

Appendix 2

Are Gospel Invitations to All?

Although, as I have explained, I do not wish to explore preparationism in this book, it is necessary to glance at a closely-connected issue: Are gospel invitations¹ universal – that is, indiscriminate to *all* sinners? or are they restricted to *sensible* sinners? The latter, says the hyper-Calvinist.² Reader, I remind you of Meney’s words: ‘The “free offer preacher” presumes to invite all sinners to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, promising them salvation if they do’. The implication is clear – universal invitations are wrong. But we do not have to rely on implication. Ella was unequivocal: ‘Does the Bible invite all men indiscriminately and everywhere to believe...? No, says the Bible’.³

Ella is not alone in this, of course:

We believe that the invitations of the gospel... are intended⁴ only for those who have been made by the blessed Spirit to feel their lost state as sinners and their need of Christ as their Saviour, and to repent of and forsake their sins... We reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be exhorted to believe in or turn to God... While we believe that the gospel is to be preached or proclaimed to all the world, as in Mark 16:15, we deny offers of grace; that is to say, that the gospel is to be offered indiscriminately to all... Therefore... [it is

¹ What follows applies not only to gospel ‘invitations’, but also to ‘commands’ and ‘exhortations’. ‘Come’, for example, can be an invitation, a command or an exhortation.

² ‘Sensible’ sinners are elect individuals who are regenerate, and, conscious of their sin and need of salvation, repent, and desire Christ. By a ‘hyper-Calvinist’, I mean one who does not hold with the free offer, who does not hold with duty faith. See chapter 3 for my note on the word ‘hyper’.

³ Ella: *The Free Offer* pp5,61. Even though, as Ella said, God commands all to repent (Ella: *The Free Offer* pp58,71). See chapter 1.

⁴ God *intends* the salvation only of the elect, yes, but the question is whether the *invitation* should be to all, or to the ‘sensible’ elect only. As is clear, these Articles restrict the invitation to the latter.

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wrong] for ministers in the present day to address unconverted persons, or indiscriminately all in a mixed congregation, calling upon them savingly to repent, believe, and receive Christ...⁵

Is this right?

Certainly not! Some gospel invitations or commands are obviously unlimited;⁶ Isaiah 45:22 and Acts 17:30, for example. This of itself puts the issue beyond doubt. God commands all sinners to look to him and be saved; he commands all sinners to repent, not just ‘sensible’ sinners.⁷

Besides, if the gospel invitation is to be issued only to those who are ‘sensible’, then every invited sinner will come – since the ‘sensible’, by definition, are elect. But we know that God in the gospel invites many sinners who refuse his invitations, and never do come (Prov. 1:24-33; Isa. 65:2; Luke 14:17-24; Rom. 10:21).⁸

⁵ Articles 24,26,29,33 of Articles of Faith of the Gospel Standard Aid and Poor Relief Societies, The Gospel Standard Societies, Harpenden. These same Articles also ‘deny duty faith and duty repentance – these terms signifying that it is every man’s duty spiritually and savingly to repent and believe’.

⁶ Spurgeon repeatedly dealt with the issue: ‘Don’t believe that the invitations of the gospel are given only to characters; they are, some of them, unlimited invitations’ (Spurgeon: *New Vol.6* p107).

⁷ Indeed, this command is superfluous for sensible sinners – who are, by definition, repentant.

⁸ Gill vainly tried to limit this call (in Proverbs) ‘to the natural duties of religion, and to an attendance on the means of grace’, and (in Luke) to ‘outward ordinances’, ‘to the house of God, and church of Christ; to come and hear the word... and attend the word and worship of God’, but it will not do. As he said on Isa. 65:2, ‘Israel... believed not in Christ, obeyed not his gospel’; on Luke 14:17, ‘John the Baptist... exhorted the people to believe in Christ... [and] Christ himself [was]... sent... to call sinners to repentance... [and] the apostles... were... sent... to preach the gospel’; and on Rom. 10:21, it speaks of ‘the ministry of the prophets... the preaching of John the Baptist, of Christ, and his apostles’. Quite! Preaching the gospel does not mean calling sinners to attend a place of worship! As Gill said on Matt. 11:28: ‘Christ... kindly invites and encourages souls to come unto him... by which is meant, not a local coming, or a coming to hear him preach; for so his hearers... were come already... nor is it a bare coming under the ordinances of Christ... but it is to be understood of believing in Christ, the going of the soul to him, in the exercise of grace

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This means, therefore, that gospel invitations cannot be restricted to ‘sensible’ sinners.⁹

But what of invitations such as Isaiah 55:1-7 and Matthew 11:28? Are *they* universal? or are they given only to those who show the characteristics (and these spiritual) stated in the invitations? If the latter, and this is said to govern all gospel invitations, then this is where hyper-Calvinism joins forces with preparationism; that is, gospel commands or invitations are given

on him, of desire after him, love to him, faith and hope in him: believing in Christ, and coming to him, are terms synonymous (John 6:35)’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.3 pp430,1035; Vol.5 pp101,507-508; Vol.6 p93).

