

THE “OFFER” OF GRACE IN THE *WESTMINSTER STANDARDS*

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Still today, proponents of the “well-meant offer” confusion exploit the modern ambiguity of the English word “offer” used in the *Westminster Standards*. On this basis, they claim that their doctrine should not only be officially permitted in Presbyterianism but that those who reject it must not be tolerated. I call it a “modern” ambiguity because the word used in the *Westminster Standards* in the mid-seventeenth century did not have the same range of meaning that the English word has today.

In this article I intend to demonstrate, first, that a modern meaning of “offer” should not be clumsily foisted upon the *Westminster Standards*; second, that those who attempt this in order to support their “well-meant offer” theology introduce a theology that does not harmonize with the *Westminster Standards*; third, that the word “offer” is used carefully in the *Westminster Standards* (which would not be the case if the authors intended to teach clearly a “well-meant offer”); and, finally, that, even if a modern meaning of “offer” is assumed, almost all of the places which speak of an “offer” can still be understood in a way that is consistent with the theology of the whole *Westminster Standards* (unlike the “well-meant offer” theology).

Etymology of “Offer” in English

The English word “offer” now has a broad range of meaning. The on-line Oxford English Dictionary lists three distinct meanings as a verb, of which the first can be used in three specific contexts and the second employed in two specific contexts. One meaning is given for the noun, which again can be used in three different contexts. Before adoption into Old English, the word had already been in vulgar usage since the Roman conquest of Britain. It was originally derived from the Latin *offerre*, with which the learned authors of the *Westminster Standards* would have been familiar. Latin was still, even in England, very much the precise and technical language of academics. It was

also the language by which scholars communicated with their international peers in the Reformed faith and, not insignificantly, it was the language of the *Canons of Dordt*. This is the word employed in the first Latin translation (1656) of the *Westminster Standards*.

During this time, as part of an increasingly independent English national identity, the English language was coming of age into its own as a language which could be used in any sphere and it appropriated a large number of technical loanwords from the Latin.¹ This growth and instability of the language led to Jonathan Swift's publication of *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* in 1712. Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* would not be published until 1755, more than a hundred years after the *Westminster Confession* was written. Anyone who suggests that Latin is irrelevant to a careful understanding of the terminology of the *Westminster Standards* shows ignorance of the dominance of Latin in technical and academic spheres (including theology) at this time. The English usage of the Westminster divines was not merely influenced by Latin but embarrassingly dependent upon it. As they were writing very carefully on technical theological subjects, it may well be considered that the divines' use of "offer" had far more relation to the Latin than whatever colloquial meaning was current at that time.

The Latin *offerre* is from *obferre* which is simply the verb *ferre*, meaning "to bear/carry," with the prefix *ob-* which in this context means "towards/against." Rather than reading into it certain modern usages of the English "offer," readers of the *Westminster Standards* would do well to remember that the primary and basic Latin meaning is "to bring before." If the authors of the *Westminster Standards* had intended to convey more than precisely this (or other than this), they had a wealth of other more precise words at their disposal, such as "invite" or "provide" (not to mention further explanatory phrases). In fact, the other words that they did employ in this context were basically synonymous with this meaning, as we shall see.

¹ Andrea Di Giovanni, "Latin in English 1500-1800," *Early and Later Modern English Language and Culture: An Online Encyclopedia* (2003), compiled by Prof. Carol Percy and published on the University of Toronto website (www.homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~cpercy/courses/6362DiGiovanni1.htm).

The “Offer” of Grace

In English, we still use the word in this sense when we speak of offering a sacrifice. To offer a sacrifice, one brings the sacrifice to *present* it before the one to whom it is offered. Also the more common usage is closely related to this basic meaning, because making something available to be accepted or rejected as desired (with the desire or purpose that it should be accepted) first of all implies bringing the thing to present it before the one to whom it is offered (i.e., the original meaning). The ideas that the thing presented may be accepted or rejected at will, and that the one presenting desires to give the thing presented, are really additions to the original meaning. But it is on these merely additional connotations that the “free-offer” contradictions are built.

