

# **ANOTHER LOOK AT “COMMON GRACE”**

**Careful Analysis of Some of the More Recent  
Developments and Expositions of the Doctrine  
by Mainline Theologians**



**HERMAN C. HANKO**



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The following chapters were originally published as a series of articles in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, between the years 1992 and 1997.

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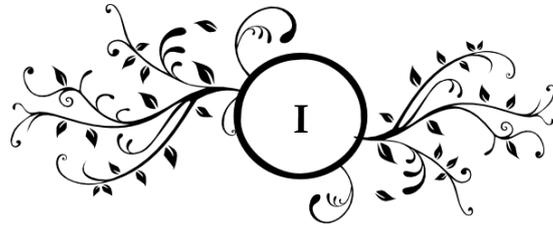
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*“But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:14).*

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**T MIGHT arouse a sigh of weariness in the souls of some to see another discussion devoted to the subject of common grace in a Protestant Reformed magazine. There are undoubtedly those with some knowledge of the Protestant Reformed Churches who may have thought these churches really never wrote about much else but common grace; and another discussion on the subject is in keeping with their character. These churches continue to grind old axes that have been ground on the stones of Protestant Reformed theology now for some 70 years.

There is some truth to all this, we readily admit.

Disagreement over the doctrine of common grace was the occasion for the organization of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Those who denied this doctrine were not permitted to be ministers within the Christian Reformed Church. The reasons were clear enough: The Christian Reformed Church adopted common grace as official dogma in keeping with Scripture and the Reformed confessions; the Protestant Reformed Churches repudiate common grace and claim that it is a doctrine contrary to both Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Hence, two denominations.

Because the question of common grace has occupied such an important place in the beginning of the history of the Protestant Reformed

Churches, it is not surprising that a great deal has been written on this subject by Protestant Reformed preachers and theologians. Perhaps the amount of writing by Protestant Reformed authors outweighs the total amount of writing on this subject by all other authors combined—although many different theologians, from both Presbyterian and Reformed traditions, have written extensively on the subject.

It would, it seems, require some justification to return again to a discussion of this subject.

Although a specific formulation of the doctrine of common grace by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 in the now famous “Three Points” became the immediate occasion of the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and although most of the writing dealing with the subject in Protestant Reformed theological literature has focused on those Three Points, there are significant ways in which both the Three Points and the discussions surrounding them have become outdated.

Scarcely anyone knows anymore what the Three Points are all about and what specifically they teach. They are, seemingly, a part of ancient history which interests only a few historians. They themselves are really no longer relevant to current theological discussion. This is the more true because, after a brief flurry of writing in their defense, shortly after 1924, the Three Points have been, for the most part, consigned to oblivion, to be raised only when some aberration of doctrine and life needed theological support.

But this does not mean that the whole subject of common grace is no longer relevant. It may not be all that relevant in the form given to it by the Three Points, but it remains a subject of much discussion in both Presbyterian and Reformed churches, both in this land and abroad. Much is still being written on the subject; appeal to common grace is common in theological circles; and, in fact, in some circles, it seems so completely accepted as truth that no one even thinks of questioning the doctrine. It has almost the hallowed sanctity of the doctrine of the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In all the writings that have appeared, especially in more recent years, some interesting questions have come up which have not been faced earlier. This in itself gives reason for taking a new look at the subject. Not only has enough time passed to give the objectivity of a more distant perspective to the discussion, but new questions have come up which

require answers and new issues have been raised which need to be addressed.

Among these new issues is to be found the obvious fact that not all people use the term “common grace” in the same sense of the word. In fact, in discussing the issues surrounding the whole idea of common grace, one soon discovers that there are many who believe that common grace means nothing more than the providence of God in His daily rule of creation. Common grace is the providential control of rain and sunshine which God is pleased to send upon the earth. Now, while one may perhaps quarrel with the use of the term “grace” in this connection, no one will quarrel with the idea. That God’s providence is His power by which He controls all that happens in all creation is a truth written large on every page of Scripture and imbedded firmly in all Reformed and Presbyterian creeds. But misunderstandings of this sort need badly to be cleared up; and perhaps the time has come to make an effort to do this.

But all this must not detract from the fact that the ongoing discussions which are directly on the subject of common grace or which appeal to common grace as some sort of theological basis for other ideas have raised new and interesting aspects of the whole question which were not addressed in the bitter controversies of the 1920s. Various subjects which are directly or indirectly related to common grace are repeatedly discussed and are, therefore, worthy of closer attention. It is our purpose to concentrate on some of these subjects.

One event of no little importance seems also to require a new look at the subject. Recently in the Christian Reformed Church, the mother church of the Protestant Reformed Churches, events have brought about a serious crisis, with the result that many individuals, congregations, or parts of congregations have felt compelled to forsake their denominational ties and secede from their mother church. Secession has been forced on these people because of false doctrine within their mother church. While many within this conservative and secession movement are not at all persuaded that common grace has played a role in the apostasy of their mother church, there are others who are not so sure. They are at least inclined to take a look at the question of whether or not the seeds of the apostasy of the last couple of decades were not sown back in the early ‘20s. Some of them have expressed the desire to take another and new look at the whole subject of common grace.

It is in the hope and with the prayer that this discussion may clear up misunderstandings which have existed and open the door to new discussions that we venture upon this project. Implied in this is an invitation for anyone interested in the subject to submit material relating to common grace which will be seriously considered for publication in our *Journal*.

## Material to Be Treated

The subject of common grace is a broad subject which is related to many other theological concepts and truths. Some of these we are interested in and some of them we are not.

The whole subject of the “free offer of the gospel,” e.g., is intimately and inescapably connected with common grace. This was true of the “Three Points” of 1924 which spoke of the fact that God’s attitude “of favour or grace” which “He shows to all His creatures in general” is manifested in “the general offer of the gospel.” And those who have discussed the whole question of the “free offer of the gospel” have pointed out that such an “offer” can be understood only within the boundaries of common grace.

It is not, however, our intention to enter into that question of the “free offer of the gospel” in this discussion. Much has been written about it, also in this *Journal*, and to discuss this whole question again would involve us in massive redundancies. Not only that, but one wearies of the whole subject at last. The Protestant Reformed Churches have, over the years, set forth the position of Scripture and the confessions on this question over and over again. Some choose to ignore what has been written; some continue, in spite of all that has been written, to misrepresent the view which we defend; some, understanding the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches, take issue with it and defend a position contrary to it. The latter are to be respected, even though they differ. But in any case, there is little point in writing more. We are not going to raise our banner again in defense of the sovereign and particular address of God in the gospel.

There are fundamental questions of common grace which are addressed by all who discuss the matter—whether it be the defenders of

the “Three Points” of 1924; the proponents of common grace by those who have *forgotten* 1924; the Presbyterian theologians, such as Charles Hodge and John Murray; or the proponents of common grace in other parts of the world, whose denominations or congregations have never been touched by controversy over the issue.

These questions, generally speaking, involve several points.

Perhaps the most crucial question is the precise *meaning* of common grace. Louis Berkhof, e.g., in his *Systematic Theology*, speaks of *three* kinds of common grace: *universal* common grace, *general* common grace, and *covenant* common grace.<sup>1</sup> Is there agreement on this question, or do differences also emerge here?

In close connection with the question of the meaning of common grace, the relationship between common grace and the cross of Christ must be examined. The most fundamental question is: If common grace is indeed *grace*, is that common grace *earned by the atoning sacrifice of Christ?*—an affirmative answer to which question would indicate that, in some sense of the word at least, the cross of Christ is *universal*.

Some have answered the question in the negative; others have answered it with an emphatic *Yes*; still others have answered with a somewhat hesitant and circumscribed *Yes*. That it is an important question is evident from the fact that the Christian Reformed Church in the mid-1960s dealt with the question of the “universality of the death of Christ” as that death of Christ stands related to the universal love or grace of God. This question was discussed at length on the broadest level of ecclesiastical assemblies.

