

THE CONTROVERSY IN THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
REGARDING THE DOCTRINE OF THE UNIVERSAL OFFER OF THE GOSPEL

A letter by Dr. Robert Strong, under date of April 25, 1947, was sent to certain members of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Appended to this letter was a copy of the letter of resignation of the Rev. and Mrs. Floyd E. Hamilton as missionaries under appointment by the Committee on Foreign Missions. In his letter, Dr. Strong takes exception to the fact that the views of certain ministers, including Mr. Hamilton, have been called in question by "persons zealous for the point of view of the complaint of 1944 in an effort to make it virtually a test of their orthodoxy." He contends that the Thirteenth General Assembly's disposition of the complaint should have ended "this sort of thing" and that the differences should now be confined to the realm of discussion. The letter ends with the question, "How long shall we have to see their personal or private interpretations, their own extra-Confessional standards insisted upon by some before a man can be granted a clean bill of Calvinistic orthodoxy?"

It is not the purpose of this paper to go into matters which the Committee on Foreign Missions has not made public. Certainly no final evaluation of the Committee's decision not to send out Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton at this time should be made by those who do not know all the facts involved. But Dr. Strong's letter publicizing Mr. Hamilton's resignation calls for the observation of certain elementary facts which he has not taken into account.

The Thirteenth General Assembly, in refusing to find that there was ground for complaint against the Presbytery of Philadelphia and in refusing to declare that the Presbytery erred in the decision to sustain the examination in theology of Dr. Gordon H. Clark, neither repudiated the theology of the complainants nor endorsed the theology of Dr. Clark; nor did it indicate for a moment that the doctrines set forth in the complaint should not be made tests of orthodoxy. The Assembly clearly took the position that, in considering the complaint, it must confine itself to the transcript of the examination. And on the basis of the transcript, the Assembly could not bring itself to find that the Presbytery had erred. The writer makes no claim that the Assembly would necessarily have reached a different decision if it had not confined itself to the transcript and had admitted other evidence which the complainants alleged would show that the Presbytery had erred. It is only contended that it was in the transcript alone that the Assembly did not find ground for the contention that the Presbytery had erred.

It is the conviction of an increased number in the church that the doctrinal issues raised in connection with the licensure of Dr. Clark are of vital importance, and that the position championed by him and others on these issues is contrary to the Word of God and the subordinate doctrinal standards of the church. These issues will continue to be raised whenever the occasion requires, for it is the settled judgment of many that the basic contentions of the complaint, rather than being personal, private or extra-Confessional interpretations, are essential to the Reformed Faith. The

writer of this paper regrets exceedingly that Mr. Hamilton and Dr. Clark hold to doctrinal positions which must be criticized. And let it be understood that this paper is not in any way intended to be an attack on them personally. But the truth of God is at stake; it must be defended at all cost. But it is hoped most sincerely that the cost will not include personal resentment and animosity. This paper is being written with the desire that it will play some part in bringing about greater doctrinal unity in the church.

Mr. Hamilton's letter of resignation sets forth three points of disagreement between him and the Committee on Foreign Missions which, he contends, were the bases of the Committee's decision not to send him out as a missionary at the present time. This paper is concerned only with the second point, namely, the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel to all men. The writer does not know whether Mr. Hamilton's position on this matter was one of the reasons for the Committee's decision, but it seems clear that his position as stated in his resignation is out of accord with the Bible.

Mr. Hamilton sets forth his position on this doctrine as follows: "I believe...that God sincerely offers the gospel to all men indiscriminately in the external call of the gospel. This may be held to be an aspect of that benevolence shown by God to all men in what we call common grace. But I do not believe that there are two contradictory wills in the secret counsel of God regarding the individual reprobate whom God has from all eternity determined to pass by in His decree of election. In other words, if God has determined not to elect a person to salvation, we have no right to say that God 'desires' to save such a one whom He 'desires' not to save; it is not to God's honor so to conceive of Him as irrational."

The History of the Controversy

In order properly to evaluate Mr. Hamilton's statement, a brief review of the history of this controversy in our church is necessary.