Modern Equivocal Usage of “Offer”

The advocates of the “well-meant offer” equivocate in their appeal to the use of the word “offer” in the *Westminster Standards*, since the meaning of their doctrine is very different. These people (who really should know better than to defend a self-contradictory theology) claim that, since the *Westminster Standards* speak of an “offer,” God, therefore, sincerely desires to give salvation to all the hearers of the gospel, including to those whom He has eternally reprobated (*Westminster Confession* 3:7). From this they also conclude a universal love of God, including for those, like Esau, whom He has eternally hated (Rom. 9:13), and a universal grace of God for all, including for those whom He blinds and hardens in His wrath (Isa. 6:9-10; Rom. 11:7-10). On this basis, the advocates of the free offer often involve themselves in the Amyraldian heresy, teaching that, since the preaching of the gospel involves an “offer,” Christ’s death must also have made salvation available to all. This self-contradictory theology flies in the face of the consistent theology of the *Westminster Standards*, running contrary to it in at least seven areas.²

First, free-offer theology is contrary to the love of God. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. & A. 4 teaches that God and His love are “infinite, eternal, and

² Cf. Allen Baird, “The *Westminster Standards* and the Gospel Offer” (a pamphlet once published by the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland). I have closely summarized his arguments since they are simple, clear and sound. For a more thorough treatment, see Herman Hanko, *Corrupting the Word of God: The History of the Well-Meant Offer* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2016).

unchangeable,” but free-offer theologians teach a love of God that is finite, temporal and changeable.

Second, it is contrary to the simplicity and impassibility of God. *Westminster Confession* 2:1 asserts that God is without “parts,” so that there cannot be any intrinsic contradiction in God, but the free-offer theologians teach that there are two conflicting wills concerning the reprobate in God. The *Confession* also asserts that God is without “passions,” but the free-offer theologians teach that God possesses emotions which are subject to inflammation, such as grief, frustration, etc.

Third, free-offer theology is contrary to the omnipotence of God. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 7 describes God as “almighty” and, with *Westminster Confession* 2:1 and *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. & A. 7, it teaches that He works all things that come to pass according to His own immutable will, but the free-offer theologians teach that some things come to pass that are not according to His will (i.e., that He wills or desires some things which He does not bring to pass).

Fourth, it is contrary to the harmony between God’s works in time and eternity. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 13 teaches that the cause of election is the particular love and grace of God which is manifested in due time, but free-offer theologians teach that God loves everyone in time, at odds with His love being only for the elect in eternity and time.

Fifth, free-offer theology is contrary to the revelation of God. *Westminster Confession* 1:1 teaches that God reveals Himself in the Scriptures but the free-offer theologians teach that what God reveals in the preaching is not in accordance with God’s Being and eternal decree.

Sixth, it is contrary to the providence of God. *Westminster Confession* 5:6 teaches that God, in His providence, blinds the reprobate and withholds His grace from them, even hardening them by the same means which He uses to soften others. Ignoring this, the free-offer theologians teach that God graciously brings the gospel to the reprobate in order to express His love for them.

Seventh, free-offer theology is contrary to the blessedness of God. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 7 teaches that God’s “blessedness” is “infinite,” yet the free-offer theologians have the audacity to teach a doctrine in

The “Offer” of Grace

which God has unfulfilled desires and frustrations, even such that the eternal destruction of sinners is the most extreme and everlasting torment for God Himself. Away with such despicable blasphemy!

Careful Use of “Offer” in the *Westminster Standards*

It is to be expected that the Westminster divines, being aware of the potential abuse of the English word “offer” (that is, if it had such a usage at that time), as well as certain contemporary “free-offer” ideas (*The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was published in two parts in 1645 and 1649),³ would be accordingly judicious in their use of the term. Overwhelmingly, this appears to be the case, as we shall see, yet the divines nevertheless deliberately chose to use the word in specific contexts, just as the *Canons of Dort* deliberately use the word (III/IV:9). This was no careless mistake or mere appeasement of those with free-offer ideas, but indicative of an important truth concerning the preaching of the gospel which they were determined to assert both strongly and precisely. The precise, technical meaning of the Latin *offerre* along with the other various expressions used achieved this purpose.

