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The Free Offer  
of the Gospel

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The Love of God  
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Coming to  
Christ

JOEL R. BEEKE

# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF  
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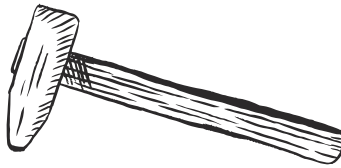
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# THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



**I**n this issue, we will address the free offer of the gospel. This is an important matter for us to discuss, because those of us who are Reformed in doctrine may have a tendency to become passive in our evangelistic preaching. Rather than being bold and calling for a response, our inclination can be to fall back into a lackluster gospel invitation. This simply must not creep into our preaching ministry.

Throughout the Bible, those who preached the doctrines of grace were those who were the strongest in their evangelistic preaching. This was certainly the case with the greatest preacher who ever lived, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was strongly committed to doctrinal purity with respect to the sovereignty of God and salvation. At the same time, he was an itinerant evangelist who proclaimed the gospel with a compelling force. If we are to preach as Jesus preached, we

must be extending the free offer of the gospel.

The same can be said of Peter, who, on the day of Pentecost, preached not only sovereign grace but also the free offer of salvation. The Apostle Paul was no different. Throughout his missionary journeys, Paul preached the sovereignty of God in salvation over the eternal destinies of men. At the same time, he called sinners to respond—to come to faith in Jesus Christ. A trust in God's sovereignty did not lead to a defeatist mentality. Rather, it energized these leaders in their extending a call to repentance.

In your preaching ministry, you must be always extending the free offer of the gospel. Even as you preach the doctrines of grace, you must be preaching the one true saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

I pray that this issue of *Expositor* will be of great encouragement to you in this high calling to be a gospel preacher. ♦



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# THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL

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STEVEN J. LAWSON

**W**ith his final words, the Apostle Paul issues a strong charge to Timothy, his young son in the faith, commanding him, “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). In sounding this mandate, the Apostle reinforces the primacy of preaching in ministry. Further, he states the manner in which it must be carried out. Paul describes in detail how Timothy is to sustain his preaching ministry.

In this same context, Paul urges, “Do the work of an evangelist” (v. 5). As Timothy expounds the Word, he must prioritize exalting God and edifying believers, building them up in their faith. But he must also preach the gospel and call unbelievers to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. As Timothy expounds

Scripture, he must intentionally evangelize the lost. In his preaching, he must sound this clarion note by issuing the free offer of the gospel. This soul winning aim is non-negotiable.

Paul’s final charge to Timothy speaks to every preacher today who steps into the pulpit to proclaim the Word. No man is free to reinvent preaching however he so chooses. This apostolic command remains binding upon every preacher who expounds the Scripture. He must feed the sheep *and* seek to win the lost to Jesus Christ. These two aspects are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are inseparably bound together.

An essential element of this mandate is issuing the free offer of the gospel. We will address this important responsibility that is incumbent upon every preacher. We must always be extending this invitation

to unbelievers who stand outside of the kingdom of God. Further, we must compel them to come in.

### **The Gospel Proclaimed**

The free offer of the gospel begins with the presentation of the gospel itself. As preachers, we must be crystal clear concerning what the gospel is. The word “gospel” (*euangelion*) means good news or glad tidings. It concerns the message of the saving work of Jesus Christ on behalf of guilty sinners. Succinctly stating its most basic truths, Paul writes, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4).

### **The Heart of the Gospel**

The person and work of Jesus Christ is the very heart of the gospel. The Lord Jesus is the alpha and omega of this saving message. He is the first and the last of this truth—and everything in between. He is the sum and substance of the gospel, its center and circumference. The gospel is rooted and grounded in His sinless life and substitutionary death. The resurrection of Christ was the Father’s validation of the saving work of the Son of God as a perfect atonement for sin (Rom 4:25).

### **Propitiation of God’s Anger**

The gospel message declares the doctrine of propitiation, which states that the death of Christ satisfies the wrath of God toward all who believe in Him. Before conversion, believers were under divine judgment. But upon the cross, Jesus became sin for us and absorbed the wrath of God in our place. The Bible teaches, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2). Therefore, Jesus appeased the righteous anger of God toward us by acting as our substitute. God “sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). In His death, Christ placated the holy vengeance of God toward sinners who repent and believe in Christ. The gospel makes the glorious pronouncement, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

### **Reconciliation with God’s Enemies**

The gospel also declares the reconciliation of sinners

with God through the death of Christ. Before conversion, all sinners were enemies of God (Rom 5:10; 11:28). But in the gospel, sinners, who were hostile toward God, are reconciled to Him through Christ (Rom 5:10). Believers enter into a new state of being at “peace” with God “through the blood of His cross” (Col 1:20). Through the death of Christ, adversaries of God are reconciled to Him and become beloved children (Rom 8:14–16) and joint heirs with Christ (v. 17). Only through the gospel can sinners “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).


### **Redemption by God’s Son**

The gospel further promises redemption from sin, which means that Christ has purchased freedom from the penalty of sin. By paying the ransom price, Jesus secured the release of those who believe in Him. At the cross, Jesus bought them at the cost of His own blood. Peter writes, “You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18–19). Because of His death, “we have redemption through His blood” (Eph 1:7). Christ has freed believers from the ruling power of sin to live a holy life. Jesus said, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (Rom 8:36). The gospel liberates those who repent from their former enslavement to sin.

### **Expiation by God’s Lamb**

The gospel likewise proclaims the expiation of our sins, meaning that the death of Christ takes away the sins of all who will believe in Him. John the Baptist pronounced, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). This is the biblical truth of expiation, that the sins of all who believe in Christ are lifted off them and transferred to Christ, who takes them far away. Paul writes, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). Upon the cross, Jesus became the sin-bearer of His people whom He came to save. “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” (1 Pet 2:24). As He bore our sins, He was our scapegoat and carried them far away (Leviticus 16).





**The person and work of Jesus Christ is the very heart of the gospel. The Lord Jesus is the alpha and omega of this saving message. He is the first and the last of this truth—and everything in between. He is the sum and substance of the gospel, its center and circumference.**

## The Gift Offered

The finished work of Jesus Christ in accomplishing salvation is to be freely offered to every person without cost. An unconverted person can do nothing to earn the grace of God in Christ. Apart from anything a lost sinner can do, a right standing before God can only come about by believing in Jesus Christ. A sinner can do nothing of any spiritual benefit to contribute to his own salvation. The riches of heaven are to be offered to paupers who are utterly bankrupt, devoid of any righteousness of their own to obtain this invaluable treasure of the forgiveness of sins.

### *Come, Buy without Money*

The prophet Isaiah declared, “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money, buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost” (Isa 55:1). Isaiah describes salvation as an extravagant banquet feast to which sinners are invited. All who are thirsting for salvation are called to respond by faith and acquire God’s forgiveness at no cost. Those without any resources to offer God are urged to come to Him and eat freely without any cost. They are summoned to sit at the banquet table and feast upon the fullness of His saving grace.

Salvation is a free gift that was purchased at the cross by Jesus Christ. The price of man’s redemption was paid in full by the finished work of Jesus Christ. When Jesus cried out, “It is finished” (John 19:30), the debt of sin had been paid in full through His substitutionary, sin-bearing death. The perfect atonement was made when Jesus bore the sins of many. Once and for all time, He shed His blood to pay the ransom to liberate His sheep. Nothing remains to be paid. There no longer remains any debt to be canceled out by the efforts of sinners.

### *A Free Gift without Cost*

James stressed the freeness of salvation when he stated, “We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11). Salvation is offered without cost to those who have no resources with which to purchase it. The Apostle Paul underscores this when he writes that it is “a gift of His grace” (Rom 3:24). Consequently, salvation is not a reward for the righteous, but a gift for the guilty (Eph 2:8–9).

Salvation is received by faith alone, not by any human achievement.

These verses—as well as countless other passages—make it clear that any acceptance with God cannot be earned through our efforts. Salvation is not for sale. There is no toll to pay to enter through the narrow gate. No amount of good works, personal morality, or religious activity can be rendered as a payment to secure eternal life. The spiritually impoverished sinner can do nothing to acquire his or her salvation except receive it as a gift with the empty hand of faith.

## The Response Urged

After proclaiming the person and work of Christ, we must urge our listeners to make their response. They must respond to the free offer of the gospel by repenting of their sins and believing in Jesus Christ. We must plead with every sinner to act upon the conditions that are set forth by the gospel. We must not only present the gospel but summon our listeners to respond to follow Christ. We must urge all lost people to answer the call of the gospel. No matter how far away from God they may be, and regardless of how deeply they have descended into sin, the invitation must be extended to all to come to faith in Christ.

### *The Invitation to Come*

Jesus extended the free offer of gospel when he said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble and heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28–30). Jesus issued this invitation to all people who heard Him. In the parable of the marriage feast, he declares, “Tell those who are invited, ‘Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fatted livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast’” (Matt 22:4). The sacrifice of Christ has been made. All is prepared. Sinners need only come to Him with empty hands and a hungry heart.

Regardless of where people are in life, no matter the depth of their sin, they are invited to come. Jesus said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink” (John 7:37). This is the declaration of the gospel, that sinners are summoned to come to Christ. They must

leave behind a life pursuit of sin. They must abandon all self-righteousness. They must forsake living a life centered on themselves. They must simply come to Christ and drink of His fullness.

### ***Come, Drink without Cost***

The Bible ends with this same invitation to come to the waters of salvation and drink fully. The apostle John writes, “Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (Rev 22:17). This is the call of the gospel, to come without delay and drink freely of “the water of life.” It is offered without “cost” because of the sacrifice of Christ made upon the cross. “The water of life” flows from a bottomless spring flowing with eternal life. The sinner need only feel his lack of water and come and drink.


If you are a preacher, “come” should be a word to

which you often return. You should be continually calling sinners to take the decisive step of faith and come all the way to faith in Christ. As you extend this open invitation, you should seek to elicit this response from your listeners. “Come” must be a constant refrain in your gospel preaching. You should be always issuing this open call of the gospel. After presenting the facts of the gospel, make the appeal to come to the Savior.

### ***The Command to Repent***

The free offer of the gospel, though, is more than an invitation to come to Christ. It is a divine command that demands to be obeyed by the unconverted. When the gospel is preached, it must be issued with sovereign authority that makes a claim upon the listener. The gospel mandates a response from the hearer. The gospel invitation is not an option to merely consider.





**In the free offer of the gospel, preachers must always be drawing their listeners to believe in Jesus Christ. When we preach, we must never allow ourselves to adopt a passive, “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude with those who hear us.**

Nor is it simply a suggestion to ponder. Rather, the gospel speaks with commanding force. Whenever it is presented, it demands an immediate response.