In his examination before the Presbytery of Philadelphia on July 7, 1944, Dr. Clark, while asserting his acceptance of the teaching of the Confession of Faith (VII, 3) on the divine offer of salvation, made it plain that he preferred to interpret the word "offer" in the sense of command. And though indicating that everything God does is sincere, at no point in the examination did he speak of God's sincerely offering the gospel to all men, stating that the word "sincere" was a peculiar adjective to use with reference to the offer of the gospel. To say the very least, he was apparently loath to use the word "sincere" to characterize either an offer or a command (Cf. Minutes of the Thirteenth General Assembly, p. 64). This reluctance, later acknowledged in The Answer to the complaint, could only be interpreted by the complainants to mean that Dr. Clark would deny that God, in His infinite compassion, desires that all men shall comply with the call, in short, that God desires the salvation of all men, including also the reprobate. This interpretation was borne out by Dr. Clark's acknowledgement that for him there was no apparent contradiction between the free offer of the gospel to all men, on the one hand, and the decree of reprobation, on the other hand.

Only by denying that God desires the salvation of all men, reasoned the complainants, can one take the position that there is no difficulty in seeing the connection between the gospel offer and the decree of reprobation. But without this desire back of God's offer of the gospel one can hardly say that the offer is sincere. It was not hard to understand, then, why Dr. Clark would not speak of the sincere offer of the gospel.

The Answer explained that Dr. Clark's reluctance to characterize the gospel offer as sincere in the case of all to whom it comes was due, in the first place, to the fact that it was superfluous, because everything God does is sincere; and, in the second place, to his desire not to be charged with Arminianism. Of course it is not wrong to use a superfluous word. In fact, one ought to use what he considers to be a superfluous word if it will help his brethren to understand what his true position is. But Dr. Clark's fear that he would be charged with Arminianism indicated that he believed it would sound un-Calvinistic to speak of "the sincere offer of the gospel."

The Answer gave not the slightest hint that Dr. Clark and the other signers believed that God desires the salvation of all men. Rather, a quotation of a small part of R. L. Dabney's treatment of the subject is set forth as "sufficient." The quotation from Dabney (Syllabus and Notes, Richmond, 1927, p. 559) simply expounds the condition on which salvation is offered to rebellious men, namely, that they shall turn. But it is obvious that this was not sufficient for Dabney, for it was only one point of the five in his reply to the Arminian contention that the decree of reprobation rules out a sincere offer of salvation to all. By citing only a part of Dabney's discussion, The Answer gave a very wrong impression of his position, for it will be shown in this paper that Dabney most warmly espoused the point of view for which the complainants were contending.

The committee charged with considering the complaint reported to the Thirteenth General Assembly its judgment that the transcript of Dr. Clark's examination before the Presbytery of Philadelphia did not bear out the contention of the complaint that Dr. Clark fails to do justice to the Scriptural doctrine of the offer of the gospel. At the same time, however, the report made the significant concession that the transcript does not show that Dr. Clark gave answers that would be sufficient to satisfy the Presbytery on "the precious teaching of Scripture that God's benevolence is actively directed toward even the reprobate and is manifested in the gospel offer to the reprobate..." If Dr. Clark would rule out this precious teaching, concluded the committee's report, there is definite ground for the complainants' charge.

At this point in the report of the committee there appears an excellent statement of the divine compassion which prompts the offering of the gospel to the wicked: "Such passages as Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11 indicate that God not only delights in the repentance of the actually penitent but also has that benevolence towards the wicked whereby He is pleased that they should repent. God not only delights in the penitent but is also moved by the riches of His goodness and mercy to desire the repentance and salvation of the impenitent and reprobate. To put it negatively, God does not take delight or pleasure in the death of the wicked. On the contrary, His delight is in mercy.

God desires that the reprobate exercise that repentance which they will never exercise and desires for them the enjoyment of good they will never enjoy. And not only so, He desires the exercise of that which they are foreordained not to exercise and He desires the enjoyment of good they are foreordained not to enjoy" (Minutes, p. 67).

It will be remembered that when one of the commissioners to the Assembly asked Dr. Clark categorically whether or not he accepted this statement, his only answer was that he had adequately set forth his position in an earlier session of the Assembly. But it ought not to be forgotten that never once on the floor of the Assembly did he deal with this head of doctrine. Hence, with regret the writer must remind the church that when he was plainly asked whether he believed that "God...is...moved by the riches of His goodness and mercy to desire the repentance and salvation of the impenitent and reprobate," Dr. Clark did not answer. It is to be hoped that he will yet declare in a forthright manner whether or not this excellent statement, evidently endorsed by the entire committee which dealt with the complaint, is acceptable to him.