First of all, the Westminster divines strictly limited the language of an “offer” of grace to three intimately related areas: the covenant of grace, the effectual call and the means of grace. They insisted that God freely “offers” grace in the covenant to be received through the necessary (or required) means of faith (in

³This book promoting the “free-offer” theology was the centre of a controversy about seventy years later which involved confusion around a denial of the necessity of repentance for coming to Christ. The General Assembly condemned this denial (cf. *Westminster Confession* 15:3), instructed ministers to warn against the book and prohibited making any recommendation of it. The controversy was aggravated by the apparent presence of legalists who taught that salvation depended upon man performing certain conditions and that believers could not be assured of salvation in the preaching of the gospel unless their repentance was deemed “sufficient.” Rather, the effectual call is that powerful work of the Spirit in a dead sinner’s heart which causes him to repent, so that he turns away from sin and comes to Christ (Acts 11:17-18). Therefore, the gospel (properly understood as the good news of Jesus Christ, both with the promise of entirely free and gracious salvation to all who believe, and the call to repent and believe; cf. Mark 1:14-15; Acts 3:19; 20:21) must be preached indiscriminately, since dead sinners must first hear and then the elect will come because of this effectual call (John 6:45; Rom. 10:14).

this sense the *Westminster Standards* speak of faith as a “condition”).⁴ The theologians at Westminster further explained that grace is “offered” in the effectual call, and that in the effectual call the Holy Spirit graciously works faith in us and renews our wills so that we embrace this grace. Finally, they also taught that God “offers” grace in the preaching to those who will believe, and that God both “offers” and confers grace by the sacraments to those who use them rightly.

Notice that in all these examples, there is careful qualification so that, even if one were erroneously to insert the modern English meaning, the overall meaning would still not be in conflict with the rest of the *Westminster Standards* which restrict the love and grace of God to the elect only. Concerning baptism, *Westminster Confession* 28:6 also teaches that this “offered” grace particularly belongs to some “according to the counsel of God’s own will.” This grace does not belong, therefore, to those on whom it is not conferred.

This means that we have here an “offer” of a grace which belongs only to some—not an “offer” of grace which is available to all, both elect and reprobate! This is emphatically not the “offer” promoted by the proponents of the “well-meant offer.” Likewise the “offer” of Christ in the gospel (also spoken of in *Canons of Dort* III/IV:9) is not a Christ who belongs to everyone—but only to His elect who will believe in Him. The difficulty is easily resolved when we understand that the “offer” here is not something made available to all but something brought before or presented to all, as the primary meaning of the Latin indicates.

Further, just as the *Canons of Dort* explain the “offer” of Christ in the gospel specifically as the promiscuous proclamation or a general call and a particular promise (cf. II:5; III/IV:8),⁵ *Westminster Confession* 7:3 explains

⁴ “In the beginning Reformed theologians spoke freely of ‘the conditions’ of the covenant. But after the nature of the covenant of grace had been more carefully considered and had to be defended against Catholics, Lutherans, and Remonstrants, many of them took exception to the term and avoided it” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006], p. 229).

⁵ Philip Schaff’s imaginative translation of the Latin phrase “*ut vocati ad se veniant*” (*Canons* III/IV:8) as “should comply with the invitation” is an indefensible gloss (*The Creeds of Christendom* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877], vol. 3, pp. 566, 589)! You do not need to know Latin to see that the two key words refer to “call” and “come” (think of the word

The “Offer” of Grace

God’s freely “offering” salvation to sinners as “requiring of them faith in him ... and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.” That is also an “offer” which consists not in an expression of universal love but in a call to faith in a particular promise.

It must be emphasized that the *Westminster Standards* never refer to some other graces (such as election or the effectual call itself) as being “offered.” Although we could speak about these things being presented or explained in the preaching, the authors of the *Westminster Standards* never speak about an “offer” of the graces which we receive passively, which are conferred on us in the absence of any activity on our part (or which produce that activity in us). In restricting the word “offer” to the graces which we must actively receive, they emphasized the necessity of this activity to embrace the grace “offered.”