⁹ Gill, commenting on the command ‘to bring in... the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind’ (Luke 14:21), said ‘the poor’ are ‘such as have no spiritual food to eat... nor any spiritual clothing, no righteousness... nor money to buy either... of which spiritual poverty some are sensible, and others are not’. As for ‘the blind’, Gill ruled out the possibility of their being sensible since they are ‘blind... as to any saving knowledge of God in Christ; of Christ, and the way of righteousness, life, and salvation by him; of the plague of their own hearts, the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the need of a Saviour; of the work of the Spirit of God upon their souls, and the necessity of it; and of the truths of the gospel, in a spiritual and experimental way. In short, under these characters are represented natural and unconverted men’. The gospel invitation is to such, but Gill, as above, tried to limit it to an invitation to attend preaching, to read the Bible, and so on, or a command ‘to a natural faith’ or ‘natural repentance’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.5 pp507-508; *Body* Vol.2 pp282-286. See also above, chapters 1-4). Spurgeon tackled this kind of evasion head-on: ‘Certain persons have been obliged to admit that the apostles commanded, and exhorted, and besought men to believe, but they tell us that the kind of believing which the apostles bade men exercise was not a saving faith’. He called this ‘an assertion so monstrous. Can we imagine for a moment apostles with burning zeal and ardour, inspired by the Spirit of God within them, going about the world exhorting men to exercise a faith which after all would not save them?... When our Lord bade his disciples go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature... the faith which was to be preached was evidently none other than a saving faith, and it is frivolous to say otherwise... It is, I repeat, a mere frivolity or worse, to say that the faith enjoined by the apostles was a mere human faith which does not save... That cause must be desperate which calls for such a defence’ (Spurgeon: *Metropolitan* Vol.17 pp135-136).

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only to those who have had certain experiences which qualify them to be so invited – hyper-Calvinism – and only those who are ‘prepared’ by these various experiences are ‘fit’ to come to Christ – preparationism. As I said in chapter 1, this opens a Pandora’s box, and starts the preacher on an impossible course of probing to see if the sinner really is ‘sensible’ and qualified to be *invited* to come to Christ, and the sinner on what might well turn out to be an endless round of self-questioning as to whether or not he is sufficiently *prepared* to come to Christ. It puts the cart before the horse – an undertaking, not only futile, but the cause of much harm. Spurgeon:

At the present time there are large numbers of Calvinistic ministers who are afraid to give a free invitation to sinners; they always garble Christ’s invitation thus: ‘If you are a sensible sinner you may come’; just as if stupid sinners might not come... I do believe there are hundreds and thousands who remain in doubt and darkness, and go down to despair, because there is a description given and a preparation for Christ demanded, to which they cannot attain – a description indeed which is not true, because it is a description of what they feel after they have found Christ, and not what they must feel before they come to him.

About a year before, Spurgeon, speaking of ‘how wide is this [gospel] invitation’, challenged those ‘ministers who are afraid to invite sinners’; ‘then why are they ministers!’ he thundered. But he had a confession to make. Very early in my ministry, he admitted:

I somewhat faltered when about to give a free invitation. My doctrinal sentiments did at that time somewhat hamper me. I boldly avow that I am unchanged as to the doctrines I have preached; I preach Calvinism as high, as stern, as sound as ever; but I do feel, and always did feel an anxiety to invite sinners to Christ. And I do feel also, that not only is such a course consistent with the soundest doctrines, but that the other course is after all the unsound one, and has no title whatever to plead Scripture on its behalf. There has grown up... an idea that none are to be called to Christ but what they call *sensible* sinners. I sometimes rebut that by remarking, that I call *stupid* sinners to Christ as well as sensible sinners, and that stupid sinners make by far the greatest proportion of the ungodly. But I glory in the avowal that I preach Christ even to *insensible* sinners.

And again:

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Some of my brethren are greatly scandalised by the general invitations which I am in the habit of giving to sinners, as sinners. Some of them go to the length of asserting that there are no universal invitations in the word of God... [But] we have one here [Isa. 1:18]. Here is most plainly an invitation addressed to sinners who had not even the qualification of sensibility. They did not feel their need of a Saviour... A more accurate description of careless, worthless, ungodly, abandoned souls, never was given anywhere... In the first verse [of the chapter] you will perceive that the text was addressed to *senseless* sinners – so senseless that God himself would not address them in expostulation, but called upon the heavens and the earth to hear his complaints... What a fine poetical setting forth of the thought, that God appealed from man to dead inanimate creatures, for man had become more brutish than the stones of the field; and yet to such is the invitation given, ‘Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord’.

And one more word from Spurgeon on this topic:

The gospel comes to all who hear it... [and] it is the same gospel which comes to the unregenerate as to the regenerate... Some of our brethren who are very anxious to carry out the decrees of God, instead of believing that God can carry them out himself, always try to make distinctions in their preachings,¹⁰ giving one gospel to one set of sinners, and another to a different class. They are very unlike the old sowers, who, when they went out to sow, sowed among thorns, and on stony places, and by the way-side; but these brethren, with profounder wisdom, endeavour to find out which is the good ground, and they will insist upon it that not so much as a single handful of invitations must be cast anywhere but on prepared soil. They are much too wise to preach the gospel in Ezekiel’s fashion to the dry bones in the valley while they are yet dead; they withhold any word of gospel till there is a little quivering of life among the bones, and then they commence operations. They do not think it to be their duty to go into the highways and hedges and bid all, as many as they find, to come to the supper. Oh, no! They are too orthodox to obey the Master’s will; they desire to understand first who are appointed to come to the supper,

¹⁰ Spurgeon was not saying that a preacher must be ‘inclusive’, treating all his hearers as believers (a fault, sad to say, all too common). ‘We must divide our congregation before we send you away’ (Spurgeon: *The Pulpit Library* p95; see also same volume pp96-97,174; *Metropolitan* Vol.17 p529). A preacher must discriminate between believers and unbelievers, but he must preach the same gospel to both, leaving the distinction to the Spirit – the only one who can make it. See also Morgan pp317-318,352.