Common grace, perhaps in its most basic sense, involves the question of God’s good gifts to the ungodly. God’s good gifts, the gifts of His providence, come to all. They come to wicked and righteous. They come to the praying saint and the blaspheming sinner. They come to the elect and the reprobate. The crucial question, the one that needs discussing, is: Are not these good gifts of God “evidences of His *grace*”? Does one ever give good gifts in anger and hatred? Are not the good things of life, in the nature of the case, *gracious* gifts of God? ... gifts undeserved? ... gifts gratuitously given? ... gifts, therefore, of *grace*? It is a question that needs looking into.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), p. 434.

A discussion of the good gifts of God's providence immediately brings us into the whole question of the *meaning* of "grace". It is clear to all, I think, that grace is surely *unmerited favor*. And that point, in itself, needs no further elucidation. But there are those who, while very uncomfortable with the views of common grace taught in years past, are nevertheless accustomed to calling God's good gifts, *grace*. And, as I indicated earlier, although there may be areas of agreement on the question of whether God actually is *favorably inclined* towards all men, the terminology at this point becomes extremely important. It must not be forgotten that the defenders of common grace have spoken freely not only of common *grace*, but also of common *love*, common *mercy*, and common *longsuffering*. And this is important, for the question is real and vital to every Reformed man: Does God *love all men*?

So a close look at terminology is crucial.

Another fundamental aspect of the "common grace" controversy is the whole question of the "restraint of sin in the lives of the ungodly."

The question of such a restraint of sin is a fairly complicated one which involves different questions more or less directly related to the main question.

There has never really been any question about the fact that God indeed "restrains sin." The Protestant Reformed Churches have sometimes been accused of denying such a restraint; but this accusation is incorrect. From the beginning of the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches, these churches have held to the obvious fact that, indeed, God restrains sin. But the question is: *How* is this sin restrained? Is it restrained by the *policeman*? or is it restrained by some *general operation of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of all men*?

If God restrains sin through the *policeman*, then grace need not necessarily be involved; although we are quick to add that some have wanted to place the restraint of sin by the police, as well, in the realm of God's "grace" towards men. It has been maintained that government in general, and its power to enforce law and order, is the product of God's "grace." Nevertheless, the restraint of sin by enforcement of law does not *necessarily* involve grace. Restraint by an "inward operation of the Holy Spirit" emphatically involves grace.

There are other questions. If, from the beginning of history, God did not restrain sin, would Adam (and the human race with him) have become a "beast"? Was the grace of restraint of sin, operating on his nature,

necessary to prevent him from descending into “total bestiality”? So it has been maintained by many, beginning already with Dr. Abraham Kuyper.

The question of the “restraint of sin” is an important question because it also involves the question of the ability of the sinner to “do good in the sight of God.” Can the sinner “do good”? More concretely, when an unregenerated man builds a hospital for the care of the sick, is this not *good*? Does a man go to hell for rescuing a drowning child? Is his punishment all the greater because a man has endowed the local art museum with money to buy costly paintings? Is there no difference in the sight of God between the butcheries of Stalin and the neighbor who cares for his wife and children, works faithfully at his job, and keeps the law of the land?

The whole question is worth some thought and attention because the simple fact of life is that the *keeping* of the law of God, though admittedly outward, brings greater reward than a *violation* of it. The man who lives faithfully with the wife of his youth enjoys the institution of marriage; the homosexual acquires AIDS. The drug addict winds up in the hospital or prison; the man who turns away from drugs never suffers their debilitating effect. The nation which *keeps* the law of God prospers; the nation which *tramples* the law of God under feet suffers the just judgment of God. If it is true that even “outward” good is rewarded (completely apart from the question of salvation) is this not because that which is rewarded is truly *good*?

And this whole problem, in turn, involves the question whether it is proper to distinguish in the life of the unregenerated man between “total” and “absolute” depravity. Many have done this. Man is not *absolutely* depraved, although he is *totally* depraved, it is said. And, the questions are basically the same: Is it correct to say that God “hates man’s sins, but loves man”? ... that God makes distinction between sin and the sinner?

The question of the ability of the natural man to “do good” involves important practical questions, questions which involve the life and calling of the child of God in the world. These questions center in what, in Reformed circles, has been called, “the antithesis.”

The question of the antithesis has been raised in different connections. But the basic argument is clear enough. If it is true that a “gracious restraint of sin in the unregenerate” results in “good works” in the lives of the unregenerate, does it not follow that cooperation in certain areas of life between the people of the world and the people of God is possible?

To cite but one example: Certainly there are plenty of people in the world who are not regenerated, but who despise with their entire being the monstrous evil of abortion. They have set themselves to do battle with this evil and to attempt to eradicate it from the land. No Christian would ever think of *approving* of the murder of unborn infants. Cannot the Christian “make common cause with the wicked at this crucial juncture so that both work together for a common goal”?

But this entire question of the antithesis has been raised in connection with other problems. The incorporation of “higher critical” methods into a Reformed hermeneutics has been justified on the grounds of common grace and the ability of the natural man to do good. If God’s Spirit operates in man to produce “good,” man is able to produce good “thinking” and good “ideas.” Higher criticism is one of these good ideas.

Common grace has been the justification to accept the findings of natural science, not only in such questions as the revolution of the planets about the sun in our solar system, but also in such questions as the origin of our universe. Natural science has discovered that the universe is from 15 to 20 billion years old and that the universe, as we now know it, has developed from lower forms of life to higher forms of life over these lengthy spans of time. And, because science is possible “because of common grace,” we must *accept* these findings of science as the fruit of God’s grace in the lives of unregenerated scientists.<sup>2</sup>

But, whether one agrees with all this or disagrees, the question remains: Is it due to the influence of God’s *gracious operations in men which enables them to discover truth*—whether that be in the area of science, or philosophy, or ethics, or anywhere else. And if this obvious discovery of truth on the part of the ungodly is not due to God’s *grace*, how is it to be explained?

To conclude this discussion, it can also be pointed out that the *purpose* of common grace has often been discussed. Why does God bestow His grace and favor upon men while they live in this world? Some have pointed out that this is necessary for the church to survive and the elect to be saved through the mission labors of the church. It is argued that, without common grace, this world would be such a “hell” that the church would be unable to survive even for a day. Others have gone a bit beyond this, and have suggested that common grace, especially as it is operative in

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<sup>2</sup> The Christian Reformed Church, in a committee report on this question, specifically appealed to common grace.

“general revelation,” is a necessary “preparatory” work for God’s special grace. The wicked world is “prepared” by common grace “for special grace,” for salvation, for membership in the church. This is argued, e.g., by the great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck:

It is common grace which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service.<sup>3</sup>

In discussing this question, appeal is made to “general revelation” in distinction from “special revelation.” “General” revelation is common grace; “special” revelation is special grace. So common has this idea been that an entire book has been written with the title: *General Revelation and Common Grace*.<sup>4</sup> The fact is that, throughout the history of the discussions of common grace, the question of “general revelation” has always been introduced. And it is important, therefore, that we take a look at that question too.

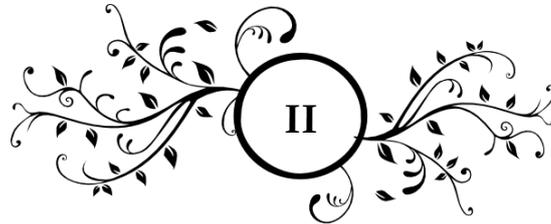
And so it seems to be worth our while to take another look at this important question, investigate anew what the Scriptures have to say about it, and open the door to discussion on the matter.



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<sup>3</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953).



## DEFINITIONS OF COMMON GRACE

**B**EFORE WE can examine various questions which are related to the idea of common grace<sup>5</sup> it is quite important to examine what precisely is meant by the concept.