That which is “offered” is not given or conferred *automatically* but some activity is required for its reception. For the *Westminster Standards*, an “offer” not merely presents something but presents something which requires an activity if it is to be received, not that it necessarily can be received but that it requires an activity *if* it is to be received. One has no interest in the benefit “offered,” unless it is embraced by the required activity. Indeed, we must further conclude that the thing “offered” does not belong to, is not provided for and cannot be received by, those who by inactivity or idleness despise the thing “offered,” or who by contrary activity and opposition reject it.

Thus the authors of the *Westminster Standards* displayed great care in their use of the term “offer” in three respects.⁶ They predominantly *limited* their usage to contexts specific to the elect (and to those graces which are received actively), *qualified* the grace “offered” as belonging only to the elect and requiring faith to embrace (not including the effectual call itself, of course, which requires “nothing in them [i.e., those effectually called];” *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 67), and *defined* this “offer” of grace in the gospel in terms of a call to faith and a particular promise to the elect. Following this

“vocation” or Julius Caesar’s “*Veni, vidi, vici*” or the French verb *venir* or the meaning of “prevent” in the AV). The word “invitation” is simply not there.

⁶ Either that or God worked by His gracious providence to produce this good result despite their lack of care.

overview, a closer examination of this carefulness is warranted under each of the contexts listed above.

1. Gracious “Offers” in the Covenant of Grace

Both the *Westminster Confession* and the *Westminster Larger Catechism* speak of an “offer” in connection with the covenant of grace. The *Westminster Confession* speaks of God “offering” life and salvation by Jesus Christ to sinners:

Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace: whereby he freely offereth [*offert*] unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe (7:3).

The word “wherein” indicates that this is an “offer” only to sinners in the covenant of grace who not only have been made willing and able to believe, but, what is more, of whom faith is *required*. Even in the covenant of grace, faith is necessary for this “offered” life and salvation. There is no life or salvation for those who do not have faith. Thus all the members of the covenant of grace must be brought to faith in order to take hold of the life and salvation “offered” in the covenant. And they are brought to faith and do receive that life and salvation, because they have been ordained to life (Acts 13:48). The ordained end necessitates the infallible provision of the required way and means.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* also speaks of an “offer” to sinners in the covenant of grace:

Q. How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?

A. The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth [*offertque*] to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition [as noted above, “condition” here is meant in the sense of a necessary means—SW] to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to

The “Offer” of Grace

enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation (Q. & A. 32).

In this case, it is made clear that the Mediator Himself is also “offered” (He is “offered” in the gospel, according to *Canons of Dordt* III/IV:9), and the “offer” and provision of the Mediator is identified as a manifestation of the grace of God. Notice the clarification that the Mediator is not only “offered” but also provided. If “offered” necessarily implied provided, it would be entirely superfluous to add this. But, as it stands, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* makes clear that Christ is not only presented in the covenant of grace (and must be embraced by faith) but that He is also provided. The *Catechism* does not assert that the Mediator is provided for all universally (which, if it had, would be grounds for Amyraldianism) but only to sinners in the covenant of grace. This Mediator is provided only for believers, since only they have an “interest” (i.e., stake or advantage) in Him.

If there is any doubt on this point (to whom the Mediator is “offered” *and* for whom He is provided), the preceding question and answer leave no ambiguity:

Q. With whom was the covenant of grace made?

A. The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed (Q. & A. 31).

So we see that the reason that the word “offer” is used is not to teach that the Mediator is provided but to emphasize that, even in the covenant of grace, without the required activity, we would have no part in Him as the Mediator by whom we receive life and salvation. But, having a part in Him by election as His seed, it is made absolutely sure that we receive the promised Holy Spirit who works in us the required faith, so that we receive through His mediation the life and salvation which He has purchased for us. The “offer,” or presentation of our Mediator and this life and salvation, is designed to be that means by which the Spirit excites in us the required activity. As it were, the thing “offered” is brought very near, even tantalizingly close to us, so that we are prompted, by this powerful working of the Spirit in us, to reach out by faith.