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and then they will invite them; that it to say, they will do what there is no necessity to do.¹¹ They have not faith enough, or enough subjugation of will to the supreme commands of the great Master, to do that which only faith dare do; namely, tell the dry bones to live, bid the man with the withered hand stretch out his arm, and speak to him that is sick of the palsy, and tell him to take up his bed and walk. It strikes me, that refusing to set forth Jesus to all men, of every character, and refraining from inviting them to come to him, is a great mistake... [David, the prophets, the apostles] delivered the gospel, the same gospel to the dead as to the living, the same gospel to the non-elect as to the elect. The point of distinction is not in the gospel, but in its being applied by the Holy Spirit, or left to be rejected of man.¹²

* * *

By considering Isaiah 55:1-7, I wish to probe this a little. This passage is particularly relevant since Ella raised it in response to Fuller, and, as he said, because it 'is used time and time again for free offer purposes'.¹³ Here is the passage:

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you – the sure mercies of David... Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

¹¹ That is, invite those who are in effect already converted. Spurgeon was here dealing with the second round of invitations spoken of in the parable, and did not contradict the point I made earlier in this Appendix; namely, that since the servants were sent first to those already invited, and they refused, it proves that the gospel invitation includes those who will never come.

¹² Spurgeon: *New* Vol.6 pp397-398; Vol.5 p436; *New and Metropolitan* Vol.7 pp145-146; *Metropolitan* Vol.11 pp494-495, emphasis his; see also, for instance, *New* Vol.5 p130; Vol.6 p302; *Metropolitan* Vol.29 pp337-348; 'Only' pp301-305; Murray: *Forgotten* pp52-59.

¹³ Ella: *The Free Offer* pp49-54.

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The picture is very clear. God, *speaking as a man*, pictures himself as a market trader or hawker who, desiring takers for his wares, lifts his voice and calls out to the passing crowd to come and accept his offer. Earnestly pressing his invitation, he commands, and seeks to persuade and encourage, all passers-by to step right up and buy, promising delight and full satisfaction to all who, feeling their need of his goods, do come and take. Observing the people spending their money on rubbish, he argues with them, trying to convince them of their stupidity, urging them to come to him to get what they really need. He appeals to them, pleading the superiority of his goods over the shoddy stuff they are at present wasting their money on, in hope of convincing them to turn to his stall and buy.

What is he offering? Salvation for sinners through Christ. What is his asking price? Nothing to the sinner; it is free.

Does it need to be said? He would be a very odd market-trader, indeed, who put the slightest limit on whom he invites to come and buy. The trader of Isaiah 55:1-7 certainly does not. Rather, he does all he can to arouse an interest in his wares; so much so, he hopes that by spreading his goods before the crowd, raising his voice, appealing to his hearers' thirst, and spelling out the richness of what he is offering, he might in some way or another make the people want his merchandise. He realises, of course, unless they have an appetite for what he carries, and see that his wares *are* superior, he will get no takers – *but that does not stop him inviting*. Indeed, eager for a sale, he presses them all the more! No trader would dream of first asking the people if they like his merchandise, checking to see if they feel their need of it, and intend to purchase, *before* inviting them to buy! Of course not! This trader doesn't! Spreading his wares and extolling their value, he urges the crowd to walk right up and buy, assuring the penniless that their empty pockets will be no bar, pointing to the price-tickets which carry only zeros. Open-armed he stands, looking for takers.

This is how it should be with the preachers of the gospel. This is what God is saying in Isaiah 55:1-7.

Hyper-Calvinists, however, will not have it. 'The text', Ella claimed, 'has to do with Christ and the people he chooses and not the masses... The passage can only be understood as God's providing of salvation for a specific people whom he has chosen

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for that purpose'.¹⁴ Nothing here, apparently, about a free invitation to all to come to Christ; it is all to do with the elect, and only the elect. Since Ella quoted Gill with approval, let us hear what he thought of the passage:

These words are no call, invitation, or offer of grace to dead sinners, since they are spoken to such who were thirsty; that is, who, in a spiritual sense, were thirsting after pardon of sin, a justifying righteousness, and salvation by Christ, after a greater¹⁵ knowledge of him, communion with him, conformity to him, and enjoyment of him in his ordinances; which supposes them to be spiritually alive; for such who are dead in sin, thirst not after the grace of God, but the lusts of the flesh; they mind and savour the things of the flesh, and not the things of the Spirit; only new-born babes, or such who are born again, are quickened and made alive, [and] desire Christ... Besides, the persons called unto are represented as having no money; which, though true of unconverted persons, who have nothing to pay off their debts... yet they fancy themselves to be rich... whereas the persons here encouraged are such, who not only have no money, but know they have none; who are poor in spirit, and sensible of their spiritual poverty; which sense arises from the quickening influences of the Spirit of God upon their souls... [the words] are not directed to [unconverted persons]... Neither Christ, nor the grace of Christ, are designed by 'the waters', but the ordinances... Now where should hungry and thirsty souls, and such that have no money, attend, but on the ordinances, the means of grace?... [The words, 'Seek the LORD...'] are an exhortation to public worship... These words ['Let the wicked forsake his way'] are [wrongly] represented as a promise of pardon, on condition of forsaking sinful ways and thoughts and turning to the Lord... [when, in fact, they are] declarations of pardoning grace and mercy... made... to encourage souls sensible of the wickedness of their ways... [They] contain no promise to dead men, but [are] a declaration of pardoning grace to sensible sinners... This passage of Scripture... is no promise of pardon to the non-elect.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ella: *The Free Offer* pp51,53.

¹⁵ Note the gloss – 'greater' – which fundamentally alters the meaning of the passage. Gill spoke of the desire for 'more knowledge of him, more communion with him, and more conformity to [Christ]' (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.3 p989, emphasis mine). See below for how Gill contradicted himself on this point.

¹⁶ Ella: *The Free Offer* pp51-52; Gill: *Cause* pp19-21; see also Gill: *Commentary* Vol.3 pp989-992.