In an effort to get at the meaning of common grace, we refer to various writers who have, over the years, supported the doctrine of common grace.

Herman Bavinck, in his pamphlet, “Common Grace,”<sup>6</sup> does not define common grace, but teaches that common grace is the explanation for the continued existence of the wicked and the preservation of the nations outside Israel during the Old Testament with a view to the salvation of a catholic church. He speaks of common grace as important because it prepares the way in the whole creation and in the human race for special grace by which the whole cosmos is saved.

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<sup>5</sup> The questions which we propose to treat in this discussion were briefly listed in chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De Algemeene Genade* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Sevensma Co., [no date]). This pamphlet was translated by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen and appeared in *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (April, 1989). We use Van Leeuwen’s translation.

In his book, *Our Reasonable Faith*,<sup>7</sup> Bavinck connects common grace with general revelation, and special grace with special revelation. He writes:

It is common grace which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service.<sup>8</sup>

Berkhof deals extensively with common grace.<sup>9</sup> He speaks first of all of three heads under which common grace can be treated: 1) *universal* common grace, which is shown to all creatures; 2) *general* common grace, which is shown to all men; 3) *covenantal* common grace, which is shown to all who live in the sphere of the covenant.<sup>10</sup>

Attempting a more formal definition of common grace, Berkhof speaks of a grace that is common in the sense of “ordinary.”

The ordinary, in distinction from the special, operations of the Holy Spirit are called common. His natural and usual operations are contrasted with those which are unusual and supernatural.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note in this connection that Berkhof, in speaking of common grace, is emphatically referring to God’s *attribute* of grace. God’s attribute of grace

appears also in the natural blessings which God showers upon man in the present life ... It is seen in all that God does to restrain the devastating influences and development of sin in the world, and to maintain and enrich and develop the natural

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<sup>7</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*. Cf. p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> William Masselink does the same thing and devotes an entire book to the relation between common grace and general revelation. See, Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*.

<sup>9</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 434, 435.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

life of mankind ... It should be borne in mind, however, that the term *gratia communis*, though generally designating a grace that is common to the whole of mankind is also used to denote a grace that is common to the elect and the non-elect that are living under the gospel, such as the external gospel call that comes to both alike.<sup>12</sup>

In summarizing common grace he writes:

(a) Those general operations of the Holy Spirit whereby He, without renewing the heart, exercises such a moral influence on man through His general or special revelation, that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted; or, (b) those general blessings, such as rain and sunshine, food and drink, clothing and shelter, which God imparts to all men indiscriminately where and in what measure it seems good to Him.<sup>13</sup>

In discussing the means by which common grace operates, Berkhof lists general revelation, governments, public opinion, divine punishments and rewards.<sup>14</sup> And the fruits of common grace are said to be a postponement of the sentence of death; a restraint of sin; the preservation of truth, morality, and religion; the performance of outward good and civil righteousness; and many natural blessings.<sup>15</sup>

Bratt calls attention to an interesting and significant aspect of common grace when he refers to the views of Johannes Groen, an example of one strain of thought within Dutch Calvinism in this country.

Johannes Groen opted for ... the principle of common grace rather than antithesis. The laws of

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 440-441.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 441-444.

social development came from Creation, he argued, not Redemption; the antithesis was spiritual and need not be reflected in all temporal activity; the redeemed might operate in ‘the social sphere’ according to natural law. Thus Christians could—indeed, *should*—cooperate with unbelievers on a ‘neutral terrain,’ the better to establish justice in society. Since in Groen’s estimation the activities of most American labor unions did precisely that (by promoting equity and solidarity), the Reformed should join them.<sup>16</sup>

James Daane speaks of common grace particularly in connection with the distinction between total and absolute depravity; and while he does not clearly define what he means, it seems that his idea is that common grace is a mitigation of depravity which leaves the depraved nature capable of doing some good. In this connection, he speaks of the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart.

The traditional manner in which Reformed theology accounted for this difference between total and absolute depravity was by reference to a general, gracious operation of the Holy Spirit upon unregenerate human hearts.<sup>17</sup>

He sums up the matter with a reference to the decisions of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924.

Thus it is evident that 1924 teaches in harmony with traditional Reformed thought that there is a restraint of sin in the life of the unregenerate and an emergence of civic righteousness, and that these

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<sup>16</sup> James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> James Daane, *A Theology of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p. 88.

two features of unregenerate life are the result of a positive operation of God's Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

In a series of sermons which, according to the author, were preached expressly to explain and defend the decisions on common grace by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, Rev. H. J. Kuiper defines common grace.

It is the grace or favor which God, for the sake of Christ and His Church, shows to those who do not possess saving grace and through which He

(negative)

1. postpones their merited judgment. (outward).
2. restrains them from sin. (inward)

(positive).

3. bestows temporal blessings upon them and offers the gospel even to non-elect among them. (outward).
4. and enables them to perform civic righteousness, to entertain some regard for virtue and to enjoy some of the blessings of the gospel. (inward).<sup>19</sup>

Kuiper also goes on to define common grace in terms of earthly blessings sent to the wicked as fruits of God's kindness and as efforts to convince the wicked of God's sincere willingness to give them the greater

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 89.

<sup>19</sup> H. J. Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace: Three Sermons with Footnotes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1925), p. 14. Interestingly, this definition appears in a footnote. One wonders whether it was actually in the sermon preached.

gift of salvation,<sup>20</sup> as proof of God's love for all,<sup>21</sup> as an inward restraint of sin,<sup>22</sup> and as the ability to do good in the sight of God.<sup>23</sup>

Dr. Abraham Kuyper concentrates especially on the restraint of sin and the consequent good which the ungodly are able to perform. Since the magistrate is instituted because of sin, it "is an instrument of 'common grace.'"<sup>24</sup> Mocking Augustine's view that the superlative accomplishments of the heathen are nothing but "splendid vices,"<sup>25</sup> Kuyper calls this idea "a subterfuge, which lacks earnestness."<sup>26</sup> Common grace, Kuyper says, "does not kill the core of sin, nor does it save unto life eternal, but it arrests the complete effectuation of sin."<sup>27</sup>

God by His "common grace" restrains the operation of sin in man, partly by breaking its power, partly by taming his evil spirit, and partly by domesticating his nation or his family.<sup>28</sup>

The result is that the unregenerate man is capable of doing good.

It is now understood that it was the 'common grace' of God, which had produced in ancient Greece and Rome the treasures of philosophical light, and disclosed to us treasures of art and justice.<sup>29</sup>

Masselink takes the same position. Discussing the relation between general revelation and common grace, Masselink says:

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-36.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), pp. 80-82. See also pp. 92, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Although Kuyper does not mention Augustine by name.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 124.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122-125

[General revelation and common grace] are related, however, because in common grace God uses the truths of general revelation to restrain sin. The two results of general revelation are: God-consciousness and moral consciousness. By means of these two results, through God's common grace, sin is curbed in the natural man.<sup>30</sup>

Masselink claims that Reformed theology all but went into eclipse for 200 years after the Reformation because “the great fact of the Christian's relation to the world was neglected.”<sup>31</sup> Kuyper and Hodge were the men responsible for reviving this important notion.