Although the Mediator is provided for the elect in the covenant of grace, we would not be entirely wrong to say that in the New Testament the Media-

tor is brought before all nations, i.e., “offered” in the original sense used in the *Westminster Standards*. Yet the authors stop short of using this word in that connection. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 35, speaking of the preaching and sacraments as the *administration* of the covenant of grace, states that in these “grace and salvation are held forth [*exhibetur*] ... to all nations.” The Westminster divines prefer the phrase “held forth” here, which leaves no room for supposing that grace and salvation are available also to the reprobate and may have been considered a safer word choice than “offered,” given the more global scope of “all nations.”

2. Gracious “Offers” in the Effectual Call

Naturally, the effectual call is the next subject in which we expect to find this language of grace being brought near and requiring activity to embrace.

This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man; who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered [*oblatum*] and conveyed [*exhibitam*] in it (*Westminster Confession* 10:2).

Notice, first, that the effectual call itself is of God’s free grace and, second, that there is also grace “offered” in it, which necessarily does not include the grace of the effectual call itself. This is also emphasized by the contrast in which the grace “offered” in the effectual call must be *embraced*, whereas in the effectual call man is “altogether passive” *until* he is “quickened and renewed.” If we say that man is active in the effectual call, then we fall into Arminianism but, if we say that man is not active in receiving the grace “offered” in the effectual call, then we have erred into a form of hyper-Calvinism. Man is passive in his regeneration and that regeneration makes him active in receiving “grace for grace” (John 1:16).

Matthew Henry comments in this connection on Matthew 13:12:

Here is a promise to him that has, that has true grace, pursuant to the election of grace, that has, and uses what he has; he shall have more abundance: God’s favours are earnest of

The “Offer” of Grace

further favours; where he lays the foundation, he will build upon it. Christ’s disciples used the knowledge they now had, and they had more abundance at the pouring out of the Spirit, Acts 2. They who have the truth of grace, shall have the increase of grace, even to an abundance in glory, Prov. 4:18.⁷

This is also how we must understand *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 116, which states “God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him.” Prayer is not our part on which God’s grace depends, but the effectual call teaches us that these desires and prayers are themselves graciously worked in us by His Spirit so that we ask for and receive more grace and more of His Spirit. We are everywhere taught in Scripture, as much as that salvation is entirely a gracious work of God, that we are also made active, even very active, in the working out of our salvation.⁸

This is the truth that regeneration and the effectual call teach us that, since God has appointed that we should be active in taking hold of our salvation, and since we are wholly incapable of anything of ourselves and without any strength, He also supplies these wondrous graces which make us wondrously active.⁹ The covenant of life is a covenant that is full of activity (this is implied by the word “life,” for life is distinguished from death by its *activity*). There is no experience or enjoyment of this covenant life apart from this activity, which is itself part of the experience and enjoyment of this glorious life. Just as the sabbath day is not a day for idleness and inactivity, so too the eternal rest in the age to come is one full of holy activity in the experience and enjoyment of our ever-active living God (cf. Luke 20:37-38). To deny the necessity of this activity is to teach an empty, lifeless covenant.

The effectual call ties together the areas in the *Westminster Standards* which speak of these “offers” of grace. Because we must be made active in the covenant of grace, God supplies the means of grace. Having been effectually called (and being effectually called still), we become active also in seeking and

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 1677.

⁸ For example, this is what the agency of Israel’s warfare in the conquest of Canaan teaches us.

⁹ These wondrous activities are enumerated in the list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, for example.

using the means of grace. We see this especially in the different administrations of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the former, we are passive in receiving the sacrament, befitting a covenant sign and seal of entrance into the kingdom by the washing of regeneration and justification without works,¹⁰ but in the latter we must actively participate, lest we bring ourselves into condemnation, "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (I Cor. 11:29).

In *Westminster Confession* 10:2, we see the familiar pattern that the word "offer" is used wherever it is important to clarify that the thing "offered" necessarily requires activity to receive. The effectual call explains how this activity is produced in man, so that the grace is not only "offered" and "conveyed," but also "embraced." Embracing the "offered" grace is also here identified as answering the call. This is entirely consistent with how the word has been used so far. Just by bringing the thing near to us, inescapably in front of us, necessarily places us under a serious responsibility—it places a call on us which we must answer.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* explains that it is centrally Christ who is "offered" to us and it identifies this "offer" with the gospel in connection with the effectual call:

Q. What is effectual calling?

A. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered [*oblatum*] to us in the gospel (Q. & A. 31).