When John the Baptist preached, he declared, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2). “Repent” was spoken in the imperative mood, which commands the obedience of the listener. The word (*metanoēō*) means a change of mind, but it also includes a change of affections and will. John the Baptist issued the gospel message as an authoritative command that necessitated a turning from self-righteousness and sin. Jesus placed this same demand upon His listeners, issuing it in the imperative mood (Matt 4:17). The repentance that Jesus preached mandated the obedience of His listeners to turn to Him in submissive trust.

Jesus charged His disciples to preach repentance to all nations (Luke 24:47). On the day of Pentecost, Peter demanded repentance from the thousands who heard him (Acts 2:38; cf. 3:19). On Mars Hill in Athens, Paul commanded repentance (Acts 17:30; cf. 20:21; 26:20). In Ephesus, Paul called for “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

#### ***Persuasion Must Be Applied***

In the free offer of the gospel, preachers must always be drawing their listeners to believe in Jesus Christ. When we preach, we must never allow ourselves to adopt a passive, “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude with those who hear us. This involves reasoning with them, anticipating their questions, answering their

objections, exposing the fallacies of their thinking, promising the benefits if they will believe, warning them of the consequences of failing to respond, and urging them to commit their lives to Christ (1 Cor 9:19–22; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Tim 4:13; cf. 2 Tim 4:2).

Paul writes, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor 5:11). The word “persuasion” (*peithō*) is a strong word that seeks to gain a favorable response from listeners. Persuasion involves “urging” (Acts 13:43) and strong pleading for the appropriate response (Acts 17:4; 18:4; 19:8,26; 26:26; 28:23, 24). Never stoic with the gospel, Paul intentionally sought to win lost souls to Christ (1 Cor 9:19–22).

### **The Warning Sounded**

The free offer of the gospel must include the sober warning of refusing its appeal. If the gospel is neglected, those who hear us preach must be admonished that eternal consequences await them. If the offer of salvation is refused, they will suffer everlasting damnation (Matt 8:12). Therefore, an open gospel presentation must include a strong admonition. Paul writes, “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ” (Col 1:28). The word “admonishing” (*noutheteō*) means to issue a warning to the mind that negative consequences await one if the message is rejected.

### **The Warning of Lost Opportunity**

Every unconverted sinner has been allotted a finite amount of time to live. The day of every person’s death is already fixed by God. All must be made aware that they have a limited time to believe in the gospel. Solomon writes, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (Prov 27:1). The preacher must always convey the dire urgency that the unconverted believe the gospel today, this very moment. They may not have tomorrow in which to believe in Christ.

Solomon further warns, “A man who hardens his heart after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy” (Prov 29:1). Such a sudden judgment will come upon the person who procrastinates in coming to Christ. One day, it will be too late to respond to the gospel. This is why the Bible stresses,

“Behold, now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’” (2 Cor 6:2). As a preacher, you must warn of the opportunity to respond to the gospel, which may never be recovered again.

### **The Caution of Final Judgment**

The preacher must warn of the coming final judgment for failing to come to faith in Christ. The free offer of the gospel must include this sobering note of warning: “How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Heb 2:3) The answer to this probing question is that no person who dies without faith in Christ will be delivered from the wrath to come. The only hope for sinners to be rescued from this everlasting punishment is to come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The author of Hebrews issues strong warnings of divine judgment to all who refuse the free offer of the gospel. The author writes, “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Heb 9:27). The final judgment is inescapable for those who die without faith in Christ. At this terrifying place, “Vengeance is Mine” and “‘The Lord will judge His people.’ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:30–31). “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). If the gospel offer is refused, the preacher must warn the unconverted about this coming day of divine judgment and eternal torment.

### **The Benefits Promised**

As the gospel is offered, you should stress the benefits of believing in Jesus Christ. Receiving salvation far outweighs anything that would be relinquished. No cost in self-denial and cross bearing can begin to compare with the positive gains of committing one’s life to Jesus Christ. The advantages far surpass the losses. The sinner gives up dirt for diamonds to become a follower of Christ. He gives up a past life of destructive sin in order to gain the blessings of knowing the Savior, both now and forever.

### **The Forgiveness of Sins**

The first benefit is the forgiveness of sins. The psalmist states, “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared” (Ps 130:3–4). A believer’s sins are sent away and canceled out by the grace

of God. God alone can remit sins based upon the sacrifice of an innocent substitute, Jesus Christ. “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act? (Micah 7:18). The prophet exults, “You will cast all their sins into the depth of the sea” (v. 19), never to be found and recovered. This is the full, forever forgiveness that God gives to all believers.

This divine forgiveness is found exclusively in the blood of Jesus Christ. Before His death, Jesus said, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). Paul reaffirms this: “In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our transgressions” (Eph 1:7). Through the death of Christ, God has “forgiven us all our transgressions” (Col 2:13). The author of Hebrews states, “Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22). This is the inestimable benefit that comes through believing in Jesus Christ—all sins are washed away and forgiven.

### *The Righteousness of Christ*

The gospel provides more than forgiveness, which is the removal of the penalty of sin. It also declares the righteousness of Jesus Christ to be credited to the one who believes in Him. This is the divine act of justification by which God declares the believer to be righteous before Him. Paul asserts, “For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith” (Rom 1:17). The apostle adds that the believer receives “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:22). This forensic act of declaring the repentant believer to be righteous is irrevocable. “Who can bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?” (Rom 8:33–34).

By the preaching of Christ crucified, Jesus became “righteousness” (1 Cor 1:30) to all who believe. Paul maintains, “You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 6:11). “He [the Father] made Him [the Son] to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him [the Son]” (2 Cor 5:21). This teaches the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to all who believe in Him. Giving his own testimony, Paul writes that he received “the righteousness which comes from God

on the basis of faith” (Phil 3:9). The apostle counted everything to be loss that he might have Christ and His righteousness charged to his account (v. 8).

### *The Hope of Glory*

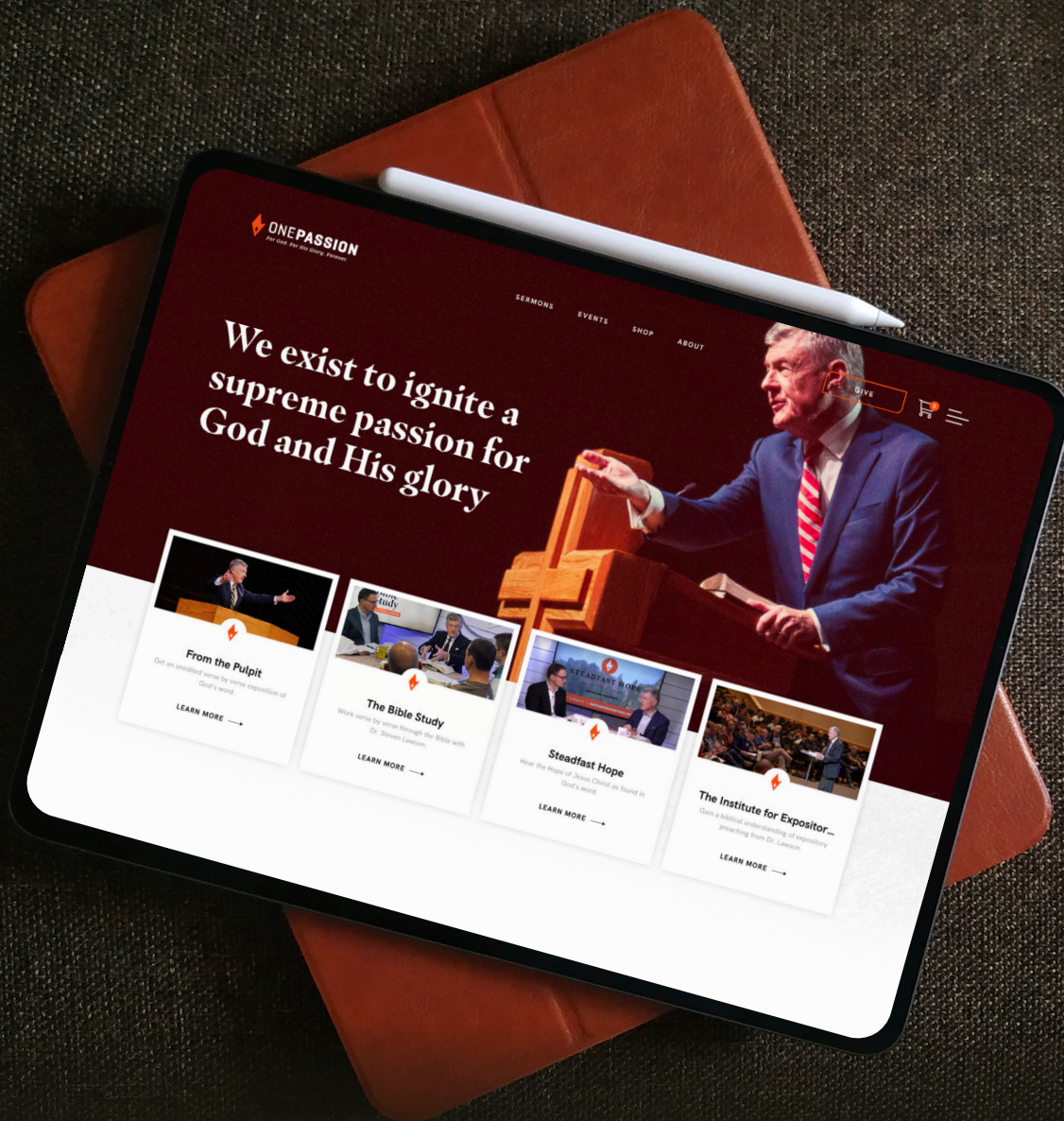
The moment that anyone believes in Christ, he also receives the hope of eternal life and being with God in heaven forever. Concerning the one justified by faith, Paul writes, “We exult in the hope of the glory of God” (Rom 5:2). Such hope “does not disappoint” (v. 5), because it will definitely come to pass. Paul writes, “For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees?” (Rom 8:24). This is to say, hope deals with what will surely occur in the future but cannot be seen in the present.

This “hope of glory” (Col 1:27) is given to every believer by God. It is possessing the certainty of future glory one day in heaven. It is the Christian’s firm assurance about his future presence with the Lord, immediately following his death or the return of Christ. This hope is synonymous with the assurance of salvation that the Holy Spirit gives to every believer. Paul writes, “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:16). The deep-seated assurance of being a child of God, as well as heaven being one’s future home, is a glorious blessing given to every believer.

### **A Concluding Word**

Every preacher must be diligent to extend the free offer of the gospel. God calls us to do so as we preach the Word. It is our solemn duty and high privilege to proclaim the saving message of Jesus Christ. If we do not sound forth the gospel message, we will have neglected our responsibility. It is incumbent upon every preacher to issue the clarion call of the gospel of grace to as many people as possible.