While the negative element of the restraint of sin is important, says Masselink, the positive must also be emphasized: “The constant operation of the Holy Spirit upon all mankind by which civil righteousness is promoted.”<sup>32</sup> Connecting common grace with God's attributes, Masselink opines that common grace prevents chaos and preserves the creation; it gives power to man, order in creation and produces science, government, art, etc.<sup>33</sup>

K. Sietsma, in his work on the office, discusses common grace. He writes:

Of course, Satan did not succeed in destroying man completely. Man is not a devil, full of conscious and deliberate hate for God. We believe, according to what we designate “common grace,” that there are active in the world and in man many energies or powers of the Word and Spirit of God which prevent the transformation of all that God once created good into its very opposite. The Lord sees to it that the thoughts of the human mind, the affections of the human heart, and the works of the human hand still manifest His glory and the rich

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<sup>30</sup> Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188, 192, 193.

qualities of His creation. There remains a rich form of human life, even where there is no regeneration of the heart and even where the grace of salvation has not been bestowed.<sup>34</sup>

It is striking that Sietsma does not find this common grace rooted in the cross of Christ, but rather in some original goodness preserved from the beginning and preserved partially in the office. It is, however, related to Christ—although Sietsma never explains the nature of this relationship.<sup>35</sup>

Henry R. Van Til discusses common grace at length. One of the values of his book is its extensive treatment of Abraham Kuyper’s massive three volume work on common grace.<sup>36</sup> After discussing Kuyper’s view at some length, Van Til summarizes it as follows:

Creation would have returned to the void unless God in his common grace intervened to sustain it; thus the creative will is now achieved through common grace. Common grace does not merely have a restraining or negative influence but it is also positive and progressive in motivating cultural activity. Culture is a gift of common grace since through it the original powers deposited in nature were brought to fruition. The very antithesis between light and darkness is possible only on the basis of common grace.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> K. Sietsma, *The Idea of Office*, tr. by Henry Vander Goot (Toronto: Paideia Press, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 34.

<sup>36</sup> Entitled, *Gemeene Gratie*. Kuyper called common grace “gratie” in distinction from the ordinary Dutch word for grace, “genade.” He did this because he wanted to distinguish his common grace from the view of common grace which included the general offer of the gospel, a doctrine which Kuyper condemned. Kuyper’s *Gemeene Gratie* is not available in English, and takes a great deal of fortitude to read even if one can read Dutch.

<sup>37</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), p. 229.

Van Til does not agree with Kuyper entirely. He does not believe that the world would have reverted to chaos without the intervention of common grace; and he also parts ways with Kuyper's view that man would have become a beast apart from common grace. The fall, Van Til says, did not rob man of his rationality and morality.<sup>38</sup>

In defining common grace, Van Til uses a definition of his uncle, Cornelius Van Til, found in C. Van Til's *A Letter on Common Grace*.

[Common grace is an] ethical attitude on the part of God to mankind by which man is restrained from fully expressing his enmity toward his Creator or his fellow man, and whereby he is enabled to perform certain moral actions. These may be denominated 'good' in the relative sense in which Scripture applies that term to the approved actions of unregenerate men.<sup>39</sup>

Van Til also points out in this same connection that common grace is indeed *grace* because the gifts which are given to men are given without merit.<sup>40</sup>

Van Til also gives some attention to the meaning of "common" in the term *common grace* and the difficulties of its use.

It would seem that one of the chief causes of this difficulty is the fact that the term "common" has not been carefully defined. It makes a great deal of difference whether one applies the qualitative or quantitative connotation. If the latter connotation is applied to grace, it would mean that God gives his favor to all indiscriminately in the sending of sunshine and rain upon the evil and the good, that the preaching of the Gospel is proof that God's favor is promiscuous, and that the restraint of sin and the power to perform civil good is also due to

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230-232.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

common grace in both regenerate and unregenerate. However, when grace is used in the qualitative sense it refers to the ordinary, the natural and usual as compared with the extraordinary. Hence, the grace we call common dispenses the ordinary gifts of life and health, sunshine and rain to those who are unthankful, since God is kind to his enemies. But he gives himself in love and fellowship to his children ...

However, there are those who have a different conception of commonality. By it they mean that all men share alike under the common grace of God in the natural blessings of sunshine and rain; they have everything in common up to a certain point. The ordinary things of life together with human nature with its gifts of reason, appreciation of beauty, etc., are universally received and given without discrimination. For God loves men promiscuously, and we must follow his example by not drawing a line between saints and sinners in the common things of life. We must learn to enjoy and appreciate the common cultures, without dragging the antithesis into the picture. An illustration at this point may not be amiss. Think of a Wyoming rancher who runs his riding horses together with his cattle. But in one corner of that open ranch there is a corral specially designed for feeding his horses a ration of protein and a vitamin fortified diet, to keep them in condition for hard service. This is horse heaven. They have the range in common with all the other livestock, but here is "special grace." Some such concept seems to be prevalent in many circles. As a result, there is a certain level of existence at which the army of the Lord is immobilized, where it does not function as an army, but suddenly takes on the appearance of crowds of vacationers, or the motley multitude at a

fair and pushing one another for a better position to see. Thus there is established between the church and the world a grey, colorless area, a kind of no man's land, where an armistice obtains and one can hobnob with the enemy with impunity in a relaxed Christmas spirit, smoking the common weed.<sup>41</sup>

We have quoted quite at length from Van Til because he very carefully defines what he means by common grace and takes exception to many current views. In addition to his rejection of these views, he also denies that common grace is God's "general love," a love which becomes the basis for mission work. This view was promoted by Leonard Verduin and was widely held in the Christian Reformed Church in the 1960s.<sup>42</sup>

The views of common grace which we have discussed to this point have been propounded chiefly in the tradition of continental Dutch Reformed theology. It is time to take a look at some leading *Presbyterian* thinkers. While many within the Presbyterian tradition have written on and defended common grace, we refer to some representative theologians.

A. A. Hodge offers a definition of common grace:

"Common grace" is the restraining and persuading influences of the Holy Spirit acting only through the truth revealed in the gospel, or through the natural light of reason and of conscience, heightening the natural moral effect of such truth upon the understanding, conscience and heart. It involves no change of heart, but simply an

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 239, 240.

<sup>42</sup> The view was propounded by Verduin in "Does Our Theology Hamper Missions," *The Reformed Journal*, (June, 1958), pp. 3ff. It resulted in a flurry of controversy, which controversy centered in a series of articles written by Harold Dekker in *The Reformed Journal*, articles which promoted the idea that mission work could be effectively performed only when the gospel proclaimed that God "loves all men." The case reached the Synod, the highest ecclesiastical assembly in the Christian Reformed Church; but the Synod refused to condemn Dekker's views. An interesting feature of the Synod's discussion of these issues was the fact that appeal was made to common grace in support of Dekker's position.

enhancement of the natural powers of the truth, a restraint of the evil passions, and an increase of the natural emotions in view of sin, duty, and self-interest.<sup>43</sup>

Hodge finds proof “that God so operates upon the hearts of the unregenerate ... 1st, from Scripture, Gen. 6:3, Acts 7:51, Hebrews 10:29; 2nd, from universal experience and observation.”<sup>44</sup>

Just as A. A. Hodge, Charles Hodge treats common grace under “Vocation,” i.e., “Calling.” He offers the following definitions of grace:

By common grace, therefore, is meant that influence of the Spirit, which in a greater or less measure, is granted to all who hear the truth. By sufficient grace is meant such kind and degree of the Spirit’s influence, as is sufficient to lead men to repentance, faith, and a holy life. By efficacious grace is meant such an influence of the Spirit as is certainly effectual in producing regeneration and conversion. By preventing grace is intended that operation of the Spirit on the mind which precedes and excites its efforts to return to God. By the *gratia gratum faciens* is meant the influence of the Spirit which renews and renders gracious. Cooperating grace is that influence of the Spirit which aids the people of God in all the exercises of the divine life. By habitual grace is meant the Holy Spirit dwelling in believers; or that permanent, immanent state of mind due to his abiding presence and power.<sup>45</sup>

In his many distinctions of grace, Hodge finds that they all apply to the elect except for a certain influence of the Spirit granted to all who hear the

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<sup>43</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outline of Theology* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1878), pp. 449, 450.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1946), Vol. II, pp. 654, 655.

truth. While Hodge speaks of an influence of the Spirit apart from the Word necessary to prepare the minds of men for the reception of the truth, it is not clear if this is a reference also to common grace, for there is no specific mention of common grace.<sup>46</sup>

But then Hodge does speak emphatically of common grace and writes:

The Bible therefore teaches that the Holy Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth to Him good .... This is what in theology is called common grace.<sup>47</sup>

In examining the Scriptures on this question, Hodge finds in Genesis 6:3 a reference to the Holy Spirit, who exerts an influence in the government of men.<sup>48</sup> Common grace is also found, according to Hodge, in Acts 7:51: God is “everywhere present with the minds of men, as the Spirit of truth and goodness, operating on them according to the laws of their free moral agency, inclining them to good and restraining them from evil.”<sup>49</sup> When Romans 1:25-28 speaks of God giving the wicked up, Hodge says that this implies some restraint of the wicked prior to the giving up.<sup>50</sup>

The fruits of this common grace are the presence of virtue in the world, a religious feeling among all men, and a diversity of religious experiences which include a conviction of the truths of Scripture, an experience of their power and of external religious life.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the most articulate defender of common grace is John Murray.