The main difference here is that the answer is in the first person plural ("we"), rather than the third person singular ("he"). This is significant because it effectively limits this "offer" in the gospel, again, only to the elect, who are effectually called (cf. Rom. 8:30; I Pet. 2:9; II Pet. 1:10). In the effectual call, the elect are engrafted into Christ and then, in that union, we actively partake

¹⁰ Although, of course, for adults baptism is only administered in the presence of evidence of that regeneration and justification—i.e., a good profession of faith and walk of life consistent with true repentance.

The “Offer” of Grace

of Him, and apprehend Him more and more—this is what the Lord’s Supper teaches us, that our new life must be sustained by the true bread of heaven. Just as God has appointed our physical activity to be the means whereby we receive the daily bread for which we pray, so too by our spiritual activity the elect receive the word of life, so that by faith (“the hand and mouth of our soul;” *Belgic Confession* 35), we “become more and more united to His sacred body” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 76). Again, we point out that the sense of “offer” in “bringing before” could legitimately be used with respect to the gospel being brought even to the reprobate but that is not spoken of here. This is again a particular “offer” to the elect who are the only ones effectually called.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* is similar:

Q. What is effectual calling?

A. Effectual calling is the work of God’s almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them [*invitat atque trahit*] to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered [*oblatam*] and conveyed [*exhibitam*] therein (Q. & A. 67).

The *Larger Catechism* speaks of God’s love to His elect as the source of the effectual call, where the *Westminster Confession* spoke of grace. Notice again that accepting and embracing the offer of grace is identified as answering the call—there is responsibility and activity required (and produced). Significantly, the *Catechism* also speaks of God *inviting* the elect. This is the word for which proponents of the “well-meant offer” seek in order to support their theories; “offer” alone is insufficient. And the word “invite” is used here because it communicates something more than the word “offer.” If “offer” were sufficient also to convey an *invitation*, there would be no need to use the word “invite” here. The idea here is that this call for the elect is more than just an outward call, but it is also effectual and *inviting*. The catechism correctly refers here to II Corinthians 5:20 and 6:1-2 in support of this teaching. Isaiah 55:1 is another

good example of this particular invitation to the elect. The “well-meant offer” proponents will not find this invitation anywhere extended to the reprobate in the *Westminster Standards*.

The following question and answer shut the door on any effectual call where the invitation extends beyond the elect:

Q. Are the elect only effectually called?

A. All the elect, and they only, are effectually called; although others may be, and often are, outwardly called by the ministry of the word, and have some common operations of the Spirit; who, for their wilful neglect and contempt of the grace offered [*oblatae*] to them, being justly left in their unbelief, do never truly come to Jesus Christ (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 68).

Here is the only place where the *Westminster Standards* conclusively speak of an “offer” of grace which is despised rather than embraced. It speaks of grace “offered” to the reprobate. On a forced interpretation of this answer, the entire “well-meant offer” theology must be built. We will treat this more at length but for now it is sufficient to note that the “offer” is again identified with being “called” (here the outward or external call). The word is here used to emphasize that the grace is brought before them, even very near them (Hebrews 6:4-6 is referenced and we could also think of Galatians 3:1), so that they could even “taste” it (to use the language of Hebrews 6:4-5) and also that, in light of God’s grace being brought before them, a grave responsibility was laid upon them not to trifle with it.

There is no suggestion that the reprobate were *invited* or that there was really any grace available for the unbelieving and impenitent or any desire on the part of God that they should be saved. On the contrary, John 12:38-40 and Acts 28:25-27 are also adduced as proof, which texts explain the blinding and hardening of these reprobate as a result of a very opposite desire of God: “lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted.” Even the words “to them” do not necessarily imply the free offer, as we may still view God’s grace as having been “offered” to them only in the sense that it was “offered” to the church in which

The “Offer” of Grace

they were ordinarily viewed with the rest of the church as living redeemed saints (cf. John 15:2; Heb. 10:29; II Pet. 2:1).

