

Introduction

George M. Ella, to put it mildly, does not agree with what is known as the ‘free offer’, and he makes no bones about it. Indeed, he has written a book on the subject: *The Free Offer and The Call of the Gospel*, in which, we are told, he has set out ‘sound reasons for rejecting the “free offer” method of evangelising’, and given ‘solid scriptural principles by which our commission to preach the gospel of sovereign grace to every creature can properly be met’.¹

Very well.

Let me declare an interest. I am an advocate of the ‘free offer’ and I, too, have written about it. For this reason, Ella has had me, as one among many, in his sights. But I welcome his attention; I am delighted to think my words have provoked thought. And if my arguments are wrong, I need to be told, and put back on the straight and narrow. What we all want, surely, is to be biblical, and in furthering this aim, reasoned, loving argument with those who do not see eye-to-eye with us can do no harm at all. No harm? Quite the opposite; informed and constructive criticism can do nothing but good. Let’s have a bit more ‘iron sharpening iron’! We can’t have too much of ‘sound reasons’ and ‘solid scriptural principles’.

Ella, I freely acknowledge, wrote his book out of deep concern for the glory of God, for the defence of the preaching of the gospel, and for the advance of the salvation of sinners. I am convinced he desired to further these aims by dealing with what he sees as an erroneous practice based upon a defective theology. I admire his intention. It is mine in publishing this reply.

Having said that about Ella’s book, in my opinion it falls far short of its claims, does not represent a serious attempt at coming to grips with a vital question, and fails to set out a reasoned account of his own position. For a start, he never even defined what he was supposed to be criticising! Just to assume what he was attacking, is cavalier. Furthermore, Ella made sweeping allegations without justification, sometimes using excessive language. More

¹ Ella: *The Free Offer* p7.

than once he dismissed the views of those he was censuring, but did so – wrongly – by association.² Speaking for myself, he has not dealt fairly with what I have said, and has attributed beliefs to me which I do not hold and have never expressed. He used caricature. He repeatedly dragged red-herrings across the track, taking his readers into areas of no relevance to the question in hand.³ Above all, when it came to expounding Scripture, the time and care which Ella showed was abysmally small.⁴

All this is grievous, a sad distraction, and leaves a crucial issue cloaked in fog. Nor is it the first time. Consequently, I have decided to reply; the free offer is too important to be left as it is in Ella's book.

But I will deal with only a part of what Ella said. Whilst I am not the only person whose views he has attacked – I use the word advisedly – I cannot speak for others. There are sections in Ella's work which have no connection with me, sections in which he has criticised views I do not hold. I will not concern myself with such. What I will do is come to the crux of the matter. There is only one question to be answered. Is the free offer biblical?

Let us begin at the beginning. What are we talking about? What was Ella supposed to be refuting?

What is the free offer?

As I have said, Ella did not define what he was writing against. Now to misuse terms leads only to confusion. So, even though it is not entirely satisfactory, since Ella has attacked me for holding to the free offer, the best I can do is to state what I think he meant by it. I do so by taking Peter L. Meney's words in his Introduction to Ella's book, and sticking as close as I can to them. This, therefore, is what I think Ella meant by 'the free-offer preacher':

² For instance, see Ella's juxtaposition of Grotius, Wesley, Fuller, Gay and (John) Murray, and his 'link' between false sects and 'the free offer enthusiasts' (Ella: *The Free Offer* pp39,49).

³ Reader, if you wish to see the sort of remarks I am talking about, please glance at Appendix 1.

⁴ For his 'exposition' of Isa. 45:22, see Ella: *The Free Offer* pp26-27; for Isa. 55:1ff and John 6:29, see the same volume pp49-55.

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The ‘free-offer’ preacher [is compelled]⁵ to invite all sinners to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, promising them salvation if they do. This he does [while holding]⁶ that Christ’s atonement was neither made for all, nor intended for all who hear the gospel message... It is not the preacher [only] with his limited knowledge, but the all-knowing, eternal God who freely, sincerely and genuinely offers salvation to all mankind. This is in spite of the Father’s eternal purpose to save only the elect, the substitutionary nature of Christ’s atoning work and the distinguishing, effectual call of the Holy Spirit.⁷

This is as close as I can get to Ella’s view of the free offer. I do wish, however, he had defined it for himself, and then we all would have known precisely what it was he was trying to refute. I am truly sorry he at least implied that ‘definitions of the “free offer” are... of little importance’.⁸ In order to make some progress, however, as far as I can judge, this is what Ella was challenging:

The free offer is the invitation to all sinners to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, promising them salvation if they do, even though Christ’s atonement was neither intended for all, nor accomplished for all.