But this paper is concerned with the views of Dr. Clark only because they provide the necessary background for consideration of the viewpoint of Mr. Hamilton. His position, now evidently called in question by a majority of the Committee on Foreign Missions, cannot be detached from the position of Dr. Clark. Mr. Hamilton was a signer of The Answer, and in thus expounding and defending Dr. Clark's position he necessarily gave the impression that he endorsed it. His present statement, together with a public incident, confirms this impression.

At a meeting of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in September 1946 Mr. Hamilton expressed surprise when a licentiate being examined for ordination indicated his agreement with the fine statement on the offer of the gospel which was contained in the report of the committee and which is quoted above; and not only did he express surprise, but went on to characterize the statement of the committee as Arminian.

The Issue

As the writer understands it, Mr. Hamilton's position is that God makes a universal, public offer of the gospel. He is not unwilling to use the word "sincere" in describing this offer. But he contends that we are not warranted in saying that God desires the repentance and salvation of all to whom He makes the sincere offer. The reason for this denial that God desires the repentance and salvation of all is that God has determined to pass by some in the decree of election. He states that "if God has determined not to elect a person to salvation, we have no right to say that He 'desires' to save such a one whom He 'desires' not to save..." The reasoning of Mr. Hamilton would seem to be that God, because He is omnipotent, cannot be said to desire the contrary of that which He purposes to do. To conceive of God having desires which do not find expression in His wise and holy volition would be to conceive of Him as irrational, is the conclusion of Mr. Hamilton.

This position is at variance with the statement of the doctrine found in the report of the committee and quoted above. It is the teaching of Scripture that God not only offers the gospel to all men, but in His infinite compassion is desirous that all who hear it shall comply with its demands and accept its invitation. In holding this belief there is no necessity of detracting in the slightest degree from the Scriptural doctrine that God sovereignly passes over some men in the decree of election and condemns them to eternal perdition because of their sins. It may not appear possible to reconcile these two doctrines of Scripture, but this difficulty should not prevent our hearty acceptance of these two truths, both of which come to us as the Word of God who will not deceive us.

It will appear, then, that the issue is whether or not the word "sincere" is to be taken seriously when it is ascribed to God's offer of the gospel to all men. Certainly one cannot speak of an offer as sincere unless there be a desire on the part of the offerer that there shall be acceptance of the offer. To state the issue in another way, is it possible, consistently with the doctrine of reprobation, to speak of a desire on the part of God that all those whom He commands to repent and invites to salvation shall comply? Mr. Hamilton answers this question in the negative; the writer maintains that it ought to be answered in the affirmative.

Dr. Vos on the Universal Love of God

The external call of the gospel comes to all men not simply as a command sovereignly imposed by God, but also as an expression of His infinite compassion which extends to all men. This compassion, or love, does not carry with it a purpose to bestow salvation and does not of itself bring about the salvation of those toward whom it is directed. Perhaps no theologian of our era has described it more carefully than Dr. Gerhardus Vos. In his address on the occasion of the opening of the ninetieth session of Princeton Theological Seminary he spoke as follows: "There is, however, still a third sense, in which Jesus leads us to ascribe universality to the divine love. This is done not so much in explicit form, as by the implications of His attitude toward sinful men in general. We must never forget that our Lord was the divine love incarnate, and that consequently what He did, no less than what He taught, is a true revelation adapted to shed light on our problem. If the Son of God was filled with tender compassion for every lost human soul, and grieved even over those whose confirmed unbelief precluded all further hope of salvation, it is plain that there must be in God something corresponding to this. In the parable of the prodigal son the father is represented as continuing to cherish a true affection for his child during the period of the latter's estrangement. It would be hardly in accord with our Lord's intention to press the point that the prodigal was destined to come to repentance, and that, therefore the father's attitude toward him portrays the attitude of God toward the elect only, and not toward every sinner as such. We certainly have a right to say that the love which God originally bears toward man as created in His image survives in the form of compassion under the reign of sin. This being so, when the sinner comes in contact with the Gospel of grace, it is natural

for God to desire that he should accept its offer and be saved. We must even assume that over against the sin of rejection of the Gospel this love continues to assert itself, in that it evokes from the divine heart sincere sorrow over man's unbelief. But this universal love should be always so conceived as to leave room for the fact that God, for sovereign reasons, has not chosen to bestow upon its objects that higher love which not merely desires, but purposes and works out the salvation of some. It may be difficult to realize from any analogy in our own consciousness how the former can exist without giving rise to the latter; yet we are clearly led to believe that such is the case in God. A logical impossibility certainly is not involved, and our utter ignorance regarding the motives which determine the election of grace should restrain us from forming the rash judgment that, psychologically speaking, the existence of such a love in God for the sinner and the decree of preterition with reference to that same sinner are mutually exclusive" (Presbyterian and Reformed Review, Vol. XIII, pp. 22f).