Do you explain the truths of the gospel? Do you call sinners to faith in Christ? Do you persuade them to believe? Do you warn them of the dangers that lie ahead if they do not? This sacred mission is your charge before God. ♦



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# THE LOVE OF GOD FOR HUMANITY

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JOHN MACARTHUR

Perhaps you have noticed that someone shows up at almost every major American sporting event, in the center of the television camera's view, holding a sign that usually reads "John 3:16." At the World Series, the sign can normally be spotted right behind home plate. At the Super Bowl, someone holding the sign inevitably has seats between the goalposts. And in the NBA playoffs, the ubiquitous "John 3:16" banner can be seen somewhere in the front-row seats. How these people always manage to get prime seats is a mystery. But someone is always there, often wearing a multicolored wig to call attention to himself.

A couple of years ago, one of the men who had gained some degree of fame from displaying these

John 3:16 signs barricaded himself in a Los Angeles hotel and held police at bay until he was permitted to make a statement on television. It was a surrealistic image—here was someone who felt his mission in life was declaring John 3:16, and he was waving a gun and threatening police while spouting biblical slogans. His career of attending major sporting events ended when police took him into custody without further incident.

As I watched the sordid episode unfold on television, I was embarrassed that someone whom the public identified as a Christian would so degrade the gospel message. It occurred to me that I was watching someone whose approach to "evangelism" had never really been anything more than a quest for publicity.

This stunt, it seemed, was nothing more than a large-scale attempt to get himself into the camera's eye once more. Sadly, he brought a horrible reproach on the very message he was seeking to publicize.

I also realized while watching that episode that John 3:16 may be the most familiar verse in all of Scripture, but it is surely one of the most abused and least understood. "God so loved the world"—waved like a banner at a football game—has become a favorite cheer for many people who presume on God's love and who do not love Him in return. The verse is often quoted as evidence that God loves everyone exactly the same and that He is infinitely merciful—as if the verse negated all the biblical warnings of condemnation for the wicked.

That is not the point of John 3:16. One has only to read v. 18 to see the balance of the truth: "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (KJV). Surely this is a truth that needs to be proclaimed to the world at least as urgently as the truth of John 3:16.

### Does God Love the Whole World?

Nevertheless, though acknowledging that some people abuse the notion of God's love, we cannot respond by minimizing what Scripture says about the extent of God's love. John 3:16 is a rich and crucial verse. Perhaps a closer look at this subject is warranted. I am encountering more and more Christians who want to argue that the only correct interpretation of John 3:16 is one that actually limits God's love to the elect and eliminates any notion of divine love for mankind in general.

But neither Scripture *nor* sound logic support such bold assertions.

Scripture clearly says that God *is* love. "The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works" (Ps 145:9). Christ commands Christians to love even their enemies, and the reason He gives is this: "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). The clear implication is that in some sense *God* loves *His* enemies. He loves both "the evil and the good," both "the righteous and the


unrighteous," in precisely the same sense He commands Christians to love their enemies.

In fact, the second greatest commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, cf. Lev 19:18) is a commandment to love *everyone*. It is certain that the scope of this commandment is universal, because Luke 10 records that a lawyer, "wishing to justify himself, ... said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29)—and Jesus answered with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The point? Even Samaritans, a semi-pagan race who had utterly corrupted Jewish worship and whom the Jews generally detested as enemies of God, were neighbors whom Jesus commanded to love. In other words, the command to love one's "neighbor" applies to *everyone*. This love commanded here is clearly a universal, indiscriminate love.

Consider this: Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law in every respect (Matt 5:17–18), including this command for universal love. His love for others was surely as far-reaching as His own application of the commandment in Luke 10. Therefore, surely He loved *everyone*. He *must* have loved everyone in order to fulfill the law. After all, the Apostle Paul wrote, "The whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14)—and, "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8). Therefore, Jesus must have loved His "neighbor." His definition of "neighbor" in universal terms demonstrates that His love while on earth was universal.

Is it possible that Jesus as perfect man loved those whom Jesus as God does not love? Would God command Christians to love in a way that He does not? Would God demand that Christian love be more far-reaching than His own? And did Christ, having loved all humanity during His earthly sojourn, then revert after His ascension to pure hatred for the non-elect? Such is unthinkable; "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever" (Heb 13:8 NASB 1977).

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the world. It is a statement about God's demeanor toward mankind in general. It is a declaration of *good* news to the effect that Christ came into the world on a mission of salvation, not a mission of condemnation: "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him" (v. 17). To convert it into an expression of divine hatred against those whom God does not save is to turn the passage on its head.

John Brown, the Scottish Reformed theologian, known for his marvelous studies on the sayings of Christ, has written,

The love in which the economy of salvation originates, is love *to the world*. "God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son." The term "world," is here just equivalent to mankind. It seems to be used by our Lord with a reference to the very limited and exclusive views of the Jews....

Some have supposed that the word "world" here, is descriptive, not of mankind generally, but of the whole of a particular class, that portion of

mankind who, according to the Divine purpose of mercy, shall ultimately become partakers of the salvation of Christ. But this is to give the term a meaning altogether unwarranted by the usage of Scripture.

B. B. Warfield takes a similar position:

Certainly here "the world" and "believers" do not seem to be quite equipollent terms: there seems, surely, something conveyed by the one which is not wholly taken up by the other. How, then, shall we say that "the world" means just "the world of believers," just those scattered through the world, who, being the elect of God, shall believe in His Son and so have eternal life? There is obviously much truth in this idea: and the main difficulty which it faces may, no doubt, be avoided by saying that what is taught is that God's love of the world is shown by His saving so great a multitude as He does save out of the world. The wicked world deserved at His hands only total destruction. But He saves out of it a multitude which no man can



number, out of every nation, and of all tribes, and peoples and tongues. How much must, then, God love the world! This interpretation, beyond question, reproduces the fundamental meaning of the text.

Warfield continues and makes the crucial point that the primary concern in interpreting the word “world” in John 3:16 should be not to limit the *extent* of God’s love as much as to magnify the rich wonder of it:

The key to the passage lies ... you see, in the significance of the term “world.” It is not here a term of extension so much as a term of intensity. Its primary connotation is ethical, and the point of its employment is not to suggest that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when He gave His Son for it.

In fact, if the word “world” holds the same meaning throughout the immediate context, verse 19 cannot refer to the “world of the elect” alone: “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (KJV).

So the context of John 3:16 requires the verse to speak of God’s love to sinful mankind in general. Calvin’s interpretation is worth summarizing here. He saw two main points in John 3:16: “Namely, that faith in Christ brings life to all, and that Christ brought life, because the Father loves the human race, and wishes that they should not perish.”

A fresh look at John 3:16 helps to absorb the real sense: “God so loved *the world*,” wicked though it was, and despite the fact that nothing *in* the world deserved His love. He nevertheless loved the world of humanity so much “that He gave His only begotten Son,” the dearest sacrifice He could make, so “that *whoever believes in Him* shall not perish, but have eternal life.” The end result of God’s love is therefore the gospel message—the free offer of life and mercy to anyone who believes. In other words, the gospel—an indiscriminate offer of divine mercy to everyone

without exception—manifests God’s compassionate love and unfeigned lovingkindness to all humanity.

And unless one ascribes unrighteousness to God, His offer of mercy in the gospel is sincere and well-meant. Surely His pleas for the wicked to turn from their evil ways and live must in some sense reflect a sincere desire on God’s part. As indicated below, however, some deny that this is the case.

### **Is God Sincere in the Gospel Offer?**


Of course, people who assert that God’s love is exclusively for the elect will usually acknowledge that God nevertheless shows mercy, longsuffering, and benevolence to the unrighteous and unbelievers. But they will insist that this apparent benevolence has nothing whatsoever to do with *love* or any sort of sincere affection. According to them, God’s acts of benevolence toward the non-elect have no other purpose than to increase their condemnation.

Such a view appears to impute insincerity to God. It suggests that God’s pleadings with the reprobate are artificial and that His offers of mercy are mere pretense.

Often in Scripture, God makes statements that reflect His yearning for the wicked to repent. For instance, in Psalm 81:13 He says, “Oh that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!” Ezekiel 18:32 says, “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord God. “Therefore, repent and live.”

Elsewhere, God freely and indiscriminately offers mercy to all who will come to Christ: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28–30). “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes [“whosoever will”—KJV] take the water of life without cost” (Rev 22:17 NASB 1977).

God Himself says, “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isa 45:22). And, “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy



# Common grace restrains sin and the effects of sin on the human race. Common grace is what keeps humanity from descending into the morass of evil that would exist if the full expression of man's fallen nature had free reign.

and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isa 55:1). "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (v. 7).

Some flatly deny that such invitations constitute a sincere offer of mercy to the non-elect. As far as they are concerned, the very word *offer* smacks of Arminianism (a name for the doctrine that makes salvation hinge solely on a human decision). They deny that God would "offer" salvation to those whom He has not chosen. They deny that God's pleadings with the reprobate reflect a real desire on God's part to see the wicked turn from their sins. To them, suggesting that God could have such an unfulfilled "desire" is a direct attack on His absolute sovereignty. God is sovereign, they suggest, and He does whatever pleases Him.

Whatever He desires, He does.

To be completely honest, this does pose a difficulty. How can unfulfilled desire be compatible with a wholly sovereign God? For example, in Isaiah 46:10, God states, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure." He *is*, after all, utterly sovereign. Is it not improper to suggest that any of His actual "desires" remain unfulfilled?

This issue was the source of an intense controversy within some Reformed and Presbyterian denominations about fifty years ago. It is sometimes referred to as the "free offer" controversy. One group denied that God loves the non-elect. They also denied the concept of common grace (God's non-saving goodness to mankind in general). And they denied that divine mercy and eternal life are offered indiscriminately to everyone who hears the gospel. The gospel offer is not free, they claimed, but extends to the elect alone.



That position is a form of Hyper-Calvinism.

Now, let's acknowledge that Scripture clearly proclaims God's absolute and utter sovereignty over all that happens. Scripture says He declared the end of all things before time even began, and whatever comes to pass is in perfect accord with the divine plan. What God has purposed, He will also do (Isa 46:10–11; Num 23:9). God is not at the mercy of contingencies. He is not subject to His creatures' choices. He "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11). Nothing occurs but that which is in accord with His purposes (cf. Acts 4:28). Nothing can thwart God's design, and nothing can occur apart from His sovereign decree (Isa 43:13; Ps 33:11). He does all His good pleasure: "Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Ps 135:6).