It is certainly what I understand by the free offer.

Of course, there is much more to gospel preaching than this. In content, the whole of Scripture must be preached, centring on Christ and him crucified (Acts 20:17-32; 1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14). No element of truth can be omitted. And preaching involves declaring the gospel to sinners, calling them, trying to persuade them, commanding them, reasoning and pleading with them, warning them, and so on, in addition to inviting them. So I agree with Ella: ‘Sinners must be called, commanded, even beseeched to repent and turn from their evil ways’.⁹ Indeed, I would apply his words to

⁵ Meney had ‘presumes’, thus begging the question right at the outset.

⁶ Meney had ‘even if he holds’. But this is not the point. We are discussing Calvinistic preachers, surely, not Arminian. See note below.

⁷ Ella: *The Free Offer* pp5-6.

⁸ Ella: *The Free Offer* p66. Since Ella was saying ‘their’ (the free-offer preachers’) ‘definitions of the “free offer” are... of little importance’, why did he himself not define what he was trying to refute?

⁹ Ella: *The Free Offer* p71.

more than calling and commanding sinners to *repent*.¹⁰ But more of this later.

What was Ella's task?

In writing against the free offer, the task Ella needed to address was this: Is the above statement scriptural? If not, he needed to show where it diverges from Scripture. In Meney's words, we ought to have had his 'sound reasons... and solid scriptural principles' argued out for us. The issue is not whether the free offer is Grotianism, Fullerism, or any other 'ism', but is it scriptural? Coming from the other direction, Ella gained nothing by proving the free offer is a contradiction of John Gill or William Huntingdon. He had no need to spill ink on such matters. By aiming at Fuller, he was aiming at the wrong target; the views of Gill and Huntingdon are not the standard. It is 'to the law and to the testimony' (Isa. 8:20) we must turn; it is God's word we must 'tremble at' (Isa. 66:5).¹¹

Nor was Ella's task, again using Meney's words, to prove that we cannot 'reconcile God's purpose to save only some, redeem only some, freely and unconditionally bestow the gift of faith on only some', on the one hand, 'with a genuine free offer to all to believe and be saved', on the other.¹² There are many things in Scripture which we cannot reconcile. God calls us to believe and obey his word, to preach it, not to reconcile it. In my writing about the free offer, I have stated my position explicitly; we cannot and should not try to reconcile God's unknowable decree with his revealed desire as expressed in Scripture. I stand by it. I will

¹⁰ I agree with John Elias: 'I cannot understand how those that are against calling, inviting, persuading, and compelling sinners to come to Christ, can be said to preach the gospel' (Morgan p317).

¹¹ I do not say the views of men are irrelevant, but while principles may be *supported* from the works of men, they must be *established* from Scripture. Just to say, in all my extracts from other authors, if need-be I modernise spelling and grammar without altering the sense. As for Gill, I quote him extensively, partly because Ella has spoken so highly of his written works. See, for instance, Ella: *Gill* pp22-26.

¹² Ella: *The Free Offer* p5.

develop the point as I go on. ‘The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children’ (Deut. 29:29). ‘Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and his ways past finding out!’ (Rom. 11:33). So let us not waste time in tackling the impossible by probing into the unknowable.

Nor did Ella have to concern himself with preachers who do not believe and preach the gospel in line with what are commonly known as the doctrines of grace, the five points of Calvinism.¹³ Ella gained nothing, for example, by drawing attention to preachers who believe in a universal atonement and thus address sinners in an unbiblical way. It may well be the case. But it has nothing to do with what he was supposed to be refuting.