If the reasoning of Mr. Hamilton is valid, Dr. Vos would have to be charged with Arminianism and with conceiving of God as irrational. But Dr. Vos is very careful not to identify or confuse "the love of compassion which God retains for every lost sinner with that...highest form of divine affection which the Saviour everywhere appropriates to the disciples" (idem, p. 23). "The love of this gracious Fatherhood is infinitely richer than that pertaining to the three other spheres previously mentioned," continued Dr. Vos. "It would be wrong, of course, to keep them mechanically separated. For those who are to be received into the inner sanctuary the privileges of the court serve as a preparation. But whatever there is of organic adjustment between the sphere of nature and of the kingdom, between that of common and of special grace, between the love of compassion and the love of adoption, cannot justify us in identifying the one with the other...So far as the actual manifestation of the love of God in human consciousness is concerned, a fundamental difference lies in this, that the enjoyment of the common love of God outside of the kingdom does not exempt man from being subject at the same time to the divine wrath on account of sin. Love and wrath here are not mutually exclusive. Within the circle of redemption, on the other hand, the enjoyment of the paternal love of God means absolute forgiveness and deliverance from all wrath. Even this, however, is not sufficient clearly to mark the distinction between these two kinds of love, the wider and the narrower. For, previously to the moment of believing, those who are appointed for salvation, no less than the others, are subject in their consciousness to the experience of the wrath of God. It would seem, therefore, that in his pre-Christian state the one who will later become a child of God is not differentiated from the one who never will, inasmuch as both are in an equal sense the objects of the general benevolence of God and of His wrath in their experience. Thus a representation would result as if a line of God's general love ran singly up to the point of conversion, there to pass over into the line of His special love. The general love of God, as a common possession of all men, would then be the only factor to be reckoned with outside the sphere of the kingdom; and a special love of God could be spoken of only with reference to those who have actually become His children. And on this standpoint the temptation would always be strong to view the special love as conditioned by the spiritual character of man,

since it does not apply to any except the regenerate. In order to clear the subject thoroughly, therefore, we must note the further fact that, according to our Lord's teaching, even before the divine wrath is lifted off the sinner at the moment of his believing, there exists alongside of the general benevolence which embraces all mankind a special affection in the heart of God for certain individuals, who are destined to become subsequently His children, and who are in their subjective consciousness as yet the objects of His wrath. Already during the pre-Christian state of the elect there are two lines, that of general and special love, running parallel in God's disposition toward them. It is not the special love itself which originates at the moment of conversion, but only the subjective realization and enjoyment of it on the part of the sinner" (idem. pp. 24f).

Ezekiel 33:11

The Scripture passage which has been appealed to more than any other in support of the view set forth in this paper is Ezekiel 33:11: "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" This passage enunciates as clearly as possible the divine offer of salvation to the wicked and expresses the desire of God that the wicked should comply with that offer. It will be noticed that the formulation of this doctrine found on page 67 of the Minutes of the Thirteenth General Assembly is couched in the language of this verse.

The disjunctive force of the first part of this passage cannot be overlooked. The prophet represents God as saying, "I do not find pleasure in, I do not delight in, I have no desire to the death of the wicked; but I do find pleasure in, I do delight in, I do have desire to the turning of the wicked." Furthermore, the term "the wicked" cannot be narrowed down to refer only to a particular class of the wicked. It is true, of course, that these words were addressed to the "house of Israel," but they are addressed to "the wicked" of the house of Israel. The fact that they are addressed as within the pale of the covenant, being of the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, does not remove them from the class known as "the wicked." Conversely, there can be no warrant for failing to apply these words to all the wicked regardless of their external relationship to the covenant. We must assert, therefore, that God declares that His delight, rather than being in the death of the wicked generically, is in the turning of the wicked generically. We dare not say that God expresses His displeasure in the death of, and His pleasure in the turning of the wicked as of the house of Israel only, but of the wicked as wicked. It is still more unwarranted to say that the reference here is to the elect who are called "the wicked" because they have not yet turned from their evil ways. To narrow the term thus would require importing into the verse an idea of which the verse does not make the slightest suggestion.

