

The Free Offer: Biblical & Reformed

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Yet another former sturdy defender of the faith now endorses a deceitful gospel which outclasses the errors of older Liberalism. David Silversides has joined such modern apostles as John and Iain Murray, Malcolm H. Watts, Phillip R. Johnson, Errol Hulse, David Gay and Ken Stebbins in their campaign to alter radically the Christian's view of God and His Word. Pastor Silversides traces the roots of opposition to his new divinity in the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the nineteen-twenties under the leadership of Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965), arguing that the PRC presented a caricature of the free-offer position thus fostering controversy and confusion. Instead of giving acceptable proof of this, Silversides caricatures those who do not use his, as yet undefined, free-offer tactics as if they preached by rote with no true heart to plead with dead sinners to turn to Christ and live.

Though Silversides exaggerates grossly the failings of his opponents, he fails to examine the enormous lack of evangelical fervency in modern free offer circles still sailing under a Reformed flag where method is often ranked higher than message and denominational law-discipline is disguised as holy living. Nor does he examine why many sound Christians, dubbed 'Antinomians and Hyper-Calvinists by the BOT school of neo-evangelists are constantly witnessing to the lost and drawing them by the Spirit to Christ, whereas their numerous free-offer, duty faith, critics often merely use their energies to call their more active brethren names and to write books promoting their free offer, Anti-Trinitarian errors. At times, one is compelled to think that all they want is a fight! Silversides, however, runs away from the grave moral problems his own defence of common grace and the free offer entails, never explaining why God, in his opinion, desires the salvation of all sinners in the preached gospel, yet nevertheless rejects them with the same delight that He felt when lulling them falsely to Himself. Silversides weird idea of God's heavenly love for sinners in this life but hate in the next presents huge moral problems which he leaves unsolved. Nor does he try to come to terms with most difficult texts such as 'Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated' as, according to his immoral theory, God must love Esau and offer Christ freely to him before changing His mind and letting him fall.

In examining the free offer and common grace problems presented by Hoeksema, Silverside does not update them by discussing the Anti-Trinitarianism of the modern free-offer movement and their teaching

respecting paradoxes in God's Word. Nor does he mention that free-offer protagonists such as John Murray, alter the Bible text as it suits them in order to put forward their views. However, we are compelled to associate Silversides with this modern Anti-Trinitarian, free-offer movement as the publisher's blurb is written by none other than Malcolm H. Watts who is deeply involved in the modern departure from the Biblical and historical Reformed faith. Furthermore, as Silversides emphasises common grace as a fore-court of saving grace with the fervour of an Errol Hulse and John Murray, we must examine critically what he says to see if he shares their shame.

This reviewer cannot recommend anything in the book other than Silversides' use of the AV without altering it to suit his purpose. Obvious criticisms are as follows:

If Silversides wishes to present Hoeksema as the father of the anti-free offer, anti-common grace school and claim that his spirit still lives on under the guidance of Prof. David Engelsma, he has chosen the wrong men for the modern debate. The PRC is now openly a duty-faith organization which nowadays goes hand in hand with the free-offer teaching as sponsored by the Banner of Truth and their theological allies. Today, most who reject the Anti-Trinitarian free offer error would also reject duty faith, and the confusion concerning the law in a believer's life which goes with it, believing it is contrary to the gospel of grace.

Silversides presents little Bible exegesis. As a Presbyterian, he keeps to the Westminster Confession which he defends against the allegedly wrong interpretations of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Non-Presbyterians will find Silversides' use of the WC unconvincing. The confession lacks the Reformed consistency of the Bible, 39 Articles, the Lambeth Articles, the Irish Articles and the Canons of Dort. The Westminster Assembly was set up by a revolutionary government and manned with politicians and men from various rebel parties and theologies, almost none of whom represented the Reformed Church of England who had ushered in the glorious Reformation and provided us with gospel teaching never bettered. Hyper-Calvinists, Antinomians, Amyraldians, Free-Willers, Separatists and Erastians competed to have their views eternalized in the Westminster Standards. Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists fought for different brands of Republicanism and ecclesiology. It is amazing that the Confession did not become a chaos. This illustrates the overruling hand of God in England's history and the deep-down-in-the-heart feeling of the rebels that they ought to stick as closely as possible to the 39 Articles, though they called their Church 'malignant'. In 'nationalising' the bishopless churches and outlawing the Reformed Church of England, the WA set up a system, under Parliament, that robbed the churches of any real leadership of the churches. With all its weaknesses, the Reformed Church of England with its Convocation had provided English believers with a freedom they were never to have again. It is interesting to note that where Silversides criticizes the Hoeksema-Engelsma movement, it is invariably

