

# THE LOVE OF GOD

**Ronald Hanko**

In the March/April 1994 issue of *Reformation Today* (hereafter, *RT*) there appears an article by Bob Sheehan entitled "Is there a Love of God for All Mankind?" Mr Sheehan introduces his article with the following statement:

During 1993, for reasons which are not clear, a number of articles from the UK and USA have appeared which have argued that Calvinism is opposed to the idea of a love of God for all mankind, a love which extends to the non-elect. One such asserts, "It is not and never has been Calvinistic to believe in a love of God for all mankind."

The article from which Mr Sheehan quotes was mine.<sup>1</sup> It is, in fact, that only article from which he quotes. Whatever other articles he refers to he does not say. But since I was the author of the statement quoted by Mr Sheehan and of several others quoted in the same article, I wish to clarify and then defend my statements.

First, though, I would like to make it clear that Mr Sheehan knows very well why my article appeared in print. The reasons for it are not unclear! My article was a response to charges made by the Editor of *RT*<sup>2</sup> that *The Standard Bearer* and the Covenant Reformed Fellowship were guilty of hyper-Calvinism for denying common grace and the free offer.

These charges were made without any substantiation, appearing simply as a news item entitled "Hyper-Calvinism in Northern Ireland." After writing a letter to the Editor of *RT* and receiving only a very curt reply, I decided to publish a response in *The Standard Bearer*. It is from my response that Mr Sheehan quotes.

In his article, Mr Sheehan tries to show from John Calvin, Francis Turretin, John Owen, John Gill, James Thornwell, Louis Berkhof and John Murray that it *is* Calvinistic to speak of a general love of God for all mankind. In this article I wish to examine his references to the writing of these men. Before we look at the quotes, however, some clarification is necessary. I do not deny that Calvin and other Reformed theologians have spoken of a general love of God. Nevertheless, it must be made clear that

by this love they refer *only to a common providence of God*, not to a love that is interested in or seeks the salvation of all men. Mr Sheehan's quotations from these authors will show that.

This is a very important point. I have no quarrel with those who are only talking about the common operations of God's providence when they speak of a common love of God (or common grace or mercy). I do not even deny that the gifts God gives all men by His providence are good gifts. I would prefer not to call these good, providential, gifts a "grace" or "love" of God, but neither am I interested in quarrelling about words. My quarrel is with those who speak of a common love to justify their teaching that in the preaching of the gospel God sincerely offers salvation to all who hear the gospel and expresses a heartfelt desire for the salvation of all who hear. It was in this connection that the whole question of the love of God first came up and it is in this connection that *RT* continues to defend a general love of God. That is evident from the Editor's introduction to Mr Sheehan's article and to another on "The Free Offer Controversy" by Tom Wells.

The Editor, Mr Hulse, charges *The Standard Bearer* and the British Reformed Fellowship with "cut(ting) the throat of the gospel so that it bleeds to death" by their denial of a universal love of God. That is the issue, therefore, not the question of a common providence of God. I had thought that was clear in my original article. But to make sure there is no confusion, I would ask you to understand that the statement I am defending is this: "It is not and never has been Calvinistic to believe in a love of God for all mankind *that desires and seeks the salvation of all in the preaching of the Gospel.*"

That kind of general love is foreign to Calvinism and the Reformed faith. Mr Sheehan's quotations prove it.

He quotes first from John Calvin on Acts 14:17-18. It is not necessary to reproduce the quote since Mr Sheehan himself admits that Calvin was not referring to electing love, but to providing love. Nor is there anything in Calvin's commentary on these verses to indicate that this love sincerely seeks the salvation of everyone who hears the gospel. The reference is only to a common providence.

The second quote is from Calvin's *Commentary* on Mark 10:17-22. Mr Sheehan quotes the following:

God embraces in fatherly love, none but his children, whom he has regenerated with the Spirit of adoption... But God is sometimes said to love those whom he does not approve or justify.

Mr Sheehan concludes: "God's love is not limited to the elect. There is a love even for those who display vices which are hateful to God." It becomes evident, however, that Calvin is not talking here either, about anything more than the providence of God over all. Calvin goes on to say:

But God is sometimes said to love those whom he does not approve or justify. The preservation of the human race is dear to him (the preservation which consists in righteousness, justice, moderation, prudence, loyalty, temperance), and therefore he is said to love the social virtues; not that any merit salvation or grace, but because they aim at something which he approves.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is there any suggestion in the rest of this passage that this love of God seeks or desires the salvation of all or has anything to do with the preaching of the Gospel.