It remains only to observe that the verb Onaphas (to take pleasure in) cannot be given a meaning other than that which is presupposed in this paper and in the report of the 1946 committee. The verb cannot here refer to what

God is pleased to do in the sense of the execution of His decrees. In this sense God is pleased, according to His perfect justice, to decree the death of the wicked. But because this passage says that God is not pleased with the death of the wicked, we must understand the word differently. Perhaps some would take the verse as a purely anthropomorphic expression according to which God would be expressing His hatred of man's wickedness and His love of man's repentance in terms of the reaction a man might have to certain events which please or displease him. But to insist on this interpretation would reveal a disposition to deny that there are in God active principles, corresponding to the highest affections and desires and inclinations of man, which are not necessarily accompanied by a purpose to act on the basis of them. It is the obvious meaning of this verse that God does not desire the death of the wicked, although He must inflict that punishment when men do not repent, and that He does desire the salvation of the wicked, although He does not bestow that salvation unless the wicked repent.

The Decretive Will and the Preceptive Will

Reformed theologians have always made a distinction between what is known as the decretive will of God and the preceptive will of God. According to the former He decrees whatsoever comes to pass; according to the latter He reveals the rule for man's duty. This distinction is one which is made in revelation and is accommodated to our feeble understanding. It should not be thought of as providing any basis for denying that the will of God is simple. Mr. Hamilton apparently does not do justice to this distinction, for in his letter of resignation he states that "if God has determined not to elect a person to salvation, we have no right to say that God 'desires' to save such a one whom He 'desires' not to save..."

But we would call attention to Calvin's interpretation of Ezekiel 18:23 which corresponds to Ezekiel 33:11: "...God desires nothing more earnestly than that those who were perishing and rushing to destruction should return into the way of safety. And for this reason not only is the Gospel spread abroad in the world, but God wishes to bear witness through all ages how inclined he is to pity...If any one should object--then there is no election of God, by which he has predestinated a fixed number to salvation, the answer is at hand: the Prophet does not here speak of God's secret counsel, but only recalls miserable man from despair, that they may apprehend the hope of pardon, and repent and embrace the offered salvation. If any one again objects--this is making God act with duplicity, the answer is ready, that God always wishes the same thing, though by different ways, and in a manner inscrutable to us. Although, therefore, God's will is simple, yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned. Besides, it is not surprising that our eyes should be blinded by intense light, so that we cannot certainly judge how God wishes all to be saved, and yet has devoted all the reprobate to destruction, and wishes them all to perish" (Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of Ezekiel, Vol. II, Edinburgh, 1850, pp. 246f).

The last three sentences of this quotation from Calvin should be studied carefully. Mr. Hamilton believes it is irrational to speak of God's

desire to save those whom He has decreed not to save. Calvin was aware of this line of thought and was concerned to refute it. He reminds us that the will of God, essentially simple, appears to us to have great variety. In other words, he makes the common distinction between the decretive will of God and His preceptive will. And because he makes this distinction, Calvin is not afraid to assert his inability to understand "how God wishes all to be saved, and yet has devoted all the reprobate to eternal destruction, and wishes them to perish". (Italics mine). This is the teaching which Mr. Hamilton would evidently term "irrational."

And Calvin is not alone in teaching that the Scriptures speak of a desire on the part of God that all men should repent and be saved. Commenting on I Timothy 2:4--"Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth"--Dr. J. Gresham Machen wrote: "But I am rather inclined to think that the phrase 'all men' is to be taken more strictly, and that the verse means that God takes pleasure in the salvation of the saved, and does not take pleasure in the punishment of those who are lost, so that so far as His pleasure in the thing directly accomplished is concerned He wishes that all men shall be saved. At any rate, that is clearly the meaning of the Ezekiel passage, whatever may be true of the I Timothy passage; and a very precious truth it is indeed" (The Christian View of Man, New York, 1937, pp. 75f).