3. Gracious “Offers” by the Means of Grace

Apart from the minor references to the preaching and sacraments which we have already examined, an “offer” is spoken of in connection with baptism:

The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered [*offertur*], but really exhibited [*confertur*] and conferred [*exhibetur*] by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time (*Westminster Confession* 28:6).

This is especially significant since the *Confession* speaks of grace being promised, “not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred,” and of that grace belonging particularly to some. The inference is that there are some to whom the grace of baptism does not belong. Notice also that the grace “offered” is first of all *promised* and also *conferred*. Again, although we could potentially speak of an “offer” of grace to the reprobate (in the sense of it being *brought before* them), that is not the sense here, but it is again a particular offer only to those to whom the grace is promised and actually conferred.

Furthermore, this article speaks of the grace being “exhibited” as something more than simply “offered.” *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 162 speaks of this purpose of sacraments, that they are to “exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his [i.e., Christ’s] mediation.” Either the meaning is a clearer or more public display of this grace or, as seems likely *in this context*, the *Catechism* refers to an actual holding out of this grace. If “offer” is restricted to “bringing before,” then “exhibit” takes this further to a “holding out.” In any case, if an “offer” is understood by the authors of the *Westminster Standards* as a word that does not go as far as “exhibit,” then the advocates of the “well-meant offer” are completely without warrant in taking it as far as they do (i.e., to an *invitation* and more).

Contrast this “exhibit” of grace to the elect, to whom this grace belongs and to whom it is promised and conferred, with the *withholding* of grace from the reprobate (*Westminster Confession* 5:6). These “offers” of grace are also spoken of as “special privileges” of the visible church:

Q. What are the special privileges of the visible church?

A. The visible church hath the privilege of being under God’s special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers [*offeratur*] of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto him (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 63).

First of all, a completely universal “offer” of grace is excluded. Rather than a universal “offer” of grace, the *Catechism* speaks of a special privilege limited only to members of the visible church. A special privilege is one that others do not receive. Again, we could perhaps legitimately speak of an “offer” of grace in the sense of “bringing before” in the gospel preached even to those outside the church but the authors of the *Westminster Standards* here restrict this usage of “offer” to those within the visible church as a special privilege. Not content with that, they also hasten to define this “offer” as consisting in the testimony that whosoever believes will be saved—not that there is grace and salvation available or provided for all, but only for those who believe.

In addition, throughout Scripture (and, therefore, in the preaching of the Word), the church is addressed organically with a view particularly to the central grain, although there is chaff present also. It is not addressed as a mechanistic composite of disparate parts, but as a field with wheat and tares growing together or as a vine with living branches and dead branches. In the preaching and in the sacraments, it is this kernel that is principally addressed, identified with names such as “saints,” “beloved” and “elect.” These words come to the whole church organically and can, therefore, in a certain respect, be said outwardly to address all the visible members generally (which may be in view in the above question and answer). However, these addresses, though spoken

The “Offer” of Grace

and given generally, and with the judgment of charity to all visible members, are so designed that the unbelieving, impenitent and hypocrites may not legitimately apply these sweet addresses or particular invitations to themselves, since they know the wrath of God against them in their consciences. They may be members in the visible church but they are not living members of it: they are empty professors. These sweet addresses are designed to sting their consciences for their duplicity and treachery.

Contempt of the “Offer” of Grace

Having thoroughly treated this very careful, limited, qualified and defined usage of “offer” in the *Westminster Standards*, there remains one usage to examine in more detail, since it speaks of grace “offered” specifically to the reprobate. As we have noted, this “offer” is identified with the outward call, and the word choice serves to emphasize that the grace is *brought before* them and by that a responsibility is laid upon them. But, in this instance, they treat that grace with neglect and contempt. We find no suggestion that the reprobate were able to receive this grace or that it belonged to them or was available to them or was provided for them or was promised to them or that there was any desire of God that they should receive it. Rather, the specific Scripture references given here and in the rest of the *Westminster Standards* prove the very opposite on all these counts.