What is more, even such references as these, and others that Calvin makes to common grace and an "offer" of the Gospel must, in all fairness to Calvin and to those who are accused of hyper-Calvinism, be weighed against such quotes as these:

The fiction of Pighius [Calvin's opponent - RH] is puerile and absurd, when he interprets grace to be God's goodness in inviting all men to salvation, though all were lost in Adam. For Paul most clearly separates the *foreknown* from those on whom God deigned not to look in mercy.<sup>4</sup>

Now let Pighius boast, if he can, that God willeth *all* men to be saved! The above arguments, founded on the Scriptures, prove that even the external preaching of the doctrine of salvation, which is very far inferior to the illumination of the Spirit, was not made of God common to *all men*.<sup>5</sup>

After this, Pighius, like a wild beast escaped from his cage, rushes forth, bounding over all fences in his way, uttering such sentiments as these: "The mercy of God is extended to every one, for God wishes all men to be saved; and for that end he stands and knocks at the door of our heart, desiring to enter."<sup>6</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that Calvin meant something far different by his references to a general love of God, a common grace, and an offer of the Gospel than those who are writing in *RT*. His theology is not the same as theirs.

Mr Sheehan simply misunderstands or misquotes the second man, Francis Turretin. It is true that Turretin distinguishes a three-fold love of God:

The first, that by which he follows the creature, called the love of the creature; the second, that by which he embraces men,

---

called the love of men; the third, which is specially exercised toward the elect and is called the love of the elect.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, this threefold love of God, according to Turretin, is shown only towards those who are saved. He explains this threefold love of God as follows:

A threefold love of God is commonly held; or rather there are three degrees of one and the same love. First, there is the love of benevolence by which God willed good to the creature from eternity; second, the love of beneficence by which he does good to the creature in time according to his will; third, the love of complacency by which he delights himself in the creature on account of the rays of his image seen in them. The two former precede every act of the creature; the latter follows (not as an effect its cause, but as a consequent its antecedent). By the love of benevolence, he loved us before we were; by the love of beneficence, he loves us as we are; and by the love of complacency, he loves us when we are (*viz*, renewed after his image). *By the first, he elects us; by the second, he redeems and sanctifies us; by the third, he gratuitously rewards us as holy and just* [Italics mine - RH]. John 3:16 refers to the first; Ephesians 5:25 and Revelation 1:5 to the second; Isaiah 62:3 and Hebrews 11:6 to the third.<sup>8</sup>

This quotation is particularly important because John Murray and others have used the distinction between a love of beneficence and a love of complacency to defend the notion that God loves all men without exception and expresses this love in a general Gospel offer of salvation. We see in Turretin, however, that this distinction was never meant to refer to anything but different aspects of the love of God towards those who are saved.

Mr Sheehan quotes from John Owen also. It is clear from the quotation he uses that Owen, too, is referring only to a common providence of God and to the good gifts that God gives to all. We have no quarrel with Owen at this point, though we would prefer not to speak of these things as a love of God:

That God is good to all men, and bountiful, being a wise, powerful and liberal provider for the works of his hands, in and by innumerable dispensations and various communications of his goodness to them, and may in that regard be said to have a universal love for them all is granted; but that God loveth all and every man alike, with that eternal love which is the foundation of his giving Christ for them and to them, and all good things with him, is not the least intimated.<sup>9</sup>

Owen, however, had no time at all for the idea that this love of God was in any sense interested in the salvation of all men. In fact, he explicitly denies that there is a love of God shown to all

hearers in the preaching of the Gospel. He writes just a little further on:

Nor is this proposition, "He that believeth shall be saved," founded on the universality of the love pleaded for [by Owen's opponent - RH].<sup>10</sup>

Some are chosen from eternity, and are under the purpose of God, as to the good mentioned. Those some are *some only, not all*; and therefore, as to the good intended [= salvation - RH], there is not a universal love of God as to the objects of it, but such a distinguishing one as is spoken against.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, in all eminent *effects* and *fruits* of love, in all the issues and ways of it, for the good of and towards the sons of men, God abundantly manifests that *his eternal love*, that regards the everlasting good of men, as it was before described, is *peculiar*, and not universally comprehensive of all and every one of mankind.<sup>12</sup>

If Mr Sheehan is going to claim John Owen as a defender of universal love in the sense of a common providence, we have no quarrel with him. But if he is going to try to claim Owen in defence of a well-meant offer of the gospel, then he is misrepresenting Owen, and trying to claim a bitter enemy of offer theology as a friend.

John Gill also speaks only of a common providence in the place cited by Mr Sheehan. In quoting Gill, Mr Sheehan certainly is a Calvinist if he is defending the proposition that it is Calvinistic to speak of a love of God for all in the sense of a common providence. That is not the proposition he is defending, though. Mr Sheehan is defending the false proposition that it is Calvinistic to believe in a love of God for all men that is interested in, and seeks their salvation. To this notion Gill is as implacable an enemy as John Owen. One could quote almost at random from Gill's works. Gill's remarks on Isaiah 55:1, a favourite text of the offer men, will serve. "These words," he says, "are no call, invitation or offer of grace to dead sinners."<sup>13</sup>

Thus also James Thornwell, the Nineteenth Century American Presbyterian. In the passage cited from Thornwell's work, *Election and Reprobation*,<sup>14</sup> Thornwell obviously meant nothing more by a general love of God for all than did Owen or Gill or any of the others. In the passage cited by Mr Sheehan he plainly says, "The general benevolence of God is common, but it implies no purpose of salvation at all."