because of the beliefs they hold in company with England's pre-rebellion Anglican Reformers and the great evangelists of the Eighteenth Century Awakening.

It is useful, after establishing a principle from Scripture, to illustrate these truths by godly examples. However, Silversides, after basing an argument primarily on the WC, or interpreting Scripture by means of the WC, quotes men who quite contradict him in context, yet Silversides claims they support him. This fully thwarts Silversides' intentions. For instance, Silversides speaks of God's love for all men on page 18, generalised from the single event of the rich young ruler (Mark 10; 21-22). Yet in his supporting quotes from Calvin, the Frenchman is not arguing for a common-grace, general love for reprobate sinners but is illustrating how 'covetousness held the young man back'. Silversides quotes John Knox on page 19 as showing 'God's love to the non-elect', yet Knox is not speaking on that subject but explaining that whereas the reprobate partake of 'common mercies', what he calls 'sovereign mercy' are reserved for His chosen children.

Apart from these unhelpful quotes in the body of the text, Silversides fills out his 128 paged booklet with 45 annexed pages of unexplained quotes from men of quite different persuasions to 'prove' that they believed in a free offer. But only one of these numerous and quite superfluous quotes appears relevant to the free offer cause, providing the translation used is correct. The rest is padding. To argue, for instance, that Mathew Mead's belief that rain falls on the just and unjust proves he is a free-offer man is fancy run wild.

Silversides deduces (p. 23) from Christ's command to love our neighbours as ourselves that God loves all sinners. God would not command us to be what He is not. True, Christians are called to love their neighbours. Believers are God's instruments and even co-workers in Providence, but this can hardly be likened to exercising a saving love for all sinners in telling them that Jesus has died personally for them and is thus freely offered to them. Likewise, we are called upon to forgive our neighbours of any wrong done to us, irrespective of their repentance, but this does not mean that, by analogy, God is obliged to do the same. Silversides challenges the immutability of God too much for my liking by arguing that though God loves our unconverted neighbours in this life, He will not love them in the next. Silversides, nevertheless quarrels with Engelsma's argument that Rom. 2:4 depicts God's love which leads to repentance, which must be a saving and discriminating love and not a general love to all men. Silversides retorts by laboriously explaining how one Biblical word (here *chrestos*) can apply to God's common love for all but, in another context, apply to God's saving love for some. Silversides, however, appears to apply such reasoning arbitrarily to suit his free offer approach.

Macabre as Silversides' doctrine of God's changing love is, his doctrine of God's two wills is even more horrifying. We are presented with God's

supposed wills of desire and decree. Silverside notes difficulties involved in using the term 'desire' but, nevertheless, still uses it. He argues on page 84 'If the term desire can legitimately be used to describe delight or pleasure in a holiness commanded but not decreed to be effected, so it can be legitimately employed to describe God's loving delight or pleasure in gospel blessings offered but not decreed to be actually bestowed." This is the deadly gospel of the free-offer monsters. According to Silversides, the 'free offer' means nothing less than God delights in promising salvation but equally delights in withholding it from the ones to whom it is promised. As Silversides repeats and underlines this 'horrible decree', there is no doubt that we are understanding Silversides correctly. However, he implies all along that we must preach God's delight in making promises and hide the fact that his all-too-human god will not keep them.