But that does not mean God derives pleasure from every aspect of what He has decreed. God explicitly says that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32; 33:11). He does not delight in evil (Isa 65:12). He hates all expressions of wickedness and pride (Prov 6:16–19). Since none of those things can occur apart from the decree of a sovereign God, the inevitable conclusion is that there is a sense in which His decrees do not always reflect His desires; His preferences do not necessarily dictate His purposes.

The language here is necessarily anthropopathic (i.e., ascribing human emotions to God). To speak of unfulfilled desires in the Godhead is to employ terms fit only for the finite human mind. Yet such expressions communicate some truth about God that human language cannot express otherwise. God uses anthropopathisms in His Word to convey truth about Himself that no other means can represent adequately. To give an example, consider Genesis 6:6: "The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." Yet God does not change His mind (1 Sam 15:29). He is immutable; "with [Him] there is no variation or shifting shadow" (James 1:17). So whatever Genesis 6:6 means, it cannot suggest any changeableness in God. The best way to approach such an anthropopathism is try to grasp the essence of the idea, then reject any implications

that lead to ideas about God that are unbiblical.

That same principle applies when grappling with the question of God's expressed desire for the wicked to repent. If God's "desire" remains unfulfilled (and in some cases it does—Luke 13:34), it is wrong to conclude that God is somehow less than sovereign. He is fully sovereign; it is impossible to understand why He does not turn the heart of every sinner to Himself. Further, speculation in this area is futile. It remains a mystery the answer to which God has not seen fit to reveal. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God"; only "the things revealed belong to us" (Deut 29:29). At some point, finite humans join the psalmist in saying, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it" (Ps 139:6).

### **In What Sense Is God's Love Universal?**

What aspects of God's love and goodwill are seen even in His dealings with the reprobate? God manifests his love universally to all people in at least four ways:

#### ***Common Grace***

Common grace is a term theologians use to describe the goodness of God to all mankind universally. Common grace restrains sin and the effects of sin on the human race. Common grace is what keeps humanity from descending into the morass of evil that would exist if the full expression of man's fallen nature had free reign.

Scripture teaches that people are totally depraved—tainted with sin in every aspect of their being (Rom 3:10–18). People who doubt this doctrine often ask, "How can people who are supposedly totally depraved enjoy beauty, have a sense of right and wrong, know the pangs of a wounded conscience, or produce great works of art and literature? Aren't these accomplishments of humanity proof that the human race is essentially good? Don't these things testify to the basic goodness of human nature?"

The answer is no. Human nature is utterly corrupt. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10). "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer 17:9). Unregenerate men and women are "dead in ... trespasses and sins" (Eph

2:1). All people are by nature “foolish ... disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending [their lives] in malice” (Titus 3:3). This is true of all alike, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

Common grace is what restrains the full expression of human sinfulness. God has graciously given humans a conscience, which enables them to know the difference between right and wrong and which to some degree places moral constraints on evil behavior (Rom 2:15). He sovereignly maintains order in human society through government (Rom 13:1–5). He enables people to admire beauty and goodness (Ps 50:2). He imparts numerous advantages, blessings, and tokens of His kindness indiscriminately on both the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45). All of those things are the result of common grace, God’s goodness to mankind in general.

Common grace ought to be enough to move sinners to repentance. The Apostle Paul rebukes the unbeliever: “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4). Yet because of the depth of depravity in the human heart, all sinners spurn the goodness of God.

Common grace does not pardon sin or redeem sinners, but it is nevertheless a sincere token of God’s goodwill to mankind in general. As the Apostle Paul said, “In Him we live and move and exist ... for we also are His offspring” (Acts 17:28). That takes in everyone on earth, not just those whom God adopts as sons. God deals with all as His offspring, people made in His image. “The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps 145:9).

If anyone questions the love and goodness of God to all, he should look again at the world in which we live. Someone might say, “There’s a lot of sorrow in this world.” The only reason the sorrow and tragedy stand out is because there is also much joy and gladness. The only reason the ugliness is recognizable is that God has given so much beauty. The only reason a person feels disappointment is that there is so much that satisfies.

An understanding that all of humanity is fallen and rebellious and unworthy of any blessing from God’s hand helps give a better perspective. “Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail” (Lam 3:22 NIV). The only reason God ever gives anything to laugh at, smile at, or enjoy is because He is a good and loving God. If He were not, His wrath would immediately consume humanity.

Acts 14 contains a helpful description of common grace. Paul and Barnabas were ministering at Lystra, and Paul healed a lame man. The crowds saw it, and someone began saying that Paul was Zeus and Barnabas, Hermes. The priest at the local temple of Zeus wanted to organize a sacrifice to Zeus. But when Paul and Barnabas heard about it, they said,

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. And in the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness (vv. 15–17).

That is a fine description of common grace. Though allowing sinners to “go their own ways,” God bestows on them temporal tokens of His goodness and lovingkindness. It is not saving grace. It has no redemptive effect. Nevertheless, it is a genuine and unfeigned manifestation of divine lovingkindness to all people.

### **Compassion**

God’s love to all humanity is a love of compassion. To say it another way, it is a love of pity. It is a broken-hearted love. He is “good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon [Him] (Ps 86:5). “To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him” (Dan 9:9). He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and

truth” (Exod 34:6). “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16).

Of course, nothing in any sinner compels God’s love. He does not love sinners because they are lovable. He is not merciful to them because they in any way deserve His mercy. They are despicable, vile sinners who, if not saved by the grace of God, will be thrown on the trash heap of eternity, which is hell. They have no intrinsic value, no intrinsic worth—there’s nothing in them to love.


I recently overheard a radio talk-show psychologist attempting to give a caller an ego-boost: “God loves you for what you are. You must see yourself as someone special. After all, you are special to God.”

That approach misses the point entirely. God does not love people “for what we are.” He loves them in spite of what they are. He does not love them because they are special. Rather it is only His love and grace that give their lives any significance at all. That may seem like a doleful perspective to those raised in a culture where self-esteem is the supreme virtue. But it is, after all, precisely what Scripture teaches: “We have sinned like our fathers, we have committed

iniquity, we have behaved wickedly” (Ps 106:6). “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away” (Isa 64:6).

God loves because He is love; love is essential to who He is. Rather than viewing His love as proof of something worthy in mankind, people ought to be humbled by it. God’s love for the reprobate is not the love of value; it is the love of pity for that which could have had value and has none. It is a love of compassion. It is a love of sorrow. It is a love of pathos. It is the same deep sense of compassion and pity humans feel when they see a scab-ridden derelict lying in the gutter. It is not a love that is incompatible with revulsion, but it is a genuine, well-meant, compassionate, sympathetic love nonetheless.

The New Testament gives the picture of Christ weeping over the city of Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her



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chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matt 23:37). Luke 19:41–44 gives a more detailed picture of Christ’s sorrow over the city:

And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

Those are words of doom, yet they are spoken in great sorrow. It is genuine sorrow, borne out of the heart of a divine Savior who “wanted to gather [them] together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,” but they were “unwilling.”

Those who deny God’s love for the reprobate usually suggest that it is the human side of Jesus here, not His divinity. They say that if this were an expression of sincere desire from an omnipotent God, He would surely intervene on their behalf and save them. Unfulfilled desire such as Jesus expresses here is simply incompatible with a sovereign God, they say.

But consider the problems with that view. Is Christ in His humanity more loving or more compassionate than God? Is tenderness perfected in the humanity of Christ, yet somehow lacking in His deity? When Christ speaks of gathering the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks, is this not deity speaking, rather than humanity? Do not these pronouncements of doom necessarily proceed from His deity as well? And if the words are the words of deity, how can anyone assert that the accompanying sorrow is the product of Christ’s human nature only, and not the divine? Does not intuition dictate that if God is love—if His tender mercies are over all His works—then Jesus’ words must be an echo of the divine?

### **Admonition**

God’s universal love is revealed not only in common grace and His great compassion but also in His admonitions to all sinners. God is constantly warning the reprobate of their impending fate, and pleading with them to repent. Nothing demonstrates God’s love more than the various warnings throughout the pages of Scripture urging sinners to flee from the wrath to come.

If God really did not love the reprobate, nothing would compel Him to warn them. He would be perfectly just to punish them for their sin and unbelief with no admonition whatsoever. But He does love and He does care and He does warn.

Anyone who knows anything about the Bible knows it is filled with warnings about the judgment to come, warnings about hell, and warnings about the severity of divine punishment.

God obviously loves sinners enough to warn them. Sometimes the warnings of Scripture bear the marks of divine wrath. They sound severe. They reflect God’s hatred of sin. They warn of the irreversible condemnation that will befall sinners. They are unsettling, unpleasant, even terrifying.

But they are admonitions from a loving God who weeps over the destruction of the wicked. They are necessary expressions from the heart of a compassionate Creator who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. They are further proof that God is love.

### **The Gospel Offer**

The final proof that God’s love extends to all lies in the gospel offer. The gospel invitation is an offer of divine mercy. The breadth of that offer is unlimited. It excludes no one from the gospel invitation. It offers salvation in Christ freely and indiscriminately to all.

In Matthew 22:2–14 Jesus told a parable about a king who had a marriage celebration for his son. He sent his servants to invite the wedding guests. Scripture says, “They were unwilling to come” (v. 3). The king sent his servants again with the message, “Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast” (v. 4). But even after that second invitation, the invited guests



remained unwilling to come. In fact, Scripture says, “But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them” (vv. 5–6). This was outrageous, inexcusable behavior! And the king judged them severely for it.

Then, Scripture says, he told his servants, “The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast” (v. 9). He opened the invitation to all comers. Jesus closes with this: “Many are called, but few are chosen” (v. 14).

The parable represents God’s dealing with the nation of Israel. They were the invited guests. But they rejected the Messiah. They spurned Him and mistreated Him and crucified Him. They would not come—as Jesus said to them, “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and *you are unwilling to come to Me*, that you may have life” (John 5:39–40).

The gospel invites many to come who are unwilling to come. Many are called who are not chosen. The invitation to come is given indiscriminately to all. Whosoever will may come—the invitation is not issued to the elect alone.

God’s love for mankind does not stop with a warning of the judgment to come. It also invites sinners to partake of divine mercy. It offers forgiveness and mercy. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:28–29). And Jesus said, “The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37).

It should be evident from these verses that the gospel is a free offer of Christ and His salvation to all who hear. Those who question the free offer therefore alter the nature of the gospel itself and deny that God’s love extends to all humanity, thereby obscuring some of the most precious truth in all Scripture about God and His lovingkindness.

God’s love extends to the whole world. It covers all humanity. Common grace demonstrates it, as do His compassion, His admonitions to the lost, and the free offer of the gospel to all.

God is love, and His mercy is over all His works.