We will, however, allow Mr Sheehan to claim Berkhof and

Murray both as ardent defenders of the well-meant offer. But for him to claim this, is merely to claim that his friends are his friends! With these exceptions, the pretence of agrément with various Reformed theologians, is just that – a pretence. Neither Mr Sheehan, nor *RT*, nor its Editor believe in a love of God for all men that is no more than a general providence. They want a love of God that offers Christ to all who hear the Gospel and that sincerely desires and seeks the salvation of all who hear. That is not Calvinism! It is not the Calvinism of the reformed theologians. It is not the Calvinism of the Reformed creeds. It is not the Calvinism of the Holy Scriptures.

In my original article I said:

To teach a love of God for all mankind, as Mr Hulse [the Editor of *RT*] does, is to teach the opposite of Calvinism. The Reformed Creeds know nothing of such a love of God for all mankind. No matter how hard he searches, Mr Hulse will not find one reference in any of the Reformed Creeds that speaks of a love of God for all. The Westminster Standards, for example, speak only of a love of God for the elect (Westminster Confession of Faith II:i and proof texts; III:v; XVII:ii; Westminster Larger Catechism 30, 79, 83). The same is true of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dordt, the original Five Points of Calvinism (cf especially I:10, 13; II:9).

Mr Hulse is not only an Arminian. He is also unbiblical. Let him try to find one passage in Scripture that uses the word "grace" to refer in any sense to the reprobate wicked! There are none. Let him try to find a single passage that clearly speaks of a love of God for those who are not and never will be saved – just one to set against the hundreds of passages that speak of the eternal, unchangeable, and abiding hatred of God for those who continue unbelieving and unrepentant and who are never saved. Where in Scripture is God's love for Esau or for Judas? Where is God's love for the wicked of Psalm 1 and Psalm 11?

Mr Sheehan has done nothing to disprove this.

With regard to Scripture's teaching, there is nothing the Bible says about love by which the love of God can be extended to all men. As the "bond of perfectness" (Colossians 3:14), it may be shown only to the elect. As something that "never faileth" (1 Corinthians 13:8), it cannot be a temporary attitude of God toward those who go lost. As something that gives "everlasting consolation and good hope through grace" (2 Thessalonians 2:16), it cannot be in vain to some. As measured by the redeeming, sanctifying death of Christ (John 3:16, 1 John 4:10), it cannot be less than saving. Insofar as its fruit is that men are "born of God" (1 John 4:7), "called the sons of God" (1 John 3:1), and that

they dwell in God and God in them (1 John 4:16), then too, that love is particular and not general.

And why was it, if a general love of God is supposed to be displayed in the preaching of the Gospel, that until recent times the Gospel was not preached to most of the world. Even in New Testament times God forbid it to be preached in certain areas (Acts 16:6-7). Did not God love most men enough even to send them the Gospel? Mr Sheehan and *RT* have no answer to this question.

The Canons of Dordt, the original Five Points of Calvinism, do have an answer. It is to be ascribed to the sovereign good pleasure of God. By the preaching of the Gospel He does not merely make an empty display of love, but actually works out His good pleasure in predestination, making the Gospel both "a savour of death unto death and of life unto life" (2 Corinthians 2:16). So too, He sends the Gospel "to whom he will and at what time he pleaseth" (Canons 1:3). But then the Gospel is not a display of love for all without exception.

Mr Sheehan and *RT* should also consider the fact that the Arminians at the Synod of Dordt, not the Calvinists, taught two loves of God, "one general and indefinite, the other particular and definite;" the one "incomplete, revocable, non-decisive, and conditional," ie, a love that did not result in the salvation of those to whom it was shown; the other "complete, irrevocable, decisive, and absolute," that did result in salvation (Canons 1, Rejection of Errors 2). Are we, then, the ones who are beyond the boundaries of Calvinism or, perhaps, are they?

But does a general love of God really preserve the character of the Gospel? Is it, in fact, good news to lost sinners to tell them that God loves them without exception? Does that not tell sinners that God does *not* take sin seriously? Does it not encourage them in their refusal to obey the command to repent and believe? Are we really the ones who cut the throat of the Gospel? We are convinced that the cause of the Gospel languishes these days – that more and more turn from the church and from the Gospel – because they have heard too often that God loves everyone and have concluded that all is well.

Mr Sheehan asks in the title of his article, "Is there a Love of God for All Mankind?" We say there is not, not in Scripture, not in the Creeds, not in Calvinism – not, at least, a love of God which desires and seeks the salvation of all who hear the Gospel.

*(Continued on page 38)*