Silversides argues that his target bogeymen Hoeksema and Engelsma believe in justification from eternity and therefore get the common grace, free offer wrong. The elect, the Dutch-Americans believe, are placed in Christ before the foundation of the world which guarantees their salvation and warrants them being given faith to appropriate it. One cannot be more secure than when one is placed in Christ. Silverside disagrees, using Romans 8:30 quite out of context, maintaining that in the order of salvation, there is first a calling, then a believing, then a justification on the grounds of the sinner's belief. This general call is common grace which also shows God's common love to all men. However, where Engelsma is arguing from God's electing decrees in eternity before the foundation of the world according to Ephesians 1:4-11. Silversides is arguing for God's actions in time according to a set chronology where faith precedes justification. This view contradicts the teaching of Romans on the justification of God's ungodly enemies and that of the English and Swiss Reformers. Romans 8.30 in context points clearly to what has already happened on behalf of the elect whose calling and predestination are referred to first in verses 28 and 29 in terms of eternity. The whole context points to the elect being the objects of justification. Ephesians 1:3-4; 2 Thesalonians 2:13-14; I Peter 1:2, Acts 13:48 and Romans 8:30 all cause us to rejoice in the justification that God has given us, outside of time, in Christ. Are not our names written down in the Lamb's Book of Life in eternity where our inheritance awaits us? Romans 8:28-30; 2 Peter 1:10 and 2 Timothy 1:9 show clearly that there is no particular time order in relation to God's decrees as they are from eternity. At times Paul speaks of calling before he speaks of predestination and at other times predestination is chosen first. In his Timothy epistle Paul places everything in eternity. Peter puts calling even before election in his letter, showing that the Apostles were not thinking in terms of time but in terms of what Christ had accomplished. On dealing with Witsius, Silversides argues that election gives the elect a right to justifying benefits but not those benefits. This would also contradict the Scriptures given above besides Witsius.

Silversides strives to dig himself out of his own pit by arguing that the free offer is only free if sinners respond to it. This is cheating. Either the offer is

free for everybody and God wishes to save everybody or the offer is conditional to either the will of man or God. Silverside maintains that 'all of grace' means 'all of God', so he is left with a gospel which is conditional on God's election in Christ and not on a free offer to all for all according to a faulty belief in a two-faced god. Again, Silversides pins his hope on the Westminster Standards (p. 62), which, however, speak of saving grace but not of common grace or a free offer. He then maintains the Westminster Confession, Article VII:3 supports him, but here is a clear reference to the offer within the covenant of grace as believed by Dort, the Marrow Men and William Huntington and not within the gospel of common grace as believed by Silversides. This is clearly shown by the next paragraph (Section 4) which refers to the covenant of grace bequeathed for an inheritance to the elect. The only section that comes anywhere near Silversides' interpretation is X:1, which is, as George S. Hendry says, a later addition "to indicate the salvation provided in the covenant of grace is in God's eternal purpose intended for all men" and has been smuggled into the body text by modern free-offer people who do not care two hoots for the old WC theology. Though Silversides is slow to explain his terms, usually introducing them with vague Arminian-like utterances, he comes closest to defining his free offer on pages 47 and 83 where he says, "The overtures of the gospel are an expression of God's love, in that he delights in the promised blessedness that is held forth, even though, concerning the non-elect, he has not decreed the bestowal of the faith necessary for that blessedness to be conveyed." In other words, the common-grace, free-offer gospel is to tell sinners that some are promised blessings in which God delights but which He will not give. This is the crassest display of Hyper-Calvinism that I have ever come across and quite destroys Silversides superficial talk of a free offer and common grace.

Is not the old orthodox religion better which speaks of an immutable God whose promises are all 'Yea and Amen' and a faithful Christ who died to redeem each and everyone of His Church, promising them that He will never leave them nor forsake them? Happily, the Scriptures teach that our triune God keeps His promises. Silversides feigned gospel is not only a gospel of deceit, it is a gospel of confusion, combining the extremes of Arminianism and Hyper-Calvinism. It is certainly not Biblical and it is clearly not Reformed.

I am grateful to Chris Nogradi for pointing this out to me.

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