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Not only are there some big assumptions here, it is confused. On the one hand, Gill thought sensible sinners are here invited to Christ for salvation; yet on the other, he thought believers are invited to come to Christ for more grace. But the main thrust is clear: According to Gill, the characteristics listed – thirsty, penniless, wasters, unsatisfied – are qualifications which define and limit those who are invited; and they are spiritual qualifications. The invitation is not universal, therefore; it is limited to the sensible; that is, to the regenerate, the converted, believers; in short, the elect. Indeed, the passage, whilst it may be thought of as a call to sensible sinners, in reality is not a call to sinners at all – sensible or otherwise – but to saints; it is a call, not for justification, but for sanctification; believers are invited to come to the Lord for more grace that they may grow in the knowledge of Christ. Indeed, playing really safe, the invitation is, after all, an invitation to attend preaching services!¹⁷

This misses the meaning of the passage by a mile. Isaiah 55:1-7 is a call to sinners to come to Christ for salvation, with a promise of mercy for those who come; it is not an invitation to believers. *First*, believers are regenerate; they are already living; but here God promises those he invites, ‘Your soul shall live’.¹⁸ *Secondly*,

¹⁷ When Christ told the woman at the well: ‘Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst’ (John 4:14), and when he said: ‘He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst’ (John 6:35), was he speaking about attendance at preaching services? Certainly not! He was talking about the gospel, salvation and everlasting satisfaction found by faith in himself.

¹⁸ Hypers disagree: ‘Some say that [this] proclamation is made to sinners dead in sin; and, as a proof of it, they say that it runs, “Hear, and your soul shall live”. But it would be very strange for a corpse to be invited to come to the [sovereign’s] palace in order to be banqueted. It would want something to move it; and if it was dead how could it “come”? The fact is, they are living souls who are here spoken of; but they are famishing, they are starving, they are wanting food; and when God the Spirit brings them to Christ, then they live, and live well too’. ‘Who is it that he is speaking to?... Some say... dead sinners. But can the dead do any work?... No indeed. Then they must belong to the people of God, those whom the Holy Spirit has quickened, who are poor, sensible, needy sinners, drawn by his power to the dear Redeemer, to all those who have spiritual faith given to them, and who are led to Christ for life and salvation; these shall

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believers are already in an everlasting covenant with Christ, yet God here promises those he invites that he will make such a covenant with them. *Thirdly*, believers are not ‘the wicked’,¹⁹ nor are they ‘unrighteous’. The whole tenor of the passage shows it is addressed to sinners not saints. I do not say that a backslider may not find great encouragement from the invitation – encouragement to return to God, and so on – but that is not its thrust. The passage is an invitation to sinners to come to God to find salvation in Christ.

But what sinners? *All* sinners, or *sensible* sinners? And do the characteristics listed qualify the invitation or the coming? In any case, are the thirst and poverty spiritual characteristics? Gill was sure they are, but is it certain it is so?

Let me take the last issue first. Might the thirst, the hunger, the waste of money on that which does not satisfy, describe the general dissatisfaction and misery and ruin which all sinners know, and not a specific spiritual experience wrought in the sinner by the Spirit? Are not all unconverted sinners thirsting, hungering, dissatisfied, and wasting their resources? Are they not all on a treadmill of

hear the voice of mercy, and their souls shall live, and live well too’ (Gadsby pp126,144; see also pp347-348). In other words, Gadsby argued, since only the regenerate can come, only the regenerate may be invited; only the believing may be invited to believe. As I have shown throughout my book, there are two points about commanding dead sinners. *First*, this is exactly what we must do. Dead sinners are to be exhorted to look and live; dead sinners are to be commanded to repent. Christ’s miracles illustrate it; he often commanded men to do what they could not do. *Secondly*, the Bible frequently leaves us with a paradox, a paradox which we must hold and proclaim in both its parts. It may be ‘very strange’, but human logic has to give way to biblical logic. In any case, as Gill said: ‘Though man by sin has lost his power to comply with the will of God, by an obedience to it, God has not lost his power, right, and authority, to command’. The gospel command does not speak of man’s ability but his duty. This is why, as Gill immediately added, ‘when... the gospel call [is] rejected, it is most righteously resented by the Lord; and such [as do reject it] are justly punished with everlasting destruction by him (1 Pet. 4:17; 2 Thess. 1:8-9)’ (Gill: *Body* Vol.2 p286).

¹⁹ As Gill admitted: ‘The word for “wicked” signifies... ungodly, and is expressive of the pollution and guilt of sin all are under’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.3 p991).

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slavery? Are not all unconverted sinners in desperate need, whether or not they realise it? Isaiah 55:1-7 certainly bears this out.²⁰ God reasons with those he invites, and expressly asks them why they are spending their money for what is not bread, their wages for what does not satisfy. In other words, by no stretch of the imagination can they be said to be looking for Christ! Their desires, far from spiritual, are carnal and futile. They want happiness and fulfilment, certainly, but they are not thinking about everlasting salvation and peace with God. Not at all! And the sort of satisfaction they are looking for, they seek from the world. In other words, they are far from being sensible, awakened, regenerate sinners who know the value of Christ and long for him! Of an awareness of their sin and need of Christ, they show not a trace.²¹ In short, are we not talking about natural men with natural desires?²² Of course we are! And yet these are the ones invited to Christ.

True, only those who spiritually thirst and realise they are spiritually penniless will come to Christ. Yes, a sinner must be regenerated before he can or will believe; he must know he is a sinner, yes, and want salvation from Christ. To borrow the language of the hyper-Calvinist, only sensible sinners will seek salvation. Yes, this is true. In fact, from a Calvinistic point of view – from a biblical point of view – it is a truism. *But we must not confuse the invitation with its acceptance.*²³ Are only the elect –

²⁰ As do a score of other passages; Prov. 27:20; Eccles. 1:8; 4:8; Rom. 6:17,19-20; Heb. 2:15, for instance.

²¹ They ‘lavish away time, opportunities, and strength, in reading and hearing false doctrine, which is not bread, but chaff... labouring to seek for happiness in worldly things’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.3 p989). In saying this, Gill contradicted his claim that these were sensible sinners who were thirsting after more knowledge of Christ (see note above).

²² Ella vehemently criticised this talk of ‘natural desire’ (Ella: *The Free Offer* pp49-50).