That is not all there is to know about God’s love, but it is a very significant aspect of it, especially in light of recent declarations to the contrary. Those who contend that God does not love everyone are unbiblical and illogical. Who God is requires that His love extends to all mankind. ♠





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# COMING TO CHRIST

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JOEL R. BEEKE

**S**ince the fall of Adam and Eve, the great question has been: “How can sinful man be brought back to God?” In Genesis 3, God sent Adam and Eve away. Genesis 3:24 says, “So he drove out the man: and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (KJV here and below). But Scripture makes it clear that there is a remedy. In Revelation 22, the New Jerusalem descends from heaven. In it we discover again the tree of life planted by a refreshing river flowing from the throne of God (Rev 22:1–2). John therefore testifies, “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let

him take the water of life freely” (v. 17). Man was *sent away* from God, but now he is *brought to* God. Man was barred from the tree of life, but now a way to God has been opened through Christ (cf. Rev 2:7). The question that remains is: *How do you and I come to Christ?*

Today, as in Puritan times, many people do not understand how a fallen sinner comes to Christ. Mistaken views abound. In some evangelistic meetings, people are asked to make a decision for Christ in their own strength. They may be asked to raise a hand during silent prayer, to recite the sinner’s prayer, or to walk forward during an altar call.

Some teach that baptismal regeneration is the key to coming to Christ. Others equate coming to Christ



**By its nature, the gospel demands our faith, so a lack of faith in the gospel is the sin of unbelief. But if the gospel call is restricted to a select group of individuals and is not universal, then the obligations of the gospel are not universal.**

with mental assent; they think people only need to know and assent to some basic truths about Christ to come to Christ. Others require unbiblical, mystical experiences. They claim to have received revelations from the Holy Spirit or miraculous experiences that assure them of having come to Christ.

Still others never fully grasp what it means to come to Christ. They wrestle with a fearful lack of assurance, always asking, “Have I come?” “How do I know if I have come?” “What does it truly mean to come?” “Has God truly begun His saving work in me?”

The Puritans grappled with these and other false views as they tirelessly labored to show people how sinners come to Christ. In this article we will briefly examine the biblical doctrine of coming to Christ through the Puritan lens. We will deal with *how* we come and *why* some do not come. Our prayer is

that, with the Spirit’s blessing, this examination may encourage those of you who question whether or not you have truly come to Christ.

### **The Universal Call to Come to Christ**

The first encouragement Puritan ministers offered is that Christ’s call to come to Him is universal in scope. Christ says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). The Puritans viewed the *extent* of this call as universal—that is, it comes to everyone who hears the gospel. Whether you are young or old, rich or poor, male or female, Christ calls, even commands you, to come to Him. As Thomas Boston (1676–1732) said, “This I will ever preach, that all, under pain of damnation, are obliged to come to him.” God commands all people everywhere to repent and come to Christ

(Acts 17:30).

The terms “labour” and “heavy laden” in this verse are universal in scope. Jesus is not saying that only those who have awareness of their sin are invited to come. He is not saying, as some Hyper-Calvinists teach, that only sensible sinners are welcome to fall at Jesus’ feet. He is not saying that only those in whom the Holy Spirit has begun to stir the waters of soul-interest are to come. Christ calls *all* people who are weary and feel the heaviness of life (cf. Eccl 1:8; Isa 55:2) to come to Him for rest.


This universal call that comes to all who hear the gospel is made even clearer when we consider the extent of the gospel, Boston said. For the gospel *is* the call to come to Christ. By its nature, the gospel demands our faith, so a lack of faith in the gospel is the sin of unbelief. But if the gospel call is restricted to a select group of individuals and is not universal, then the obligations of the gospel are not universal. Those who reject the gospel, then, would not be guilty of unbelief because they were never called to believe the gospel. As far as sinful corruption reaches, so does the call to come to Christ.

Do you realize how this universal call magnifies the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? Do you see how willing Christ is to save sinners? He calls sinners to Himself to receive His rest with the promise: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek

and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:29–30). Christ calls sinners to Himself because He alone is the willing Savior—not because of our good works, our righteousness, or anything else. He calls sinners to Himself as the exclusive means of coming to God (cf. John 14:6). He is willing to save us, and we must come to Him to be freed from our sins and burdens.

Some might question this, saying, “If the call is universal and goes out to everyone, yet not everyone comes, then the invitation must be insufficient.” This is false reasoning. Think of Christian fleeing the City of Destruction in the tale of John Bunyan (1628–1688), *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christian went all about the city, warning people about God’s wrath that would soon destroy it. Most people responded to the warning by mocking Christian and his warnings. But their refusal to listen did not make Christian’s invitation to go with him insufficient or insincere. The warning itself was not insufficient.

When you invite someone to a wedding reception and the person declines to come, does that mean the invitation was not sufficient? Does it show a weakness in the people who issued the invitation? No, the insufficiency in Christian’s case was not the warning, but rather the people who refused to respond to the warning. There was no insufficiency in the wedding



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invitation, but in those who refused to come.

So it is with the call to come to Christ. There is no fault, insufficiency, or lack of sincerity in Christ's invitation; all blame rests upon those who refuse to come to Him for eternal life. The Canons of Dort explain this well in Head III–IV, articles 8–9:


As many as are called by the gospel, are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly declared in His Word, what will be acceptable to Him; namely, that all who are called, should comply with the invitation. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life, and rest, to as many as shall come to Him, and believe on Him. It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ, offered therein, nor of God ... that those who are called by the ministry of the word, refuse to come, and be converted: the fault lies in themselves.

The Canons make plain that there is no insufficiency in God's willingness to save sinners. The invitation is not a lie; it is a true, rich, full, free invitation. The gospel is a well-meant offer. Christ is ready and willing to save sinners. This is what Bunyan referred to as the conditional promise. To all who will come to Him, Christ freely gives eternal life. This call is based on the condition of faith and is a true invitation. But no one comes to Christ simply because of this universal calling. We who are called are insufficient to respond to that call; we cannot and will not come. The insufficiency is in us. Our sin keeps us from responding to Christ's call—the blame is wholly on us. Jesus said, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:40).

Judgment Day will confirm this truth. No one will stand before God on the Last Day and say, "The invitation was not for me. The invitation was not sufficient



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to save me.” Christ stands at the door of our hearts and knocks. He will enter the heart of *anyone* who opens that door and will dine with that person (Rev 3:20). But that leaves us asking, “What must I do to come? How can I come? How can I be assured that I am coming to Christ?”

### The Effectual Call to Come to Christ

We have not been left to doubt whether sinners like us *may* or *do* come to Christ. From Genesis 3 through Revelation 22, the Bible reveals to us the steps God takes to bring us back to Him. Coming to Christ is an experience that we may have in this life. Union with Christ can become a present reality. We would be remiss to put aside the question of coming to Christ. We would fail to understand God's graciousness if we thought that coming to Christ was something so mysterious that we could never understand it.

There are two extremes we must avoid in seeking proper understanding of the biblical doctrine of

coming to Christ. On the one hand, we should avoid the problem of *easy belief*, usually called *easy-believism*. The meaning of this term varies accordingly to its context of use. We do not want to state that coming to Christ is effective when we cite a little prayer, raise our hand, or respond to an altar call. We do not want to make light of this doctrine of coming to Christ. But the other extreme we should avoid is presuming what we cannot know. We do not want to give up, saying, “There is nothing I can do to assure myself of coming to Christ.” This usually involves *spiritual distortion* and/or *spiritual laziness*.

Between these two extremes, the Puritans clarified how we truly come to Christ. They took care to show us that coming to Christ is possible because Christ is not only willing but also able to save sinners. Not only does He hold out His hands, but He also takes sinners into His arms. Not only does He offer salvation, but He also secures salvation.

In addition to God's universal call, there is His

# The unconditional promises grounded in Christ's atoning work reveal that Christ is able to bring sinners to Himself. The unconditional promises are given to His elect, fulfilling the conditions of what He requires of us when we come to Him.

effective call, often referred to as the effectual call of Christ. This effectual call is inseparable from what the Puritans called God's unconditional promises. Unconditional promises give what conditional promises require, the Puritans explain. John Bunyan wrote,

The conditional promise calls for repentance, and the absolute promise gives it (Acts 5:31). The conditional promise calls for faith, and the absolute promise gives it (Zeph. 3:12; Rom. 15:12). The conditional promise calls for a new heart, and the absolute promise gives it (Ezek. 36:25–26). The conditional promise calls for holy obedience, and the absolute promise gives it (Ezek. 36:27).

The unconditional promises grounded in Christ's atoning work reveal that Christ is able to bring sinners to Himself. The unconditional promises are

given to His elect, fulfilling the conditions of what He requires of us when we come to Him. John Flavel (1628–1691), commenting on the *need* of the effectual call, stated, “But yet, all the preaching in the world can never effect this union with Christ in itself, and in its own virtue, except a supernatural and mighty power go forth with it for that end and purpose. Let Boanerges and Barnabas try their strength, let the *angels* of heaven be the preachers; till God draw, the soul cannot come to Christ.”

Thus, a universal calling is not sufficient to draw people to Christ. But Christ does not stop at a universal call. He goes further, penetrating the hearts of the elect through an effectual call, which is rooted in the unconditional promises to bring sinners to Christ.

Christ clearly proclaims the effectual call in John 6:37, 44: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast

out. ... No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." What we observe here is that no one can come to Christ unless he or she is drawn by the Father, and those who are drawn to Christ *will* come to Christ. The unconditional promise in these verses is that those whom the Father draws will by God's sovereign grace come to Christ, and Christ, being an able and willing Savior, will not cast them out.

"This is good news indeed!" you say. "But I am still unsure. How do I know if Christ is effectively drawing me? How do I know if I am a recipient of this inward, effectual call? How is this call *applied* to the hearts of unworthy, yes, even hell-worthy sinners?"

Because of its effectual nature, this call is a *spiritual* call, not primarily a physical or volitional call. What we mean is that the effective call is not a physical coming to Christ. It is not made evident by raising a hand when the pastor asks, or coming forward during an altar call, or making the sign of the cross, or taking the elements in the Lord's Supper. Bunyan, who was well aware of the deceitfulness of equating the effective call with a physical act, said that many people came to Christ "carnally, or bodily, that had no saving advantage." A physical act is not the true means of coming to Christ for salvation.

Likewise, coming to Christ is not merely a volitional act. Making a decision to follow Jesus is not what makes Christ's calling effective. The Bible says that no one is able to come to Christ of his own volition. We cannot meet the conditional promises of this calling; we are so helpless that we need something more than our volitional act. If salvation were left to our wills to come to Christ, we would all be hopelessly lost. None of us would come. None would follow Christ. God makes the call effective by a *spiritual* act, which, as John Flavel says, is a "supernatural and mighty power" that causes us to come to Christ. Effectual calling, therefore, is the Holy Spirit's powerful work in us (John 6:63) which then results in our volitional act of coming to Christ. We are made willing (Ps 110:3) and enabled (Eph 2:1) to come in the day of God's power.