In volume I of his *Collected Writings* appears an article entitled, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel.” In this article, Murray discusses what he means by common grace.

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, II, pp. 660-664.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 667.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 668.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 608.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 669.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Emphatically he speaks of the fact that the “unrestricted overture of grace is rooted in the atonement.”<sup>52</sup> Pursuing this line of thought, Murray writes: “Many benefits accrue to the non-elect from the redemptive work of Christ.”<sup>53</sup> After explaining this in some detail, Murray concludes the paragraph with the startling words: “... It would not be improper to say that, in respect of what is entailed for the non-elect, Christ died for them.”<sup>54</sup>

These benefits are, Murray goes on to say, expressions of God’s kindness, mercy, and love.<sup>55</sup> Finding proof for God’s love for all men in Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27, 35, Murray writes:

There is a love in God that goes forth to lost men and is manifested in the manifold blessings which all men without distinction enjoy, a love in which non-elect persons are embraced, and a love that comes to its highest expression in the entreaties, overtures and demands of gospel proclamation.<sup>56</sup>

Some of these benefits Murray finds mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-5; 10:29; II Peter 2:20, 21.

But Murray makes some careful, though difficult to understand, distinctions in an effort to escape the charge of universalizing the atonement of Christ. He writes: “The non-elect enjoy many benefits that accrue *from* the atonement but they do not partake of the *atonement*.”<sup>57</sup> The same distinction must be made in the love of God.<sup>58</sup> While the love of *benevolence* is a love which saves, the love of *complacency* is a love which is conditioned by a response to our love.<sup>59</sup> This love, rooted in the cross, is expressed in the gospel offer.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel,” in John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), vol. I, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

In another article, Murray discusses common grace in more detail. Taking his starting point with the noble examples of heathenism and how they are to be explained, and disagreeing with what Murray considers to be a very narrow definition of common grace in Charles Hodge and A. A. Hodge, he offers a broader definition:

[Common grace is] any gift or favor bestowed upon, and enjoyed by creatures ... Gifts bestowed upon other creatures as well as upon men ... Every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.<sup>61</sup>

In defining these gifts further, Murray uses a classification found in Herman Kuiper. Universal common grace is “grace which is common to all the creatures who make up this sin-cursed world ... a grace which touches creatures as creatures.” General common grace is “grace common to all human beings in distinction from the rest of God’s creatures ... a grace which pertains to men as men.” Covenant common grace is “grace common to all who live in the covenant sphere ... to all elect and non-elect covenant members.”<sup>62</sup>

Murray has an elaborate classification of the elements of common grace. There is, first of all, restraint “upon the expressions and consequences of human depravity and of unholy passion.”<sup>63</sup> This restraint is further divided into a restraint of sin which is a “restraint upon the workings of human depravity” by which God “prevents the unholy affections and principles of men from manifesting all the potentialities inherent in them.”<sup>64</sup> The proof of this is found in Genesis 3:22-23; 4:15 because “a halo of sanctity was placed around [Cain’s] life;”<sup>65</sup> Genesis 20:6 where the assumption is that Abimelech was an unbeliever;<sup>66</sup> II Kings

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<sup>61</sup> “Common Grace,” in John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), vol. II, pp. 93-96.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 97. See Berkhof, above, for the same idea.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

19:27-28, which contains God's Word of judgment against Sennacherib, king of Assyria.<sup>67</sup>

That restraint includes, secondly, a restraint upon the divine wrath and a postponement of judgment. This is interpreted as longsuffering and forbearance.

Thirdly, God restrains evil by means of "correcting and preserving influences so that the ravages of sin might not be allowed to work out the full measure of their destructive power."<sup>68</sup>

Secondly, the bestowal of good and the excitation to good is an element in common grace.<sup>69</sup> This also includes various elements.

First of all, creation is the recipient of divine bounty.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, unregenerate men are recipients of divine favour and goodness. The proof that is given includes God's blessing on Potiphar; Acts 14:16-17; 17:30; Matthew 5:44-45; Luke 6:35-36; 16:25.<sup>71</sup>

Thirdly, good is attributed to unregenerate man. Faced with the paradox or seeming contradiction between the good of the unregenerate man and the testimony of Scripture that the wicked do only wickedness, Murray, in a footnote, resolves the paradox by an appeal to the "relative good" of the wicked. His proof is found in II Kings 10:30; 12:2; Matthew 5:46; Luke 6:33; Romans 2:14-15.<sup>72</sup>

Fourthly, another element of common grace is the operations and influences of the Spirit which the unregenerate receive through the preaching and which "result in experience of the power and glory of the gospel ..."<sup>73</sup> The proof for this element is found in the parable of the sower; Hebrews 6:4-8, which Murray calls "non-saving grace at its very apex;" II Peter 2:20-22, Romans 1:18ff.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, an element of common grace is civil government which restrains sin and promotes good.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104ff.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Finally, Murray discusses the purpose of common grace as serving special grace, although the salvation of the church is “not the only purpose being fulfilled in history and not ... the one purpose to which all others may be subordinated.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the pre-conversion works of the Spirit belong to common grace.

Furthermore, when we come to the point of actual conversion, the faith and repentance involved in conversion do not receive their genesis apart from the knowledge of the truth of the gospel. There must be conveyed to the mind of the man who believes and repents to the saving of his soul the truth-content of law and gospel, law as convicting him of sin and gospel as conveying the information which becomes the material of faith. To some extent at least there must be the cognition and apprehension of the import of law and gospel prior to the exercise of saving faith and repentance. ‘Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom. 10:17). But this apprehension of the truth of the gospel that is prior to faith and repentance, and therefore prior to the regeneration of which faith and repentance are the immediate effects in our consciousness, cannot strictly belong to the saving operations of the Spirit. They are preparatory to these saving operations and in the gracious design of God place the person concerned in the psychological condition that is the prerequisite of the intelligent exercise of faith and repentance. In other words, they place in his mind the apperceptive content that makes the gospel meaningful to his consciousness. But since they are not the saving acts of faith and repentance they must belong to a different category from that of saving grace and therefore to the category of non-saving or common grace. We may thus say that in

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

the operations of common grace we have what we may call the vestibule of faith.<sup>77</sup>

In an unpublished paper, which actually deals with the hypostatic union in Christ, David Silversides treats also common grace.<sup>78</sup> He says that common grace is God showing favor, love, and mercy toward the reprobate. Such common grace includes the restraint of sin, the restraint of divine wrath, material blessings, civil government, and the preaching of the gospel: "... God enjoins his ministers to present a genuine and benevolent invitation to sinners to come to Christ expressive of his love and favour to them."<sup>79</sup> Thus common grace emphatically means God's love for all men.<sup>80</sup>

John H. Gerstner also makes a distinction in the love of God which allows room for something approaching common grace. He says that God loves all men with a benevolent love, i.e., a love "which consists in doing some good for another being whether that being is excellent and deserving of that good or not." It is distinct from the "love of complacency" which is "based on the excellency of another moral being." Still, even benevolent love is both "the benevolent love of common grace (sunshine and rain)" and the "benevolent love" which is "salvific," which is intended "to bestow eternal life."<sup>81</sup>

In an important book, Donald Macleod writes extensively on the subject of common grace and takes the time to criticize (sometimes rather severely) the view of the Protestant Reformed Churches.<sup>82</sup> He speaks of the fact that common grace includes blessings enjoyed by the reprobate; the laudable qualities to be found in the lives of the wicked; and the

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>78</sup> Silversides is a minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. It is not too clear how the common grace issue enters his discussion of the hypostatic union, but he takes the time to take to task the views on common grace held by Herman Hoeksema.