²³ Above all, we must get the right emphasis. Hyper-Calvinists concentrate on the sinner’s fitness to be invited, and preparationists on the sinner’s fitness to accept. But the gospel invitation focuses on Christ. There is a great deep here, of course. The way the Spirit regenerates, convicts and converts a sinner, is his sovereign prerogative, and known to him alone (John 3:8). Human logic, though it might try to analyse the

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indeed, the elect who have been made sensible – to be invited because only they will come? or, is the invitation general even though its acceptance is – like Christ’s atonement – particular? This is the issue.

Calvin, commenting on Isaiah 55, far from thinking the hearers were spiritually awakened, drew attention to the opening word, ‘Ho!’, noting:

So great is the sluggishness of men that it is difficult to arouse them. They do not feel their wants, though they are hungry; nor do they desire food, which they greatly need; and therefore that indifference must be shaken off by loud and incessant cries... Besides, the invitation is general; for there is no man who is not in want of those ‘waters’, and to whom Christ is not necessary; and therefore he invites all indiscriminately, without any respect of persons.

Not a sensible sinner in sight! Awakened? They were sleep walking! Calvin was clear, however, there is a ‘true preparation for receiving this grace’ – *for receiving this grace*,²⁴ please note, *but not for receiving the invitation*. Before sinners will receive this grace, said Calvin, they must be spiritually ‘thirsty’; those who are not, ‘will not receive Christ’. Why not? ‘Because’, said Calvin:

They have no relish for spiritual grace... It is therefore necessary that we have ‘thirst’, that is, an ardent desire, in order that it may be possible for us to receive so great blessings... [The prophet] complains of the ingratitude and madness of men, in rejecting or disdain[ing] the kindness of God who offers all things freely... Men... choose rather to... vex themselves in vain, than to rely on the grace which God offers to them... The prophet... exclaimed against all men, to whatever age they might belong; for all the posterity of Adam... in seeking the road to a heavenly life, they altogether go astray, and follow their own vain opinions rather than the voice of God.²⁵

This is clear enough. According to Calvin, Isaiah was addressing all men, ‘the invitation is general’, ‘he invites all indiscriminately’,

process, and sort out its order in precise detail, is probing where it ought not.

²⁴ ‘These passages [including Isa. 55] declare that none are admitted to enjoy the blessings of God save those who are pining under a sense of their own poverty’ (Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.1 p232).

²⁵ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.8 Part 2 pp156-158.

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but only those prepared of God will receive the promised grace.²⁶

The Sum of Saving Knowledge: ‘Here... the Lord... makes open offer of Christ and his grace, by proclamation of a free and gracious market of righteousness and salvation, to be had through Christ to every soul, without exception, that truly desires to be saved from sin and wrath... He invites all sinners, that for any reason stand at a distance from God, to come and take from him riches of grace’.²⁷ This too is clear. The offer is ‘open’, God ‘invites all sinners’ whatever their condition, but only he who ‘truly desires to be saved’ will obtain that salvation.

Tobias Crisp:

Life now is reached out to such a person, that is a dead person... I am not fit for Christ... What is this to come without money, and without price? It is nothing but to take the offer of Christ, these waters of life, to take them merely and simply as a gift brought, and this is a sure mercy indeed...

The Father expects nothing in the world of men; no one qualification or spiritual disposition, before, or upon the communicating of his Son Christ to men... Consider... Isaiah 55:1; it is plain there... that God

²⁶ Calvin, however, contradicted himself when he went on to say the prophet does not speak of those who ‘take no concern about the spiritual life of the soul’ – and ‘there are many such persons’. Either the prophet addresses all men, or he does not. But whatever the explanation of that contradiction, Calvin lends no support to the hyper-Calvinistic interpretation of the passage. The prophet was not addressing sensible sinners, but ‘those who desire life, and yet do not understand the method or way of obtaining it’, using ‘methods which men contrive, in opposition to the word of God, for obtaining salvation... [using] all the industry, study, or labour which belongs to man... our idle attempts to worship [God]... labours foolishly undertaken [yet which] are reckoned valuable by the judgement of the flesh’. This does *not* describe sensible sinners – since they *are* seeking Christ, and, being taught by the Spirit, are seeking him in his appointed way. As for the ‘desire [for] life’ and the ‘obtaining [of] salvation’, does this not describe the overwhelming majority of men? Don’t most unbelievers cherish a vain hope that somehow all will be well with them in the end? Indeed, to judge by the confident pronouncements made at many an unbeliever’s funeral, they regard it as a certainty! But just because an unbeliever vaguely hopes, or presumes, he is going to heaven, it does not mean he is sensible!

²⁷ *The Sum* p332.

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looks for nothing in the world of men; be they what they will, be they in the worst condition, no matter what it is, they are the men to whom Christ offers himself... that is, everyone that has but a mind to come to him, everyone that would take him, may have him... But what does God require here in the covenant? No money, no price... nor anything at all.²⁸

Matthew Henry dealt first of all with those invited:

We are all invited to come and take the benefit of that provision which the grace of God has made for poor souls in the new covenant... Who are invited: 'Ho, every one'... the poor and the maimed, the halt and