The Puritans labored to show *how* sinners can know if they have come to Christ, or as they often put

it, have closed with Christ, or appropriated Christ, or apprehended Christ. All of these terms are synonymous in the Puritan mind. The Puritans defended their explanations by anchoring them in Scripture. We come to Christ, they said, when we are (1) *drawn actively by faith to Christ* (2) *as He offers Himself in the gospel*, (3) *through the power of the Holy Spirit*. Let us look at each of these briefly.

We must be *drawn actively by faith to Christ*. Bunyan spoke of coming to Christ as a mental act. He said those who come to Christ are so affected in their hearts that they mentally come to Him. What he means is that the person who comes to Christ is made willing to come; he comes voluntarily. This coming is by no means easy belief, which we have already repudiated. Rather, Bunyan says, "The Lord Jesus positively determines to put forth such a sufficiency of all grace as shall effectually perform this promise."

Christ does not force us to come to Him; He changes our mentality so that we can do nothing other than come to Him. He makes us willing in the day of His power (Ps 10:3). Faith willingly believes from the heart what the Scriptures teach about man's sinfulness, God's holiness, and Christ's saving work. As the sinner encounters God's awesome holiness, his faith repudiates self-righteousness. It brings him to need Christ as revealed in Scripture. Faith abandons all self-merit as it is increasingly allured to Christ and His merits (Rom 7:24–25).

It is important to emphasize that Christ is the object of this active faith. Properly speaking, faith has never saved anyone. As believers, we do not have faith in our faith; we exercise faith in Christ. True faith lays hold of Christ, embraces Christ, and rests upon Christ for total salvation. As J. G. Pike said, "This central truth is the principal and proper matter of faith, and Christ or God in Christ appearing in it, is the proper and only object of faith."

The two brief words *to Christ* refer to two important causes of coming to Christ. Bunyan says, "Firstly, there is in Christ a fullness of all-sufficiency of that, even of *all* that, which is needful to make us happy. Secondly, those that indeed come to him, do therefore come to him that they may receive it at his hand." It is *to Christ* we go. It is *to Christ* we come.

It is to Christ we turn to receive bounty at His hand.

Faith surrenders to the gospel and falls into the outstretched arms of Christ. Faith looks away from self to Christ, moved entirely by grace. It flees with all the soul's poverty to Christ's riches. It moves with the soul's guilt to Christ as Reconciler, with the soul's bondage to Christ as Liberator. Faith confesses with Augustus Toplady (1740–1778):

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

Faith unites a sinner with his Savior. As John Calvin (1509–1564) said, “Faith justifies in no other way than as it introduces us into a participation of the righteousness of Christ.” It apprehends (*fides apprehensiva*), closes with, and grasps Christ in a believing embrace, surrendering self, clinging to His Word, and relying on His promises.

Christ is not only the object of faith; He is also present in faith. For faith rests in the Person of Christ by coming, hearing, seeing, trusting, taking, embracing, knowing, rejoicing, loving, and triumphing in Him. It leaves its case in the hands of Christ as the great Physician, following His directions and trusting in His finished work. As Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote, “Faith clasps Christ as a ring clasps its jewel.” Faith wraps the soul in Christ's righteousness. It appropriates with a believing heart Christ's perfect righteousness, satisfaction, and holiness of Christ. It tastes the efficacy of Christ's blood-righteousness as the righteousness of God Himself (Rom 3:21–25; 5:9; 6:7; 2 Cor 5:18–21). It weds the soul to Christ, experiences divine pardon and acceptance in the Beloved, and makes the soul partake of every covenant mercy.

We come to Christ by active faith as He is offered in the gospel. The Christ we come to is not an abstract idea. He is not a Christ of our imagination. He is not a Christ of our own picking and choosing, but the Christ of Scripture revealed to us by God in sacred writ.

The Christ we come to is held out to sinners in the gospel. This means the only way you can come to Christ is in your sin. Bunyan explained, “It is a moving of the mind towards him, from a sound sense of the absolute want that a man has of him for his justification and salvation. Indeed without this sense of a lost condition without him, there will be no moving of the mind towards him.”

The Puritans said that an awareness of our need of Christ for justification and sanctification is a primary means by which we come to Christ. Flavel said the Law is given to “kill vain confidence, and quench carnal mirth in the hearts of men.” We come to the Christ of the gospel, who lived, died, rose again, and ascended on high to fulfill our every need. David Clarkson (1622–1686) argued that since we must understand our misery apart from Christ, many people fail to come to Christ because they do not see their need.

By the Spirit's grace, have you turned in faith to Christ as He is offered in the gospel as your only hope for salvation? This is a sure sign of coming to Him!

Finally, we come to Christ only *through the power of the Holy Spirit*. The Spirit is the efficient cause of our coming to Christ. Faith comes by God through the hearing of the Word (Rom 10:17)—the Word of the offered Christ. Those who hear can do so only because the Spirit's power has regenerated them. This is the only effective faith that a person coming to Christ can have. Only after the Holy Spirit works upon sinful men, removes their blindness, unstops their ears, and regenerates them can people have any hope of heeding God's spiritual, unconditional promises. Thus, Paul wrote that “no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Cor 12:3).

As the Spirit applies salvation in the offered Christ to the hearts of the elect, He gives supernatural power to sinners to stretch out their withered arms and hands to embrace Christ by active faith. What we do not want to do and cannot do ourselves, the Spirit enables us to desire and *do*. Flavel put it this way: “For though God does not force the will contrary to its nature, yet there is a real internal efficacy implied in this *drawing*, or an immediate operation of the Spirit upon the heart and will, which, in a way congruous



# The Christ we come to is held out to sinners in the gospel. This means the only way you can come to Christ is in your sin.

and suitable to its nature, takes away the rebellion and reluctance of it, and of unwilling, makes it willing to come to Christ.”

Thus, we conclude with the Puritans that we come to Christ when we are (1) *drawn actively by faith to Christ* (2) *as He offers Himself in the gospel*, (3) *through the power of the Holy Spirit*.

Let me close this article with two Puritan convictions. First, the Puritans stress that *the works of the Trinity are undivided* in a sinner’s coming to Christ. Christ makes the promise in John 6:37 that all the Father gives to Him will come to Him. In John 6:44, Christ says that only those whom the Father draws will come to Him. Jesus says in John 6:63 that the Spirit gives life, but the flesh profits nothing. Christ is saying that He is willing to save by the operation of the Holy Spirit all those whom the Father is willing to draw to Himself. There is no division in the Godhead. The Father freely, graciously, and mercifully draws souls to His blessed Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when Christ offers His unconditional promises, we can be assured that the Father and the Holy Spirit are of the same mind. Christ is a willing Savior, the Father is a willing drawer (Eph 1:4–6), and the Holy Spirit is a willing enabler (Rom 8:15). All three persons of the Trinity are equally able and willing to save sinners through Jesus’ atoning work.

Second, *the marks of saving grace* are an important

method of assuring us that we have truly come to Christ by faith. The Puritans were fond of giving us many marks. We can sum up what they say by pointing to a few characteristics:

- Those who come to Christ know the urgency of the gospel. They know the seriousness of their sin and whom they have sinned against.
- They know that only Christ can relieve them of their sins and burdens, so they covenant with Him and He becomes theirs.
- In so doing, they fight their sinful flesh by the Spirit.
- They share in communion with Christ and walk in newness of life.
- They despise their own righteousness and the accolades of the world, and seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

The Puritan understanding of coming to Christ is, therefore, a holistic approach. Those who come to Christ learn throughout the remainder of their lives that God must be glorified in *everything*. Their purpose for living, as the Puritans say, is to “glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 1).

Have you, too, come to Christ holistically? Is your earnest prayer that you might “glorify God and ... enjoy Him forever”? ✦



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# ANDREW FULLER AND THE CLASSIC DEFENSE OF THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL

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MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

**N**ear the beginning of the funeral sermon that John Ryland, Jr., (1753–1825) preached for Andrew Fuller in 1815, Ryland described Fuller (1754–1815) as “perhaps the most judicious and able theological writer that ever belonged to our [i.e., the Calvinistic Baptist] denomination.” Although Fuller was Ryland’s closest friend and confidant, his judgment is by no means skewed. Joseph Belcher, the editor of the final edition of Fuller’s collected works, believed that his works would “go down to posterity side by side with the immortal works of the elder president Edwards [i.e., Jonathan Edwards, Sr.]” while Charles Haddon

Spurgeon once described Fuller as “the greatest theologian” of his century. And in an allusion to his weighty theological influence, the nineteenth-century Welsh author David Phillips described the Baptist author as the “elephant of Kettering.” While Fuller wrote on a variety of theological issues, many have regarded his rebuttal of Hyper-Calvinism and his defense of the free offer of the gospel as his key work.

## **The Pathway to Conversion, 1754–1769**

The youngest of three brothers, Andrew Fuller was born on February 6, 1754, at Wicken, a small agricultural village in Cambridgeshire, to Robert Fuller

(1723–1781) and his wife Philippa Gunton (1726–1816), who rented and worked a succession of dairy farms. Baptists by conviction, both of his parents had been born into Dissenting families. Honour Hart, for instance, who was Andrew Fuller’s paternal grandmother, had become a Baptist after a number of years as a Congregationalist. His maternal grandmother, Philippa Stevenson, was among the founding members of Soham Baptist Church, where Fuller would later spend his first pastorate.

When Fuller was seven years of age, his parents moved to the village of Soham, about two and a half miles from Wicken. Once settled in Soham, they joined themselves to the Calvinistic Baptist work in that locality. The pastor of the work was a certain John Eve (d. 1782), who was a Hyper-Calvinist, or, as Fuller put it, one “tinged with false Calvinism” in his teaching. Many years later Fuller remembered how Eve’s preaching “was not adapted to awaken [the] conscience” and “had little or nothing to say to the unconverted.” Thus, despite the fact that Fuller regularly attended the Baptist meeting-house, he gave little thought or heed to the sermons that he heard. When he was fourteen, though, he began to entertain thoughts about the meaning and purpose of life. He was much affected by passages that he read from the biography of John Bunyan (1628–1688), his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, as well as Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and some of the works of Ralph Erskine (1685–1752), the Scottish evangelical minister and poet who, you may recall, was a significant figure in the Marrow controversy. These affections were often accompanied by weeping and tears, but they ultimately proved to be transient, there being no radical change of heart.