<sup>79</sup> Pp. 35ff. in this paper.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>81</sup> John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), pp. 130, 131.

<sup>82</sup> Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Ross-shire, Christian Focus Publications, 1991).

cultural achievements of the natural man.<sup>83</sup> The effects of common grace, according to Macleod, are God's exercise of forbearance and longsuffering towards the world, the blessings of divine benevolence, God's restraint of sin in men's lives, God's preservation of some sense of morality and religion in human society, man's capability of civil good and domestic affection, and man's cultural and technological achievement.<sup>84</sup> The instruments of common grace are defined as God's general revelation, the presence of the church to restrain sin and postpone judgment, the ordinances of law and government which restrain sin and create a favorable climate in which men can live, God's judgments which remove wickedness and restrain sin, and the eternal call of the gospel.<sup>85</sup>

Macleod, in explaining God's favor and love towards the unregenerate, points out that God does not always hate the wicked any more than He always loves the elect: "His attitude to them (the elect, HH) is not simply one of love."<sup>86</sup> And in explaining the good which the unregenerate are capable of performing, he falls back on the widely accepted distinction between total depravity and absolute depravity.<sup>87</sup>

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Having concluded our survey of the views of various thinkers on the subject of common grace, it would probably be beneficial to summarize all these views so that the issues are more clearly before us.

Although one finds in the literature very little effort to define precisely what common grace is, two points especially emerge. The first is that by "common" is meant "universal." That is, grace which is common is grace which is shown *universally*; not only to all humans, but also to all God's

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-120.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-123.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>87</sup> This distinction is interpreted in different ways by defenders of common grace. Macleod seems to make the distinction apply to the deeds of men and holds that man does not do all the wickedness he would be capable of doing if it were not for common grace. Others have made the distinction apply to the *nature* of man and have said that, although man is depraved in all parts of his nature (total depravity), he is not *completely* depraved in any part of his nature (absolute depravity). We shall deal with this further on in our discussion.

creation, to what the First Point of 1924 called “God’s creatures in general.”<sup>88</sup> Some even speak of a common grace within the covenant which is shared by the elect and non-elect who are born within the sphere of the covenant.

And, secondly, “grace” is indeed defined as grace in the full sense of that word—even if common grace is carefully distinguished from saving grace. Common grace is a grace which is a revelation of God’s own attribute of grace. It is a grace that is unmerited favor. It is a grace that is synonymous with, or includes in it, love, favor, kindness, mercy, longsuffering, forbearance, and benevolence. In fact, common grace is also said by some<sup>89</sup> to be rooted in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Some emphasize in this connection that this common favor of God can indeed be called “grace” because it is unmerited; and that which is unmerited is always grace.

Most of the proponents of common grace agree that it includes the following elements: the natural blessings which come to all such as rain and sunshine; the maintenance of order in society in general; the postponement of judgment on the wicked; the preservation of truth, morality, and religion among men; the enrichment and development of natural life; the experience of the power and glory of the gospel to those who come under the preaching of the gospel but are not saved; and the restraint of sin in the lives of men, with the result that the unregenerate are capable of doing good in an outward or relative sense of the word.

Some are inclined to stress various aspects of these fruits of common grace. The question quite naturally arises, *viz.*, how it is possible for the unregenerate to do good in the sight of God, even if that good is natural, civil, and relative. Some answer this question by speaking of a certain mitigation of the depravity of the human nature, which mitigation is sometimes explained in terms of a distinction between total depravity and absolute depravity.<sup>90</sup> Some speak of the fact that, if it had not been for common grace which God showed to the world immediately after the fall,

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<sup>88</sup> Some disagreement exists over the question whether common grace is shared by the elect and non-elect, or whether it is God’s grace only to the non-elect, while the elect are the heirs of special grace.

<sup>89</sup> Notably, John Murray. See also, R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1959), pp. 81-95.

<sup>90</sup> See our earlier remarks on this subject.

the creation would have returned to a void, and man would have become a beast or a devil.<sup>91</sup>

John Murray adds one other aspect to common grace, an idea that was common among the later Puritans. Common grace, where the gospel is preached, gives some understanding of the law and the gospel which results in a conviction of sin and an understanding of the attractiveness of Christ proclaimed in the gospel. Apparently, this comes to all who hear the preaching and is preparatory to the work of regeneration, conversion, repentance, and faith. Murray calls it the “vestibule” of saving grace. Bavinck goes further and speaks of this aspect of common grace as found in all men, not now through the preaching of the gospel, but through general revelation, and as having the effect of showing men the hopelessness of idolatry as well as stirring up in them a desire for something better and different.

Common grace is bestowed upon man in different ways, according to the defenders of this doctrine. It seems, however, as if proper distinctions are not always made in this connection. Almost all agree that common grace comes from God through the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all men. But, in addition to this inward work of the Holy Spirit, common grace comes through many other means.<sup>92</sup> Most importantly, it comes through the general revelation of God in creation and in the conscience by means of which men retain some knowledge of God, some sense of morality, and some ability to do good in God’s sight. Other ways, however, in which common grace is bestowed on men are through the institution of government, through public opinion, and through divine punishments and rewards. Whether these means by which common grace becomes operative are also the fruit of the Spirit is not made clear.

There is one other aspect of common grace, not generally held in the men whose writings we have surveyed, but nevertheless of considerable importance. It is the view of Johannes Groen, described by James Bratt, to which we referred earlier in this study.<sup>93</sup> Groen spoke of common grace creating a sphere of life rooted in the creation ordinance, where, therefore,

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<sup>91</sup> Others, however, disagree with this. See, e.g., Henry Van Til, *Op cit.*

<sup>92</sup> Whether these other means are worked by the Holy Spirit is not often discussed.

<sup>93</sup> See pp. 12-13.

the antithesis does not apply, and where elect and non-elect can cooperate in various activities in life.

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So these are the main ideas to be found in the doctrine of common grace. Included in all this is, of course, the relation between common grace and the free offer of the gospel. But we have decided not to include in our discussion this latter aspect of the question.

We will now begin an analysis of these ideas in the following chapters.





## WHAT IS GRACE?

**I**N THE previous chapter, we quoted extensively from defenders of common grace to learn from them specifically what they mean by the concept. We turn now to a discussion of the idea itself.

If one should study the writings of those who defend common grace, one soon discovers a rather striking fact about such defenses: In their appeals to Scripture to support their views, no text is ever quoted in which the word “grace” itself is used. Sometimes various passages are quoted which are supposed to refer to different aspects of common grace, such as the origin and source of common grace, the effects of common grace among men, the purpose of common grace, and such like things. But in every case, no text is quoted where grace itself is mentioned.

The same is true when common grace is discussed in terms of its synonyms. Common grace is identified with a “general love of God for all men,” or a “general longsuffering of God toward all” (the latter being God’s supposed willingness to postpone men’s judgment until they have sufficient opportunity to repent). Sometimes common grace is defined in terms of God’s goodness toward all men, or a certain kindness or benevolence that He shows toward all. And various Scriptural passages are quoted which are alleged to teach such general love, or kindness, or longsuffering.