Likewise Charles Hodge does not hesitate to say that God desires the salvation of all men. Referring to I Timothy 2:4, he says: "The second interpretation is that God desires the salvation of all men. This means, 1st, just what is said when the Scriptures declare that God is good; that he is merciful and gracious, and ready to forgive; that he is good to all, and his tender mercies over all his works. He is kind to the unthankful and to the evil... 2d. It means what is said in Ezek. xxxiii. 11...and in Ezek. xviii, 23... It means what is taught in the parable of the prodigal son, and of the lost sheep and the lost piece of money; and is taught in the lament over Jerusalem" (Conference Papers, New York, 1879, pp. 18f).

In answering the arguments of those who sought in 1890 to revise the Westminster Confession of Faith because its particularistic soteriology was regarded as offensive, William G. T. Shedd stated that "God's desire that a sinner should 'turn and live' under common grace, is not incompatible with his purpose to leave him to 'eat of the fruit of his own ways, and be filled with his own devices'--which is the same as 'foreordaining him to everlasting death.' A decree of God may not be indicative of what he desires and loves. He decrees sin, but abhors and forbids it. He decrees the physical agony of millions of men in earthquake, flood, and conflagration, but he does not take delight in it. His omnipotence could prevent this suffering in which he has no pleasure, but he decides for adequate reasons not to do so. Similarly he could prevent the eternal death of every single member of the human family, in which he takes no pleasure, but he decides not to do so for reasons that are wise in his sight. This distinction between the revealed will and the secret will of God is a valid one; and the latter of these wills may be no index of the former, but the exact contrary of it" (Calvinism: Pure and Mixed, A Defense of the Westminster Standards, New York, 1893, pp. 51f). In a footnote

on page 52 of this volume, Dr. Shedd writes that "God's revealed will, or will of desire, is expressed in Isa. 55:1; Ezek. 33:11; I Tim. 2:4; Tit. 2:11. His secret will, or will of decision and purpose in particular instances, is expressed in Mat. 13:11; John 6:37, 44, 65; Rom. 9:16, 18, 19." And what could be more pertinent to the present controversy in our church than Shedd's assertion that "God sincerely desires that the sinner would hear his outward call, and that his common grace might succeed with him. He sincerely desires that everyone who hears the message: 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; yea, come buy wine and milk without money,' would come just as he is, and of his own free will, 'for all things are ready.' The fact that God does not go further than this with all men and conquer their aversion, is consistent with this desire" (idem, p. 50).

Mr. Hamilton's Error

Mr. Hamilton's basic error, we believe, is his failure to appreciate fully this distinction between the decretive will of God and His preceptive will, or, as Shedd terms it, God's will of desire. This is evident from his letter of resignation in which he states: "...I do not believe that there are two contradictory wills in the secret counsel of God regarding the individual reprobate whom God has from all eternity determined to pass by in His decree of election." Implied in this statement is the charge that those who have questioned Mr. Hamilton's position on the offer of the gospel do believe that there are "two contradictory wills in the secret counsel of God regarding the individual reprobate..." This is a serious charge to make, and we can understand now, on the assumption that it is a valid charge, Mr. Hamilton may speak of Arminianism and irrationalism on the part of some in the church. But the charge is groundless. Certainly those who have disagreed with Mr. Hamilton do not hold that there are "two contradictory wills in the secret counsel of God." They teach no such thing when they speak of God's desire that all sinners should repent and be saved. But Mr. Hamilton, in failing to do justice to the Scriptural distinction between the decretive and preceptive wills of God, charges scores of ministers in our church with irrationalism. He must also, to be sure, make the same charge against Calvin, Hodge, Shedd, Machen and a host of other Reformed theologians.

Mr. Hamilton, we know, does not explicitly deny the distinction between the decretive will of God and His preceptive will. What he fails to see, however,—and this is the heart of the debate—is that there is the element of desire or inclination in the preceptive will of God. It has been noted that he speaks of the sincerity of the universal offer of the gospel. Yet he is unwilling to say that God, who sincerely offers the gospel, desires that all who hear its invitations and commands shall comply. This simply and clearly negates the word "sincere." Did not God, though He decreed to permit the fall of man, look with abhorrence on the sin of Adam? Was it not His desire that Adam should successfully complete his probation? To answer these questions in the negative would be blasphemy! Is it permissible to say that God desires that some men shall steal just because He does not provide that grace which restrains a greedy spirit? God commands that all men shall keep

the Sabbath. Dare we say that God lacks the desire that the heathen, who have not been given grace to obey that command, shall desecrate His holy day? If God is sincere in demanding obedience, He desires that all men shall be holy. By the same token, if He is sincere in calling all men by the gospel, He desires that all shall comply with the terms of the call and be saved.