²⁸ Crisp: *Christ Alone* Vol.1 pp37-38,100-101; *Sermons* Issue 1 pp41-42; Issue 2 pp42-43. Surprisingly, Gill made no comment on these extracts. He did, however, elsewhere try to limit – to sensible sinners – Crisp's offer of Christ (Crisp: *Christ Alone* Vol.2 p27), as did the Christian Bookshop, Ossett (Crisp: *Sermons* Issue 1 p48). But this is wrong. In addition to the above, Crisp was clear: 'The secrets of the Lord are with himself; only the names of particular persons are written in the book of life; but they are not written in the word... but... it is as sufficient for the satisfaction of a man, [that] the general tender of free grace and pardon of sin to all sinners... [is] as if his name in particular were set down in that tender' (Crisp: *Christ Alone* Vol.3 p40). See also *Christ Alone* Vol.1 pp47,114-115; *Sermons* Issue 1 pp50-51; Issue 2 pp54-55. Gill, even though he admitted Crisp made 'this general tender, or offer of Christ to all', nevertheless stated that 'the universal offer cannot be supported without supposing universal redemption' (Crisp: *Christ Alone* Vol.1 p114; *Sermons* Issue 2 pp58-59). In this last, he was mistaken; the extent of the atonement has no bearing on the extent of the offer. Owen: 'Christ died... only for the elect... Some then tell us we cannot invite all men promiscuously to believe. But why so? We invite... all men as sinners; and we know that Christ died for sinners' (Owen: *Psalms 130 in Works* Vol.6 p523). See also my note in Appendix 1. As for Crisp, he preached both the *universal* offer and *particular* redemption (Crisp: *Christ Alone* Vol.2 pp81-82), as Gill recognised (Crisp: *Christ Alone* Vol.1 p10; *Sermons* Issue 1 n5 (not n9) p19; Issue 2 p59). See also Rippon p71; Murray: *Spurgeon* p132. With regard to the offer not specifying persons by name, Spurgeon made a telling point; namely, that if Scripture did put names to the promise, it would provide far less encouragement to doubting sinners. As he said, speaking for himself, he would wonder if there was another Charles Haddon Spurgeon! 'How much worse would it be for the Smiths and the Browns!' he declared (Spurgeon: *Metropolitan* Vol.32 pp645-646; see also Vol.11 pp705-706).

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the blind, are called to this marriage supper, whoever can be picked up out of the highways and the hedges. It intimates that... ministers are to make a general offer of life and salvation to all... and that the gospel covenant excludes none that do not exclude themselves. The invitation is published with an ‘Oyez – Ho’, take notice of it.

The invitation is to all. But ‘what is the qualification required in those that shall be welcome’? This:

They must thirst. All shall be welcome to gospel grace upon those terms only that gospel grace be welcome to them. Those that are satisfied with the world and its enjoyments for a portion, and seek not for a happiness in the favour of God – those that depend upon the merit of their own works for a righteousness, and see no need they have of Christ and his righteousness – these do not thirst; they have no sense of their need, and are in no pain or uneasiness about their souls, and therefore will not condescend so far as to be beholden to Christ. But those that thirst are invited to the waters, as those that labour, and are heavy laden, are invited to Christ for rest. Note, where God gives grace he first gives a thirsting after it; and where he has given a thirsting after it, he will give it (Ps. 81:10).

And, finally, ‘Whither they are invited’:

‘Come you to the waters’... Come to Christ...²⁹ The gifts offered us are invaluable and such as no price can be set upon... He who offers them has no need of us, nor of any returns we can make him. He makes us these proposals, not because he has occasion to sell, but because he has a disposition to give... The things offered are already bought and paid for. Christ purchased them at the full value, with price, not with money, but with ‘his own blood’ (1 Pet. 1:19)... We shall be welcome to the benefits of the promise, though we are utterly unworthy of them, and cannot make a tender of anything... We are earnestly pressed and persuaded (and O that we would be prevailed with!) to accept this invitation, and make this good bargain for ourselves... That which we are persuaded to is to hearken to God and to his proposals... [to] accept God’s offers.

Edwards, citing Isaiah 55:1 with other passages, declared: ‘Pardon is as much offered and promised to the greatest sinners as any, if they will come aright to God for mercy. The invitations of the

²⁹ Matthew Henry included ‘ordinances’ in the invitation, but majored on Christ himself.

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gospel are always in universal terms'.³⁰ Once again, pardon is offered to all, but received only by those who come in faith.

Young: 'Redemption has been accomplished... and now the invitation is extended to all that are in need to come and to partake of the salvation the Lord offers... This [passage] is equivalent to the divine imperative of the gospel message, whereby men who are lost are commanded to come to Christ and in him to find the blessings that they so desperately need and that he alone can give... The invitation is universal, addressed to all who are wicked and men of iniquity'.³¹

Fuller: 'This is the language of invitation... The thirst which [those who are invited] are supposed to possess does not mean a holy desire after spiritual blessings, but the natural desire of happiness which God has implanted in every bosom, and which, in wicked men, is directed not to "the sure mercies of David", but to that which "is not bread", or which has no solid satisfaction in it'.³²

Boston:

That gospel offer (Isa. 55:1) is the most solemn one to be found in all the Old Testament; and that recorded [in] Rev. 22:17 is the parting offer made to sinners by Jesus Christ at the closing of the canon of the Scripture, and manifestly looks to the former; in the which I can see no ground to think that the thirsting therein mentioned does [in] any way restrict the offer; or that the thirsty there invited are convinced, sensible sinners who are thirsting after Christ and his righteousness; the which would leave outside the scope of this solemn invitation... the far greater part of mankind... The context seems decisive [on] this point; for the thirsting ones invited are such as are 'spending money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfies not' (Isa. 55:1-2); but convinced, sensible sinners who are thirsting after Christ and his righteousness, are not spending their labour and money at that rate; but, on the contrary, [they are spending it] for that which is bread and satisfies; namely, for Christ. Wherefore the thirsting there mentioned must be more extensive, comprehending, indeed, and principally aiming at that thirst after happiness and satisfaction which, being natural, is common to all mankind. Men pained with this thirst or hunger are naturally running, for quenching

³⁰ Edwards p112.

³¹ Young pp374-380.

³² Fuller: *Worthy in Works* p157.