Although the words themselves (love, kindness, longsuffering, goodness) are sometimes used in the texts cited, more often than not the words do *not* appear in the texts, and the conclusions drawn from them (*viz.*, that these attributes of God are shown toward all men) are mere deductions.<sup>94</sup> This is not to say that the deduction, because it is a deduction, is necessarily wrong.<sup>95</sup> But the fact remains that the terms associated with common grace are terms in Scripture that, when used, usually are clear and unmistakable references to God's attitude toward *His elect people*.

This is emphatically true of the term *grace*. One would think that a concept so important as that of common grace would surely be mentioned by name in Scripture. But anyone who knows the Bible at all must admit that nowhere, either in Scripture or in the confessions, is the term found.<sup>96</sup>

It can be argued, of course, that this is not really an objection because other theological terms, such as "trinity," "providence," etc., are also not found in Scripture, but are nevertheless accepted by all Reformed people as words that connote truths of Scripture. And so, it is said, the same is true of common grace. The term is not there, but the idea is.

This argument would hold some value if it were not for the fact that, while "common grace" is a term not found in Scripture, "grace" is found repeatedly in both the Old and the New Testaments. One would think that if "common grace" is indeed taught in Scripture, then *somewhere* the word "grace" itself would refer to common grace. Why then is it that no such texts are ever quoted? Why does not anyone point us to one passage where the word "grace" refers to *common grace*?

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<sup>94</sup> An instance of this is the text from Matthew 5:44-45. This passage is perhaps quoted more than any other in support of common grace. And yet none of the words are found in it which are used to refer to God's general attitude of favor towards all.

<sup>95</sup> The *Westminster Confession* speaks of "good and necessary consequence," when it deals with the legitimate interpretation of Scripture.

<sup>96</sup> It is, of course, found once in the *Canons of Dordrecht*. But in this one instance, it is found in the mouths of the Arminians, whose views were condemned by the Synod of Dordrecht. The pertinent article reads: "[The Synod *rejects* the errors of those who teach] that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which we understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, *viz.*, the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself" (*Canons* 3-4, Rejection of Errors 5).

There is another somewhat strange aspect of this question. Theologians can be found who, while they deny the *doctrine* of common grace, nevertheless use the *term*. In general, they use the term to denote God's *providence*. More particularly, they use it to denote that aspect of God's providence according to which God sends good gifts to men. Among these good gifts are rain and sunshine, health and wealth, friendship and marriage.

While it is our intention to discuss these good gifts at some later point, it is important now to notice two things. In the first place, one could very well ask the question of those who hold to the term while denying the doctrine: Why do you want to use the term "grace" to indicate God's *providence*? More particularly, why do you want to use the term "grace" to indicate especially the *good gifts* of God's providence? Would you have objections to using the term "grace" to indicate cancer, or an automobile accident, or famine? These things, too, come by God's providence. The answer to these questions would be interesting.

In the second place, we are, again, back to the point. The term "grace" is often used in Scripture. A good question to ask any Reformed man would be: Is the term "grace" in Scripture ever used to denote providence in general, or the good gifts of providence in particular? If it is not, to say the very least, the use of the term is highly dangerous in today's theological climate when the term is used in many more ways than merely the workings of divine providence.

All of which leads us to the conclusion that a good beginning in our discussion of common grace is a careful analysis of the use of the term in Scripture. What does *Scripture* mean by "grace"? To that we intend to devote this article.

Even a cursory study of the concept "grace," in Scripture, will immediately make clear that the word has a variety of meanings, which meanings are, nevertheless, related.

Kittel<sup>97</sup> points out that although Scripture gives to the term its own distinct meaning, nevertheless, the basic idea of the term was found in profane Greek. It meant 1) that which pleases or delights; 2) the state of

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<sup>97</sup> Kittel, G., ed, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), vol. VIII.

being pleased; 3) that which causes pleasure to others, kindness.<sup>98</sup> In general, therefore, it means good pleasure, favor, goodwill.<sup>99</sup>

In Hellenism, Kittel says, the term means either the demonstration of a king's favor, a gracious disposition, or thanks. He then goes on to add that the term also had the connotations of power, a connotation found also in its New Testament usage.<sup>100</sup>

He goes on to discuss the meaning and connotation of the terms in Scripture, which are הֵן (*hén*) from the verb הֵנַן (*hénan*) and χάρις (*karis*) in Greek. Kittel says that the noun in Hebrew refers first of all to beauty or charm, and points to several passages as illustrations. In Exodus 3:21 the Lord says: "And I will give this people *favour* in the sight of the Egyptians." Here "favour" is really "grace." This thought is repeated in Exodus 11:3 and 12:36. The same meaning is attached to the word, according to Kittel, in Psalm 84:11: "For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give *grace* and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly."<sup>101</sup>

In other places in the Old Testament the word refers often just to an *attitude*. This is especially true of such passages as speak of one finding grace in the eyes of another. An example of this is in Genesis 6:8: "But Noah found *grace* in the eyes of the Lord."<sup>102</sup>

After pointing out that this Old Testament idea is carried over into the new, Kittel goes on to say that it is especially the New Testament which emphasizes that grace is always *free*. While a number of texts are quoted as support for this idea, Kittel appeals especially to Romans 3:24: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."<sup>103</sup>

Kittel's summary statement is: "What is in view is the process whereby one who has something turns in grace to another who has nothing, nor is this just an impersonal transfer of things, but a heart-felt movement of the one who acts to the one acted upon."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 375-376.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

In connection with the fact that grace is always free, Kittel makes some very sharp statements that have direct bearing on our discussion of whether Scripture uses the word “grace” as being common, i.e., towards all men.

He defines grace as the “totality of salvation,” and quotes II Corinthians 6:1 and I Corinthians 1:4 as proof. II Corinthians 6:1 reads: “We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the *grace* of God in vain.”<sup>105</sup> And I Corinthians 1:4 reads: “I thank my God always on your behalf for the *grace* of God which is given you by Jesus Christ.”<sup>106</sup>

As he emphasizes this point, Kittel speaks of grace as “the power of grace [which] is displayed in its work, the overcoming of sin.” He refers to Romans 5:20 as proof: “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, *grace* did much more abound.”<sup>107</sup> He uses such expressions as follows—all of which show the *particularity* of grace: “It is free election.” “It actualizes itself in the church.” “Its goal is every good work.” “It holds the believer fast in the fellowship of grace.” “It is the destruction of sin.” “*χάρις* [*káris*] is the divine ‘favour’ shown in Christ.” In fact, in Colossians 3:13, grace means “to pardon.” “Forbearing one another, and *forgiving* one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ *forgave* you, so also do ye”—where, in both instances that the verb “forgive” is used, the Greek uses the verb form for *grace*.<sup>108</sup> So grace always belongs to salvation.

If it is argued that these Scripture passages all speak of *saving* grace in distinction from *common* grace, the obvious answer is: *Saving* grace is the only use of the term in God’s Word.

Hermann Cremer<sup>109</sup> is in basic agreement with Kittel’s analysis of the term. He offers the general definition: Grace is a “kind, affectionate,

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<sup>105</sup> This is an interesting passage. The translation of the AV might lead one to misinterpret it. The Greek reads: Συνεργοῦντες δὲ καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν μὴ εἰς κενὸν τὴν χάριν τοῦ Θεοῦ δεῖξασθαι. The translation is: “But working together, we also beseech you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” The point is not that we are co-workers with God; but that we work together as ministers *of* God.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>108</sup> The Greek word is χαρίζομαι (*kárisomai*)

<sup>109</sup> Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1895).

pleasing nature, and an inclining disposition either in person or thing.”<sup>110</sup> Luke 1:30; 2:40, 52; Acts 2:47; 4:33; 7:46 are referred to as texts which use the word in this sense.