During the first quarter of the seventeenth century the Arminians in Holland charged that Calvinism has a gospel only for the elect. They made this charge because they believed that the doctrine of predestination ruled out the possibility of a bona fide offer of the gospel to all men. The Calvinists did not for one moment admit that this charge was valid. Instead, the Synod of Dort took the unequivocal position that "As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God has most earnestly and truly declared in His Word what is acceptable to Him, namely, that those who are called should come unto Him. He also seriously promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe" (Canons of Dort, III & IV, 8). But hyper-Calvinists have yielded to the Arminian contention that predestination eliminates the free offer, and, clinging to the former, they have denied the latter. It appears that Mr. Hamilton is guilty of the same thing. He cannot allow the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel to stand beside the doctrine of predestination; consequently, while using the word "sincere" to describe the offer of the gospel, he robs that word of its meaning completely when he denies that God desires that the gospel shall be accepted by all to whom it comes. The Arminian charge is based on a rationalistic approach to the Scriptures. Its validity should be denied, and all who base their thinking on special revelation should be willing to let these two doctrines stand side by side in spite of any difficulties in attempting to reconcile them.

R. L. Dabney on God's Active Principles

With no show of logic can it be denied that with every precept, invitation or command made by God there is the element of compassion, of inclination, of affection, of desire. Also, then, we must speak of God's desire that all men repent and believe the gospel unto their salvation. R. L. Dabney writes that "while God 'has no parts nor passions,' He has told us that He has active principles, which, while free from all agitation, ebb and flow, and mutation, are related in their superior measure to man's rational affections." These active principles are, according to Dabney, a part of the complex motives which prompt divine volition. "God's will is also regulated by infinite wisdom," he continues. "Now, in man, every rational volition is prompted by a motive, which is in every case, complex to this degree, at least that it involves some active appetency of the will and some prevalent judgment of the intelligence. And every wise volition is the result of virtual or formal deliberation, in which one element of motive is weighed in relation to another, and the elements which appear superior in the judgment of the intelligence, preponderate and regulate the volition. Hence, the wise man's volition is often very far from being the expression of every conception

and affection present in his consciousness at the time; but it is often reached by holding one of these elements of possible motive in check, at the dictate of a more controlling one... We must not ascribe to that God whose omniscience is, from eternity, one infinite, all-embracing intuition, and whose volition is as eternal as His being, any expenditure of time in any process of deliberation, nor any temporary hesitancy or uncertainty, nor any agitating struggle of feeling against feeling. But there must be a residuum of meaning in the Scripture representations of His affections, after we have guarded ourselves duly against the anthropopathic forms of their expression. Hence, we ought to believe, that in some ineffable way, God's volitions, seeing that they are supremely wise, and profound, and right, do have that relation to all His subjective motives, digested by wisdom and holiness into the consistent combination, the finite counterpart of which constitutes the rightness and wisdom of human volitions. I claim, while exercising the diffidence proper to so sacred a matter, that this conclusion bears us out at least so far: That, as in a wise man, so much more in a wise God, His volition, or express purpose, is the result of a digest, not of one, but of all the considerations bearing on the case. Hence it follows, that there may be in God an active principle felt by Him, and yet not expressed in His executive volition in a given case, because counterpoised by other elements of motive, which His holy omniscience judges ought to be prevalent. Now, I urge the practical question: Why may not God consistently give some other expression to this active principle, really and sincerely felt toward the object, though His sovereign wisdom judges it not proper to express it in volition?... The great advantage of this view is, that it enables us to receive, in their obvious sense, those precious declarations of Scripture, which declare the pity of God towards even lost sinners. The glory of these representations is, that they show us God's benevolence as an infinite attribute, like all His other perfections. Even where it is rationally restrained, it exists... We can now receive, without any abatement, such blessed declarations as Ps. lxxxi:13; Ezek. xviii:32; Luke xix:41, 42" (Syllabus and Notes, Richmond, 1927, pp. 529ff).