Nor was Ella required to establish the doctrines of grace. This is not at issue. Obviously, I can speak only for myself – but I am sure all free-offer preachers (as defined above) can say the same – I am in full accord with Ella’s statement on ‘a particular atonement, on the invincible work of the Spirit in turning man from damnation to salvation, and on the fact that Christ’s atonement was not in vain, and those whom he aimed to save are saved’.¹⁴ I believe it and preach it. I do not believe in ‘a gospel of

¹³ I use the term ‘Calvinism’ merely as a convenient historical catch-word to denote ‘the gospel, God’s system of salvation by grace’. Calvin, great as he was, did not found this system, nor is he its standard. See Spurgeon: *New* Vol.4 p341; *New and Metropolitan* Vol.7 pp298,302; Murray: *Spurgeon* p40. Calvinism does not clash in any way whatsoever with the full free-offer of the gospel; in fact, such an offer can be made only within the structure of the doctrines of grace. See Kelly pp49-50,78. Spurgeon: ‘Calvinism... gives you ten thousand times more reason for hope than the Arminian preacher’. ‘Someone asks me, “Why talk of Calvinism?” Why I talk of it [is] because you dislike it. I use that very word because it happens to displease you... Calvinism... is really Bible-ism. But as you have given it a nickname, I will label the article as you have done. You may reject it if you like, but... if you read the Bible, you will find it to be according to the oracles of God’ (Spurgeon: *The Pulpit Library* pp25,127-128).

¹⁴ Ella: *The Free Offer* p31.

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universal redemption, nor even of universal atonement'.¹⁵ I never preach such a thing. Yes, 'belief comes solely through God's sovereign will... [it] is the [gift] of God'.¹⁶ I preach it to sinners. Yes, in becoming a believer a man is 'granted repentance, faith, justification...'.¹⁷ I am persuaded of it. I have no quarrel with Ella when he said the free-offer preacher 'teaches that God genuinely offers forgiveness of sin and salvation to sinners, irrespective of the eternal decree of election, despite the particular, substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, and regardless of the distinguishing effectual call of the Holy Spirit'.¹⁸ No quarrel with it? It is meat and drink to me, and describes my position as well as I could. The doctrines of grace are not at issue. I believe them and preach them to sinners. I believe and preach total depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, effectual calling and the perseverance of the saints, but none of this restricts the invitation to all sinners to come to Christ. The issue, I repeat, is not the doctrines of grace, *but the way these doctrines are preached to sinners*.

I go further. Preaching doctrine, *as such*, is not the way to bring sinners to salvation. As I said earlier, the biblical way is to preach Christ (2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 1:18; Col. 1:28), and to woo men to him. I am one with Spurgeon when he declared:

I believe, most firmly, in the doctrines commonly called Calvinistic... but if any man shall say that the preaching of these is the whole preaching of the gospel, I am at issue with him. Brethren, you may preach those doctrines as long as you like, and yet fail to preach the gospel... Preach Christ, young man, if you want to win souls... Facts about Christ Jesus, and the promise of life through him, these are the faith of the gospel.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ella: *The Free Offer* p64, whatever the difference may be.

¹⁶ Ella: *The Free Offer* p61. Ella had 'the work of God'. Faith is never called this – see chapter 3.

¹⁷ Ella: *The Free Offer* p61.

¹⁸ Ella: *The Free Offer* back cover.

¹⁹ Spurgeon: *Metropolitan* Vol.13 pp706-707; see also *Soul Winner* pp18-21,108-109,188-189. What is more, God's decrees ought not to be preached in such a way as to stifle the invitation of the gospel. See Murray: *Spurgeon* pp114-117.

Two issues to be faced: duty faith and God's desire to see sinners saved

What was Ella's task? He needed to show that the free offer is unbiblical, and then set out the truth. In my opinion, he failed to do it. Now the question of the free offer is very serious, and has large implications. Since, therefore, Ella challenged the doctrine behind the free offer, I want to look at his assertions, and try to set out what I consider to be the biblical position. I restrict myself to two matters which Ella raised and denied. There is far more to preaching the gospel than these two points, I hasten to add, but since this is where he directed his attack on me, I confine myself to them.

First, are sinners to be commanded to believe? that is, does the Bible teach what is commonly known as duty faith?

Secondly, has God shown us in his word that while he has decreed the salvation of his elect, he has also shown a general desire for the salvation of all men – which desire has to be expressed in the preaching of the gospel to sinners?

These two principles are fundamental to the free offer. To the first of them I now turn.