Now, one popular expression of eighteenth-century Hyper-Calvinist spirituality was the notion that if a scriptural text forcefully impressed itself upon one’s mind, it was to be regarded as a promise from God. One particular day in 1767, Fuller had such an experience. Romans 6:14 (“sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace,” KJV here and below) came with such suddenness and force that Fuller naively believed that God was telling him that he was in a state of salvation and no longer under the tyranny of sin. But that evening, he later recalled, “I returned to my former


vices with as eager a gust as ever.”

For the next six months, he utterly neglected prayer and was as wedded to his sins as he had been before this experience. When, in the course of 1768, he once again seriously reflected upon his lifestyle, he was conscious that he was still held fast in thralldom to sin. What then of his experience with Romans 6:14? Fuller refused to doubt that it was given to him as an indication of his standing with God. He was, he therefore concluded, a converted person, but backslidden. He still lived, though, with never a victory over sin and its temptations, and with a total neglect of prayer. “The great deep of my heart’s depravity had not yet been broken up,” he later commented about these experiences of his mid-teens.

In the autumn of 1769, he once again came under the conviction that his life was displeasing to God. He could no longer pretend that he was only backslidden. “The fire and brimstone of the bottomless pit seemed to burn within my bosom,” he later declared. “I saw that God would be perfectly just in sending me to hell, and that to hell I must go, unless I were saved of mere grace.” Fuller now recognized the way that he had sorely abused God’s mercy. He had presumed that he was a converted individual, but all the time he had had no love for God and no desire for his presence, no hunger to be like Christ and no love for his people. On the other hand, he could not bear, he said, “the thought of plunging myself into endless ruin.” It was at this point that Job’s resolution—“though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15)—came to mind, and Fuller grew determined to cast himself upon the mercy of the Lord Jesus “to be both pardoned and purified.”

Yet the Hyper-Calvinism which formed the air that he had breathed since his earliest years proved to be a real barrier to his coming to Christ. Hyper-Calvinists maintained, as we have seen, that in order to flee to Christ for salvation, the “warrant” that a person needed to believe that he or she would be accepted by Christ was a subjective one. Conviction of one’s sinfulness and deep mental anguish as a result of that conviction were popularly regarded by Hyper-Calvinists as such a warrant. From this point of view, these experiences were signs that God was in the process of converting the individual that was going through them. This perspective on conversion was

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**Fuller was in the throes of a genuine conversion and quite aware of his status as a sinner, but, under the influence of the Hyper-Calvinist spirituality of conversion, he was convinced he had neither the qualifications nor the proper warrant to flee to Christ in order to escape the righteous judgment of God.**

a direct result of the argument that the Scriptures invite only those sinners who are sensible of their sin to believe in Christ. The net effect of this teaching was to place the essence of conversion and faith not in believing the gospel, “but in a persuasion of our being interested in its benefits.” Instead of attention being directed away from oneself toward Christ, the convicted sinner was turned inwards upon himself or herself to search for evidence that he or she was being converted. Against this perspective, Fuller would later argue that the gospel exhortation to believe in Christ was a sufficient enough warrant to come to the Lord Jesus.

Fuller was in the throes of a genuine conversion and quite aware of his status as a sinner, but, under the influence of the Hyper-Calvinist spirituality of

conversion, he was convinced he had neither the qualifications nor the proper warrant to flee to Christ in order to escape the righteous judgment of God. Upon later reflection, he saw his situation as akin to that of Queen Esther. She went into the presence of her husband, the Persian king Ahasuerus, at the risk of her life, since it was contrary to Persian law to enter the monarch’s presence uninvited. Similarly, Fuller decided: “I will trust my soul, my sinful, lost soul in his [i.e., Christ’s] hands—if I perish, I perish!” So it was that in November 1769 Fuller found peace with God and rest for his troubled soul in the cross of Christ.

Fuller’s personal experience prior to and during his conversion ultimately taught him three things in particular. First, there was the error of maintaining that

only those sinners aware of and distressed about their state have a warrant or right to come to Christ. Second, genuine faith is Christ-centered, not a curving inwards upon oneself to see if there is any desire to know Christ and embrace his salvation. Third, Fuller recognized that true conversion is rooted in a radical change of the affections of the heart and manifest in a lifestyle that seeks to honor God.

### **Soham Church, A Theological “Labyrinth”**

The following spring, in 1770, Fuller was baptized and joined the church at Soham. That fall, though, the church was sorely divided over the question of whether or not sinful men and women had “the power ... to do the will of God and to keep themselves from sin.” The controversy in the Soham church over this issue—which Fuller later described as the “wormwood and the gall of my youth”—had arisen through Fuller’s rebuke of a fellow member who had gotten drunk. When confronted by Fuller with regard to his sin, the individual replied that he was not able to prevent himself from sinning in this way and that he was not his own keeper. Fuller told him that “he could keep himself from such sins as these, and that his way of talking was merely to excuse what was inexcusable.” The man answered Fuller by telling him that he was still a young Christian and only in time would he come to know the deceitfulness of the heart. While this member was ultimately disfellowshipped, the theological implications of his answers to Fuller continued to be debated in the church for quite a few months and eventually led to Pastor Eve’s resignation from the church in October of 1771. Fuller later commented that though this controversy deeply troubled him, it was ultimately the means of leading him into “those views of divine truth” that later made their appearance in his major published works.

In January of 1774, Fuller was asked by the church to regularly fill the pulpit. Sixteen months later, Fuller was ordained as the second pastor of the Soham church. The work consisted of forty-seven members and met for worship in a rented barn. It was not until 1783, a year after Fuller had been called to Kettering Baptist Church, that the church had the finances to erect a more permanent dwelling.

During this first year of ministry, Fuller’s time was largely taken up with reading and study. He continued

to reflect upon the principles at stake in the controversy that had wracked the Soham church a few years earlier. The controversy caused him to realize that God’s will regarding the unregenerate entailed more than “mere outward actions, but extended to the inmost thoughts and intents of the heart.” Yet due to the fact that Eve’s preaching was the only homiletical model he had ever had, he preached like Eve and refused to urge the unconverted to come to Christ. But he was increasingly dissatisfied with Hyper-Calvinist reasoning. He began to sense that his “preaching was anti-scriptural and defective in many respects.” But he saw no easy solution to his problem. He felt he was having to feel his way slowly “out of a labyrinth.”

One of the ministers who took part in his ordination in May of 1775 was Robert Hall, Sr. (1728–1791), pastor of the Calvinistic Baptist cause in Arnsby, Leicestershire. At the ordination, Fuller was asked why Eve had had to leave the church in 1771. After Hall had heard Fuller recount the details of the controversy that had led to Eve’s resignation, he recommended that Fuller study the classic work by Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) on divine sovereignty and human responsibility, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of Will* (1754). The Arnsby pastor was rightly convinced that this work would help clarify some of Fuller’s thinking about the power of sinful men and women to obey God.

In this treatise, Edwards had sought to show that it was scriptural to uphold the responsibility of men and women for their remaining in sin as well as to maintain that human beings are utterly unable in their own strength to turn from their sin and turn to God. That is, a person’s possession of natural faculties such as reason and will render him or her accountable to God for the proper use of them. However, due to the perverse disposition of the human will, men and women in their natural state are unable to use their natural faculties aright. Humanity’s consistent failure to live in such a way as to please God stems, then, not from physical inability but from moral inability. As we shall see, this distinction between physical and moral inability would also be central to the attack Fuller made on the canons of Hyper-Calvinism. But it was not until 1777, nearly two years later, that Fuller actually read this work.

In the meanwhile, Fuller was immersing himself in the doctrinal treatise *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, by John Gill (1697–1771), which was all but required reading for English Baptist pastors in the eighteenth century. One could be assured that Baptist pastors owned at least two works: Gill’s *A Body of Divinity*, as well as his expository commentary on the entirety of the Old and New Testaments. Fuller was also reading the works of the Baptist author from the previous century John Bunyan. Fuller read most of Gill’s systematic work, finding much that was helpful in it, but was deeply troubled by the evident differences between Gill and Bunyan. Both were ardent Calvinists, but whereas Bunyan recommended “the free offer of salvation to sinners without distinction,” Gill did not. Fuller wrongly concluded that though Bunyan was “a great and good man,” he was not as clear as Gill regarding the gospel. Yet as Fuller perused the writings of other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors, in particular those of the Puritan theologian John Owen (1616–1683), he noted that they too “dealt ... in free invitations to sinners to come to Christ and be saved.” In other words, Fuller had discerned that with regard to the preaching of the gospel, there was a definite difference not only between Bunyan and

Gill, but more broadly between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Calvinism and that of the early eighteenth century.

Although Fuller would eventually find strong theological allies in the elder Hall, John Ryland, Jr., and John Sutcliff (1752–1814), pastor of the Baptist work at Olney, Buckinghamshire, these men lived sixty to seventy miles away. Fuller’s inquiry after the truth was in many ways, therefore, a solitary one. As Ryland wrote in his memoirs of Fuller: “He had fewer means of assistance from men and books than he might have had elsewhere; but he was obliged to think, and pray, and study the Scriptures, and thus to make his ground good.” A personal covenant written by Fuller in 1780 speaks of his “determination to take up no principles at second-hand, but to search for every thing at the pure fountain of [God’s] word.”

This then was the crucible in which *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* was written and the free offer of the gospel defended.

#### *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*

A preliminary draft of the work was written by 1778. In what was roughly its final form, it was completed by 1781. Two editions of the work were published



in Fuller's lifetime. The first edition, published in Northampton in 1785, was subtitled *The Obligations of Men Fully to Credit, and Cordially to Approve, Whatever God Makes Known, Wherein Is Considered the Nature of Faith in Christ, and the Duty of Those where the Gospel Comes in that Matter*. The second edition, which appeared in 1801, was more simply subtitled *The Duty of Sinners to Believe in Jesus Christ*, a phrase which well expressed the overall theme of the book.

There were substantial differences between the two editions, which Fuller freely admitted and which primarily related to the doctrine of particular redemption, but the major theme remained unaltered: "Faith in Christ is the duty of all men who hear, or have opportunity to hear, the gospel." Or, as he put it in his preface to the first edition: "God requires the heart, the whole heart, and nothing but the heart; ... all the precepts of the Bible are only the different modes in which we are required to express our love to him."

In the first section of the work, Fuller states the theme of the book and spends some time discussing the nature of saving faith. He especially takes to task the popular High Calvinist view of faith as something primarily subjective:

The Scriptures always represent faith as terminating on something without us; namely, on Christ, and the truths concerning him: but if it consist in a persuasion of our being in a state of salvation, it must terminate principally on something within us; namely, the work of grace in our hearts; for to believe myself interested in Christ is the same thing as to believe myself a subject of special grace.