Dabney proceeds to show the fallacy of the contention that God feels no compassion towards the lost: "And thus argues the ultra-Calvinist: 'Since God is sovereign and omnipotent, if He has any propension, He indulges it, of course, in volition and action. But if He had willed to convert reprobate Israel, He would infallibly have succeeded. Therefore He never had any propension of pity at all towards them.' And so this reasoner sets himself to explain away, by unscrupulous exegesis, the most precious revelations of God's nature!... It is not true that if God has an active principle looking towards a given object, He will always express it in volition and action... We know that God's omnipotence surely accomplishes every purpose of His grace. Hence, we know that He did not purposely design Christ's sacrifice to effect the redemption of any others than the elect. But we hold it perfectly consistent with this truth, that the expiation of Christ for sin--expiation of infinite value and universal fitness--should be held forth to the whole world, elect and non-elect, as a manifestation of the benevolence of God's nature" (idem, p. 533).

Revelation Versus Rationalism

One who seeks to understand, in the light of Scripture, the relationship between the offer of the gospel and the decrees of God is not to be accused of rationalism. Dabney's attempt to relieve the difficulty is not rationalistic simply because he confines himself to the Bible. He has made a worthwhile contribution to the subject; but he cannot be credited with removing the paradox which appears to us as we consider these two doctrines. For Dabney, the ways of the God of grace remain ineffable. We are impressed with John Dick's solemn reminder that attempts to alleviate this difficulty are "a faint struggle to extricate ourselves from the profundities of theology. We believe, on the authority of Scripture, that God has decreed to give salvation to some, and to withhold it from others. We know, at the same time, that he offers salvation to all in the Gospel; and to suppose that he is not sincere, would be to deny him to be God. It may be right to endeavor to reconcile these things, because knowledge is always desirable, and it is our duty to seek it as far as it can be attained. But if we find that beyond a certain limit we cannot go, let us be content to remain in ignorance. Let us reflect, however, that we are ignorant in the present case only of the connexion between two truths, and not of those truths themselves, for these are clearly stated in the Scriptures. We ought therefore to believe both, although we cannot reconcile them. Perhaps the subject is too high for the human intellect in its present state. It may be, that however correct our notions of the Divine purposes seem, there is some misapprehension which gives rise to the difficulty. In the study of theology, we are admonished at every step to be humble, and feel the necessity of faith, or an implicit dependence upon the testimony of Him who alone perfectly knows himself, and will not deceive us" (Lectures in Theology, Vol. II, New York, 1851, pp. 148f). Dick wards off rationalism by taking up his position behind the bulwark of the doctrine of divine revelation in the Scriptures.

Likewise the words of Shedd should give us pause. Referring to several passages of Scripture which teach absolute predestination, and several others which teach the sincere, universal offer of the gospel, he writes: "Since both classes of passages come from God, he must perceive that they are consistent with themselves whether man can or not. Both, then, must be accepted as eternal truth by an act of faith, by every one who believes in the inspiration of the Bible. They must be presumed to be self-consistent, whether it can be shown or not" (Calvinism: Pure and Mixed, p. 45).

Preaching the Gospel

Hodge insists that this truth must be maintained at all times. For him it is no matter of academic speculation detached from the preaching of the gospel to lost souls. "The conviction that God is love, that he is a kind Father, is necessary to encourage sinners to repent. The prodigal hesitated because he doubted his father's love. It was his hope that encouraged him to return" (Conference Papers, p. 19).

We do not say, of course, that Mr. Hamilton falls behind any in his zeal to preach the gospel to all men. But we do contend that his position on the offer of the gospel, his denial that God desires that all men shall repent and be saved, would logically result in robbing the gospel message of the warmth and fervor which characterize it when it is presented as the earnest command and the sincere invitation not only of the preacher, but also of God himself. Mr. Hamilton could not, consistently with his present view, tell each lost sinner that God wants him to repent and earnestly desires his salvation. It would seem to be a most precarious step to allow him to teach young men who are preparing to preach the gospel to the heathen in Korea. It is the sincere hope of the writer of this paper, as well as of many others, that Mr. Hamilton will speedily see the inconsistency in his present position and that he will acknowledge the Scriptural teaching that although some men have not been predestinated by God to enjoy eternal salvation, He nevertheless sincerely wishes that they would repent and believe the gospel unto their soul's salvation. May he go forth very soon to preach God's full-orbed, sincere offer of the gospel to all.

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