Acts 13:14-52 provides a detailed example of this kind of “offer” (or “bringing before”) which illustrates its significance as a “bringing before” and the contempt of it. In this passage, the gospel is brought to Pisidian Antioch, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, after the Jews largely reject it. This is, therefore, an example of the despising of the outward call.

First, the grace testified in the gospel is brought very close. No less than an apostle of Christ, a witness of the resurrected Lord and one of their own nation, preaches to the Jews in their own synagogue when they were gathered on the sabbath day (v. 14). These are Jews who read the law and the prophets (v. 15). Paul could address them as “men of Israel,” whose fathers were chosen by God (vv. 16-17). To this Israel, God promised a Saviour (v. 23). To them, John the Baptist had preached the baptism of repentance, testifying to them of Christ (vv. 24-25). These were children of Abraham, to whom the word of

salvation was sent (v. 26). To these children of the fathers, to whom God gave the promises, He had fulfilled these promises and brought them the glad tidings of that fulfilment (vv. 32-33). To these were preached the forgiveness of sins through Christ (v. 38). To these the grave warning was given not to despise the message through unbelief (vv. 40-41).

In this sense, they have been “offered” grace but they “put it from” them (v. 46). The grace of the gospel had been brought right in front of them, thoroughly displayed before them, along with the requirement to believe in order to receive that “offered” grace. Absent from all of this is the conception of the “well-meant offer” where God supposedly desires to save those who do not believe. Instead, God’s will is expressed for them as, “Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish” (v. 41). In quoting this text from Habakkuk 1:5, Paul both acknowledged and warned his hearers of the very real possibility that this grace was not God’s purpose for them: “Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets” (Acts 13:40).

Second, the “offer” of grace is presented to all the hearers in the synagogue that day, with addresses that specifically identify God’s elect within the organic whole. This was not so different to the visible church at that time of the beginning of the New Testament. These were, organically considered, God’s people whom Paul was addressing. Therefore, he addressed them as “men of Israel” (v. 16) and “children of the stock of Abraham” (v. 26). He extended this address with “ye that fear God” (v. 16) and again “whosoever among you feareth God” (v. 26). Not to all without exception but to these in particular, the word of salvation was sent. We can see this in that many did not believe, but there were also those who were ordained to eternal life and who, therefore, did believe (v. 48). Paul concludes that these particular addresses did not really apply to those who “put it from” them, when he asserts that they “judge [themselves] unworthy of everlasting life” (v. 46). Elsewhere, he points out the same: “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly ... but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly ... whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:28-29).

Third, grace was “offered” in the sense that the way of receiving grace was presented—a responsibility was placed upon the hearers. There was an exhortation for the people (Acts 13:15): it called them to the same repentance required by John (v. 24). It preached that the forgiveness of sins is only through Christ,

The “Offer” of Grace

so that not those who try to keep the law of Moses, but only those who believe, are justified (vv. 38-39). It concluded by warning them that those who do not believe will perish (v. 41). Finally, for their contempt of this grace which was so clearly and closely laid before them, Paul and Barnabas “shook off the dust of their feet against them” (v. 51), as a solemn sign of God’s heavy judgment against them. In these senses, the *Westminster Standards* speaks of contempt of the “offer” of grace.

Proponents of the “well-meant offer” would do well to take heed to these warnings. In promoting a universal grace based on an equivocal use of the word “offer,” they are treating the particular grace “offered” in the *Westminster Standards* with contempt. Do the *Westminster Standards* give warrant to theologians and preachers to continue using the term “offer” today? If we were still commonly speaking and writing in Latin, there might be a good argument to do this based on the usage in the *Westminster Standards*, especially in how the word is used to emphasize that an activity is required to receive the grace presented. However, since we are speaking and writing English in the twenty-first century, it would seem the better part of wisdom to avoid the term to circumvent the confusion which results and to shun the equivocation of those who want to promote a theology at odds with the *Westminster Standards*. If we use the term in English at all, the *Westminster Standards* themselves show us a good pattern for using it carefully (and there are far more grounds today for this carefulness than in the past), even restricting it particularly to those “offers” of grace to the elect in the covenant of grace.