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thereof, to the empty creation, and their fulsome lusts; so ‘spending money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfies not’, their hungry souls find no food, but what is meagre and lean, bad and unwholesome, and cannot satisfy their appetite. Compare Luke 15:16. In this wretched case, Adam left all mankind, and [this is where] Christ finds them. Whereupon the gospel proclamation is issued forth, inviting them [that is, all mankind] to come away from the broken cisterns, filthy puddles, to the waters of life, even to Jesus Christ, where they may have bread, fatness, what is good, and will satisfy... their painful thirst (John 4:14; 6:35).³³

And as Boston said on Matthew 11:28: ‘I cannot agree with those that restrain these expressions to those that are sensible of their sins and misery, without Christ, and are longing to be rid of the same; but I think it includes all that are out of Christ, sensible or insensible’.³⁴

Spurgeon:

I am sorry that some of my brethren entertain the idea that the gospel is to be preached only to certain characters. They dare not preach the gospel to everybody;³⁵ they try to preach it to the elect; surely, if the Lord had meant them to make the selection he would have set a mark upon his chosen. As I do not know the elect, and have no command to confine my preaching to them, but am bidden to preach the gospel to every creature, I am thankful that the gospel is put in such a way that no creature can be too poor, too wicked, or too vile to receive it, for it is ‘without money and without price’... If before I preach the gospel I have to look for a measure of fitness in a man, then I cannot preach the gospel to any but those whom I believe to have the fitness; but if the gospel is to be preached freely, with no conditions or demands for preparations or prerequisites... then I may go to the most degraded [pagans]... and tell them the good news; we may speak of mercy to harlots and thieves... we may penetrate the jungles of crime, and still with the same entreaty from heaven – ‘Let the wicked forsake his

³³ Boston: *Marrow* p143.

³⁴ Boston: *Beauties* p261. Boston did not leave it there, but gave his reasons.

³⁵ Hypers, I acknowledge, claim they do preach the gospel to all, but Spurgeon was referring to the fact that they limit the gospel *invitation* to the sensible. Giving the invitation to *all*, however, is an essential part of preaching the gospel to every creature; without it, the gospel is not being preached as it should be.

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way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him turn unto the Lord, for he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon'. The fact that the mercy of God is 'without money and without price' enables us to preach it to every man, woman, and child of woman born.

Spurgeon on Matthew 11:28:

Labourers and loaded ones constitute the great mass of mankind, and the Lord Jesus invites them all without exception... Some have ventured to say that this describes a certain *spiritual* character, but I fail to see any word to mark the spirituality of the person; certainly I see not a syllable to limit the text to that sense. Brethren and sisters, it is not our wont either to add to or to take from the word of God knowingly, and as there is no indication here that these words are to be limited in their meaning, we shall not dare to invent a limit. Where God puts no bolt or bar, woe unto those who shall set up barriers of their own. We shall read our text in the broadest conceivable sense, for it is most like the spirit of the gospel to do so. It says – '*all* you that labour', and if you labour, it includes you. It says – '*all* you that are heavy laden', and if you are heavy laden, it includes you, and God forbid that we should shut you out.

And as he had explained in a sermon preached fifteen years before: 'While the invitation is given to the weary and heavy laden, you will perceive that the promise is not made to them *as* weary and heavy laden, but it is made to them *as* coming to Christ'.

Again:

In order that you may come to Jesus, no preparation is required. You may come just as you are, and come at once: only confess that you need him, desire to have him, and then take him by trusting him. He is like wine and milk, supplying delight and satisfaction, and you are to take him as men would take a drink. How could the invitation be put more broadly than it is? How could it be uttered more earnestly? It has a 'Ho!' to give it tongue. Tradesmen in certain parts of London stand outside of their shops and cry 'Buy, buy!' or call out 'Ho!' to the passers-by because they are anxious to sell their wares. Jesus is yet more eager to distribute his rich grace, for he longs to see men saved... There are many such invitations in the Scriptures, and if not all expressed by the same metaphor, they are all equally as free and as clear... Jesus entreats men to look to him and live: he bids them come

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to him and find rest unto their souls.³⁶

Let me bring this to a conclusion: Reading the characteristics set out in some gospel invitations as qualifications which sinners must meet before they are invited, not only turns those invitations upside down, it demands the impossible, since no preacher, nor any sinner, can ever be sure the qualifications have been met in any particular case. The upshot is, whereas the characteristics spelled out in the invitations are intended to encourage – not hinder – sinners in coming to Christ, hyper-Calvinists turn them into barriers – impossibly high barriers – for both ministers and sinners. Ministers have to be sure sinners have surmounted the barriers before they can invite them; sinners have to be sure they have climbed over the barriers before they can be invited, let alone come to Christ. An influence more deadening on the gospel invitation it would be hard to imagine, the consequences of which are serious in the extreme.

I wish John Brown's wise and biblical counsel, based on the words of Christ in John 7:37-38, were known, remembered and acted upon. Rightly depicting those words as the gospel's 'unlimited invitation to participate in the blessings of salvation' – that is, stressing 'the unlimited extent of the invitation' – Brown declared:

The free and unrestricted nature of the invitation [to Christ]... deserves notice. Not only is the descriptive character of those invited, 'those who thirst', common to all human beings, but the invitation is so fashioned, that no human being can find the shadow of a reason for thinking himself excluded... It is not, 'If any man be deeply sensible of his guilt, depravity, and wretchedness, let him come to me and drink'. Such are invited; but if that were all, as some have taught, thus, however unintentionally, clogging with conditions the unhampered offer of a free salvation, men might think that till they had brought themselves, or were in some way or other brought, into a state of deep contrition, and earnest seeking after pardon, and holiness, and salvation, it would be presumption in them to come to Christ, or even look towards the Saviour for salvation. But the invitation is,

³⁶ Spurgeon: *Metropolitan* Vol.20 pp140-141; Vol.22 pp614-615; *New and Metropolitan* Vol.7 p109; *Metropolitan* Vol.26 pp415-416, emphasis his; see also *New* Vol.4 p342; Murray: *Spurgeon* pp69-71.