As Fuller goes on to point out, genuine faith is fixed on "the glory of Christ, and not the happy condition we are in." These are two very different things. The former entails "a persuasion of Christ being both able and willing to save all them that come unto God by him," while the latter is "a persuasion that we are the children of God." The Hyper-Calvinist schema thus ultimately turns faith into a preoccupation with one's spiritual state and security and with Christ as a means to the latter.


In Part II of the work, Fuller adduces six arguments

in defense of his position. Let us look at one of these arguments, the first, in which Fuller seeks to show from various biblical passages that "unconverted sinners are commanded, exhorted, and invited to believe in Christ for salvation." John 12:36, for instance, contains an exhortation of the Lord Jesus to a crowd of men and women to "believe in the light" that they might be the children of light. Working from the context, Fuller argues that Jesus was urging his hearers to put their faith in him. He is the "light" in whom faith is to be placed, that faith which issues in salvation (John 12:46). Those whom Christ commanded to exercise such faith, however, were rank unbelievers, of whom it is said earlier "they believed not on him" (John 12:37).

Or consider John 6:29, where Jesus declares to sinners that "this is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." Fuller first points out that this statement is made to men who, in the context, are described as following Christ simply because He gave them food to eat (v. 26). They are unbelievers (v. 36). Christ rebukes them for their mercenary motives and urges them to "labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life" (v. 27). Their response as recorded in John 6:28 is to ask Christ, "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" His answer is to urge them to put their faith in him (v. 29). Or as Fuller puts it, faith in Christ is "the first and greatest of all duties, and without it no other duty can be acceptable."

Again, in John 5:23 we read that all men and women are to "honour the Son, even as they honour the Father." Giving honor to the Son entails, Fuller rightly reasons, "holy, hearty love to him" and adoration of every aspect of his person. It "necessarily supposes faith in him." Christ has shown himself to be an infallible teacher, a holy advocate who pleads the case of his erring people, a physician who offers health to the spiritually sick, and a supreme monarch. Honoring him in these various aspects of his ministry requires faith and trust. "To honour an infallible teacher is to place an implicit and unbounded confidence in all he says; to honour an advocate is to commit our cause to him; to honour a physician is to trust our lives in his hands; and to honour a king is to bow to his sceptre, and cheerfully obey his laws." Fuller can also point to the incident with Simon Magus in Acts 8, where





## One very important question that Fuller had to wrestle with had to do with human inability and the Spirit's help.

the magician is urged by Peter to “repent” and “pray” for forgiveness of his sinful thinking (Acts 8:22). Forgiveness, though, can be found only in Christ. So, Fuller reasons, “he was, in effect, directed to believe in Jesus.”

Another argument that Fuller brings forward is the fact that lack of faith in Christ is considered a “heinous sin” in the Scriptures. Fuller reasoned that trust in Christ is required of all that sit under the preaching of the Word. Men and women are never reprovved for their not being among the elect, for election is solely God’s work. But “sinners are reprovved for not believing,” as in passages such as John 5:40, where Jesus rebukes his hearers for being unwilling to come to him to receive eternal life.

One very important question that Fuller had to wrestle with had to do with human inability and the Spirit’s help. Hyper-Calvinists argued that sinners are unable to do anything spiritually good and thus are under no obligation to exercise faith in Christ. They supported their argument by reference to such texts as John 6:44 (“No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him”) and 1 Corinthians 2:14 (“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”). The inability of which these passages speak, Fuller contended in response,

is a moral inability, which is rooted in the sinful disposition of the heart. Men and women refuse to come to Christ because of their aversion to him. They fail to understand the gospel and the things of the Spirit because they lack the means by which such matters are understood—namely, the presence of the indwelling Spirit. And they lack the Spirit because their hearts are closed to God. These verses are not speaking of a physical inability—such as insanity or mental deficiency—which excuses its subject of blame. In making this distinction between physical and moral inability, which Fuller derived from Jonathan Edwards, Fuller was seeking to affirm a scriptural paradox: sinful men and women are utterly powerless to turn to God except through the regenerative work of God’s Holy Spirit, yet this powerlessness is the result of their own sinful hearts.

This led Fuller to address the role of the Spirit’s work in conversion. Hyper-Calvinists argued that if repentance and faith are ascribed by the Scriptures to the work of the Spirit, then “they cannot be duties required of sinners.” As Fuller points out, though, the force of this objection is dependent upon the supposition that “we do not stand in need of the Holy Spirit to enable us to comply with our duty.” What is amazing about this supposition is that Arminianism assumes the same. For the Arminian, because faith is commanded of sinners by God, then they must

be able to believe without the irresistible drawing of the Spirit. Similarly, the Hyper-Calvinist reasons that since faith is wrought by the Spirit, it cannot be an act of obedience. The truth of the matter, however, is that “we need the influence of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do our duty” and that “repentance and faith, therefore, may be duties, notwithstanding their being the gifts of God.”

There were two main practical conclusions to Fuller’s arguments. First, sinners have every encouragement to trust in the Lord Jesus for the salvation of their souls. They do not need to spend time dallying to see if they are among God’s elect or if God is at work in their hearts by his Spirit. Moreover, they can no longer sit at ease under the sound of the gospel and excuse their unbelief by asserting that faith is the gift of God. And second, ministers of the Word must earnestly exhort their hearers to commit themselves to Christ, and that without delay. In so doing they will be faithful imitators of Christ and his apostles, who “warned, admonished, and entreated” sinners to repent, to believe, and to be reconciled to God. Many Hyper-Calvinist ministers of Fuller’s day, though, were too much like John Eve and had next to nothing to say to the unconverted in their congregations, because they believed that these men and women were “poor, impotent ... creatures.” Faith was beyond such men and women, and could not be pressed upon them as an immediate, present duty. Fuller was convinced that this way of conducting a pulpit ministry

was unbiblical and simply helped the unconverted to remain in their sin. Fuller put his position well in an article of the statement of faith he made at his induction into the Kettering pastorate in 1783: “I believe it is the duty of every minister of Christ plainly and faithfully to preach the gospel to all who will hear it; ... and that it is their [i.e., the hearers’] duty to love the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him for salvation ... I therefore believe free and solemn addresses, invitations, calls, and warnings to them to be not only *consistent*, but directly *adapted*, as means, in the hand of the Spirit of God, to bring them to Christ. I consider it as a part of my duty which I could not omit without being guilty of the blood of souls.”

### Controversy

As we have noted, Fuller originally wrote this treatise to help clarify his own thinking. It was not intended initially for public consumption. Nevertheless, his friends, the elder Hall, Sutcliff, and Ryland, encouraged Fuller to consider seriously its publication. But Fuller delayed publishing his manuscript. He honestly feared that it might injure the cause of Christ. He was also afraid of the controversy that it would engender. This latter fear was only alleviated by the conviction that his argument for the obligation of men and women to believe in Christ was indeed of vital importance. Finally, in October of 1784, Fuller took the plunge and made the decision to publish. The following month he walked the thirteen or so miles from



**Ministers of the Word must earnestly exhort their hearers to commit themselves to Christ, and that without delay.**

Kettering to Northampton to deliver it into the hands of Thomas Dacey (1742–?), a wealthy Northampton printer whose father and grandfather had made the family money through the sale of ephemeral popular literature. When Fuller’s book appeared the following year, it was indeed an epoch-making work. It provided a theology for many others in the Baptist denomination whose thinking was moving in the same direction and developing along the same lines.

Of the various early written attacks against Fuller’s position, there were two major ones, both of them by London Hyper-Calvinists. The first, by William Button (1754–1821), pastor of Dean Street Baptist Church, appeared in 1785. The second, by John Martin (1741–1820), who pastored Grafton Street Baptist Church, was published in three parts between the years 1788 and 1791. It is noteworthy that despite their attacks on Fuller, both Button and Martin subsequently had friendly relations with him. Button, for instance, was a firm supporter of the Baptist Missionary Society from its early years until his death. And Martin, in 1797, could speak of his sincere respect for Fuller. Later opponents of Fuller’s views, or Fullerism as it came to be called, were not as generous. The Strict Baptist patriarch William Gadsby (1773–1844) could state in public that Fuller was “the greatest enemy the church of God ever had, as his sentiments were so much cloaked with the sheep’s clothing.”

Far less significant than the theological responses of Button and Martin, but probably more irksome, was the petty sniping and ostracism to which Fuller was subjected. Rushden Baptist Church was about ten miles south of Kettering. From 1785 to 1794, though, relations between Fuller’s church and that in Rushden were quite acrimonious. In the summer of 1785, a Mrs. Wright, who was a member of the Rushden church but was now living in Weekley, just north of Kettering, requested a letter of dismissal from Rushden to Kettering. The pastor of Rushden, William Knowles (d. 1794), refused to give her one, because, he said, “The church at Kettering had gone off from their former principles.” After a while, Mrs. Wright again sought a letter of dismissal from Rushden, but to no avail. On behalf of the Kettering congregation, Fuller then wrote to the Rushden work and asserted that they still held to those truths “commonly called Calvinistical,” which were “the source

of all our salvation and all our hope.”

A response from Rushden was a long time coming. Eventually, on December 22, 1785, the Rushden Baptists wrote back and accused the Kettering congregation of lording it over their church. “Have we not,” they wrote, “an undoubted right to dismiss or not to dismiss a member at [our] discretion without being compelled thereto?” Nevertheless, they said, if the Kettering church wanted to receive Mrs. Wright as a member, they were free to do so, but it would have to be without a letter of dismissal. Indeed, at this point, the Kettering Baptists were prepared to accept her without such a letter. The Kettering church also acknowledged that there was indeed one difference between them and the Rushden believers. It was obviously this one difference which had led to the strained relations between the two churches. “We consider,” Fuller wrote in the minute book of the Kettering congregation, “the doctrines of grace as entirely consistent with a free address to every sinner, and with a universal obligation on all men where the gospel is preached to repent of their sins and turn to God through Jesus Christ.”

However, Mrs. Wright, being of a timid disposition, was unprepared to leave the Rushden fellowship with ill-feeling. She thus stayed in the Rushden church until Knowles died in 1794, and finally, on February 16, 1796, she was given an honorable dismissal to Kettering.

### A Concluding Word

The importance of Fuller’s classic defense of the free offer of the gospel turned out to be of global significance. For Fuller stood behind the iconic missionary of the nineteenth century—namely, William Carey (1761–1834). As Harry R. Boer puts it this way: “Fuller’s insistence on the duty of all men everywhere to believe the gospel ... played a determinative role in the crystallization of Carey’s missionary vision.” And so, to rightly understand the import of Fuller’s defense of the free offer of the gospel is to see him as a central theological figure at the fountainhead of the globalization of Christianity in the nineteenth century. ♦



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