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‘Whosoever wishes to be happy, let him come to me, sinful and miserable as he is, and in me he shall find salvation. If you are not a brute, if you are not a devil – however like the one in sensuality, or the other in malignity – you are invited. If you are on earth, not in hell, you are invited’.

As Brown had said: ‘A more comprehensive description of human beings, I believe, could not be conceived. “If any man thirst”, is just equal to, “Whosoever wishes to be happy”. If a man can be found who is perfectly happy, or who has no wish to be happy, that man is not invited. Till such a person is found, we must hold that the invitation has no limits’.³⁷

* * *

Forgive me, reader, but I cannot leave such a glorious subject there. Permit me to quote just one more free-offer preacher actually going about his business. Observe how Edward Payson makes the gospel invitation general, *but not generalised*; that is, he invites all his hearers, but makes sure that everyone in particular knows he is personally invited. Whilst the invitation is all-embracing, there is nothing vague about it.

First, let Payson state the facts:

My friends, God offers you the water of life, without money and without price. Everyone may come and take it if he will... [Christ] was... pleased to express his invitations in the most general and encouraging terms which language could afford... He intended that no man, who heard the gospel, should have any cause to pretend that he was not invited to share in its benefits. He therefore made his invitations as general and comprehensive as possible, so as to exclude none who did not exclude themselves.

Now let us hear Payson preach it:

Permit me then to apply the subject by pressing everyone present, who has not already embraced the Saviour, to come to him without delay. As the mouth of God, and in my Master’s name, I invite everyone of you to do this. Our Creator, our God has made a great feast, a

³⁷ Brown: *Discourses* Vol.2 v, pp1,5-10. Note that Brown cited Bunyan’s *Jerusalem Sinner*, and linked John 7:37-38 to other gospel invitations including Isa. 55:1-3 and Matt. 11:28.

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marriage feast for his Son; a feast for the [reception] of sinners... To this feast you are now invited. No tickets of admission are necessary. The Master of the feast stands at the door to receive you, declaring that not one, who comes, shall be cast out; and as his servant, sent forth for this very purpose, sent especially to you, I now invite you to come. I invite you, children; for there is a place for you. Leave your toys and follies then, and come to Christ. I invite you who are young; for your presence is especially desired. Leave your sinful amusements and companions then, and come to the Saviour. I invite you who are [middle-aged]. To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men. Particularly do I invite you, who are parents, to come... to the Saviour's feast. I invite you, who are aged, to come and receive from Christ a crown of glory, which your grey hairs will be, if you are found in the way of righteousness. I invite you to come, you poor, and Christ will make you rich in faith and heirs of his kingdom. I invite you to come who are rich... I invite you, who are ignorant, to come and Christ will impart to you his treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I invite you who possess human learning... I invite you who are afflicted to come, for my God is the God of all consolation, and my Master can be touched with the feeling of your infirmities. I invite you, who feel yourselves to be the greatest of sinners, to come... I invite you, who have long despised, and who still despise this invitation, to come; for Christ's language is, Hearken to me, you stout-hearted, and far from righteousness. And if there be any one in this assembly, who thinks himself overlooked; if there be one who has not yet felt that this invitation is addressed to him, I now present it to that person, particularly, and invite him to come.

Then the warning:

And now, my friends, I have done. My directions were to invite to the Saviour's marriage feast as many as I should find. I have accordingly invited all and each of you. I take you to record, as witnesses against each other, that you have all received the invitation. I take each of your consciences to record, as witnesses against yourselves, that you have been invited, and as a witness for me, that I have discharged my commission. If then any of you do not come, you cannot ascribe it to the want of an invitation. If any of you perish, it will be, not because Christ did not offer to save you; nor because you did not hear the offer, but solely because you would not accept it. You are, therefore, left without excuse. I am aware, however, that you will fancy you have an excuse. You will pretend that you wish to come, but are unable. My friends, I know nothing of that. I am not directed to answer such objections. I have nothing to do with them. My business

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is simply to preach to you the gospel; to proclaim to you the glad tidings; to invite you to Christ, and to assure you, in his name, that, if you come, you shall most certainly be received. If you say that you cannot come; if you can make God believe it; if you dare go to the judgement seat with this excuse, and venture your eternal interests on its being accepted as sufficient, it is well. But if you determine on this course, permit me to remind you, that God's sentiments, as revealed in his word, differ very widely from yours, with respect to this excuse. He evidently considers your unwillingness, or inability, or whatever you choose to call it, to come to Christ, as your greatest sin. He, once and again, denounces upon you the most dreadful punishments for this very thing. He declares, not only that all who do not believe in Christ shall be condemned, but that they are condemned already. What you consider as your best excuse, he considers as your greatest sin. Beware then, my friends, how you make this excuse...

Instead, therefore, of seeking for excuses, which will only prove your destruction, let me persuade you rather to comply with Christ's invitations.

Payson returns to mercy:

The blessings which [Christ] offers and dispenses... cost him their full value. They cost thirty-three years' labour... No! more, they cost him his life. He paid the dreadful price in tears and groans and blood, in agonies unutterable. There is not a single blessing he offers you, O sinner, which did not cost him a pang. He purchased the privilege of offering you those very blessings which you have a thousand times rejected... Now he offers you, without money and without price, all that cost him so dear. He even beseeches you as a favour to accept it, and will consider the joy arising from your acceptance and salvation as a sufficient recompense for all that he suffered in procuring it.

To conclude:

Man is happy and free... if he... embraces the Saviour and the salvation thus freely offered; otherwise, [he is] lost, more fatally, hopelessly lost, than ever.³⁸

Are gospel invitations universal? They are, praise God, they are. Thank God it is so, for it means that God invites me – and, reader, it means that God invites YOU.

³⁸ Payson Vol.1 p474; Vol.2 pp484,490-495; Vol.3 p156.