He then proceeds to speak of it as God’s grace and favor which excludes merit and is not hindered by guilt, but forgives sin. Among other texts, the following are quoted as supporting this idea. Romans 5:15: “But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the *grace* of God, and the gift by *grace*, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many.” Galatians 2:21: “I do not frustrate the *grace* of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.” Ephesians 3:2: “If ye have heard of the dispensation of the *grace* of God which is given me to you-ward.” And he concludes his discussion with the statement that grace is *spontaneous favor*.<sup>111</sup>

Also Cremer finds no use of the term in Scripture which can in any way be construed as applying to a grace which is *common*.

Following these analyses of the word “grace,” Rev. Herman Hoeksema also treats this concept extensively in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>112</sup>

He points out, first of all, that grace is an attribute of God.<sup>113</sup> God, says Hoeksema, is gracious in Himself. As proof of this use of grace in Scripture, he refers to Exodus 34:6: “And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth”; and I Peter 5:10: “But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.”

Hoeksema considers this to be an important point. He argues that God never becomes outside Himself what He is not, first of all, within His own triune covenant life. He is gracious *in Himself*. The grace that He reveals to sinners is the grace which He is *within His own being*. And so, such revelations of His grace, as He is pleased to show in Christ Jesus, are revelations of *His own perfections*.

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 573.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 574.

<sup>112</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966). This book can be purchased at the following page: <http://www.cprf.co.uk/bookstore/reformeddogmatics.htm>.

<sup>113</sup> In fact, his analysis of the term is found under the section dealing with the attributes of God.

Proceeding from this starting point, Hoeksema shows, first of all, that grace is always rooted in ethical goodness.<sup>114</sup> He quotes a number of passages to prove this. Among them are the following. Proverbs 22:11: “He that loveth pureness of heart, for the *grace* of his lips the king shall be his friend.” This is an important text in the argument, for it proves that pureness of heart and grace belong together. The one who loves pureness of heart has grace of lips. Psalm 45:2: “Thou art fairer than the children of men: *grace* is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever.” Ephesians 4:29: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister *grace* unto the hearers.” That is, grace is administered to hearers when we speak nothing corrupt, but speak good to the use of edifying. Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech be always with *grace*, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.”

Grace is, therefore, a beauty or excellence, a comeliness or attractiveness which is rooted in ethical perfection.

Secondly, grace is an *attitude of gracefulness*. In Acts 7:46, David is described as one “who found *favour* (or grace) before God.” The same is true of Mary as the angel assures her: “Thou hast found *favour* (or grace) with God” (Luke 1:30).

We must be sure that we understand this meaning of the term clearly. The idea is not so much that David or Mary were in themselves graceful in the sense that they were ethically pure and thus attractive—although this was surely, in a sense, true. But the idea is rather that God took an *attitude of favor* towards them. He was *favorably inclined* towards them. He *looked upon them with approval*.

It is at this point that the two ideas come together. Grace is attractiveness which is rooted in ethical perfection; but it is also an attitude of God towards men. Now this latter can mean two things. It may mean that the one who is gracious is ethically perfect. God is gracious because He is ethically perfect.

But, quite obviously, this idea does not do justice to the texts cited above in which Scripture states that David and Mary found grace in the sight of God. The idea is here that these two are the *objects* of God’s attitude of favor, of approval, of delight. The idea here is, then, that God’s attitude towards them is an attitude which cannot possibly be rooted in

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

themselves or in the kind of people they were. They were wicked and ethically impure.<sup>115</sup>

God is favorably inclined to them, therefore, because they were ethically perfect for *another* reason than the kind of people they *actually were*. They were ethically pure *objectively in Christ*, who died for them so that God sees them *in Christ*. But that great attitude of God's favor towards them *made them* ethically pure.

Hence, in the third place, grace is *undeserved* favor. This is repeated again and again in Scripture. It is sharply contrasted with works of any kind. It is never payment of a debt. It is never earned. It is the very opposite of works. This truth is emphatically stated in Romans 11:6: "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."<sup>116</sup> The same truth is stated in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."<sup>117</sup>

Finally, grace is the *power of salvation*.<sup>118</sup> It is, itself, the power whereby these blessings are actually *given* and *become the possession* of the people of God. It is that which *makes* the objects of God's grace ethically perfect as He is, by transforming them into saints and bestowing on them all the blessings of salvation.

It is clear how crucial the idea of ethical perfection is to the concept of grace. If it is true that ethical perfection always stands connected with grace, then it is also true that the term in Scripture cannot apply to any common attitude towards all men.

And so it is clear that the term *grace* in Scripture has reference only to the saving grace of God which is given through Jesus Christ to those who

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<sup>115</sup> Some effort is made to get around this by the defenders of common grace by asserting that God "loves the sinner, but hates his sin." The trouble with this distinction is that it is the *sinner* who sins. Sin is not an abstraction which hangs out in the air somewhere. Sin is *the activity of a person*. Not only that, but even more importantly, the sinner sins *because he is a sinner*. He *is*, in his own nature, totally depraved. He is ugly and repulsive, shot through with guilt, full of running sores. That kind of person God cannot love as a sinner.

<sup>116</sup> The last sentence of this verse is omitted in some translations. This is a mistake. The support for the verse as we have quoted it is very strong.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

belong to Christ's church. Never is there the slightest hint that this grace is "common," that it is shared with all alike, that all men are, in some sense, the objects of this grace. Scripture simply does not use the term in that sense at all.

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It is obvious from a study of the term *grace* in Scripture that grace is closely related to other attributes of God such as mercy, love, longsuffering, goodness, and the like. Kittel, e.g., treats the concept *mercy* along with *grace* on the grounds that the two are so closely related that they cannot be treated separately.<sup>119</sup> And Hoeksema also makes the point that these ethical virtues of God stand related to each other.

The defenders of common grace are quick to admit this. They insist that, because all men are the objects of God's grace, all men are also the objects of God's love, mercy, goodness, etc.

H. J. Kuiper, e.g., speaks of a grace *and love* shown to all men.<sup>120</sup> He goes on to explain how God can both hate and love the same person: "God hates the wicked *as wicked*, but He loves them as *His creatures*."<sup>121</sup> So bold is Kuiper on this point that he states:

There is no one here in this audience who can say, "God hates me." Suppose you knew that you will ultimately be lost; even then you could not say, "God does not care for me."<sup>122</sup>

Macleod speaks of God's *longsuffering* towards the world and insists that man receives blessings of divine benevolence.<sup>123</sup> Surprisingly, Macleod even goes so far as to say that God does not always love the elect, just as

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<sup>119</sup> Kittel, *loc. cit.*

<sup>120</sup> Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace: Three Sermons with Footnotes*. These sermons were delivered in Kuiper's congregation shortly after the controversy in the Christian Reformed Church which led to the expulsion of Rev. Herman Hoeksema. In the Foreword he states: "Our real purpose was to explain and defend the Three Points." See pp. 10, 11 where Kuiper explicitly states that God's love is towards all men.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>123</sup> Macleod, *Behold Your God*, p. 118.

He does not always hate the wicked: “His attitude to them (the elect, HH) is not simply one of love.”<sup>124</sup>

Henry Meeter insists that grace towards all men must be identified with God’s favor which includes goodness, kindness, longsuffering, love.<sup>125</sup>

John Murray is not at all reluctant (as some are) to root common grace in the atoning work of Christ: “Many benefits accrue to the non-elect from the redemptive work of Christ.”<sup>126</sup> Specific benefits upon the ungodly are expressions of God’s kindness and mercy.<sup>127</sup> He finds in Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27, 35 proof also for God’s love to the unregenerate:

[There] is a love in God that goes forth to lost men and is manifested in the manifold blessings which all men without distinction enjoy, a love in which non-elect persons are embraced, and a love that comes to its highest expression in the entreaties, overtures and demands of the gospel proclamation.<sup>128</sup>

The argument is, of course, correct, formally. Because God’s attributes are one in Him, they are to be treated together. God’s grace is surely inseparably connected to and a part of His love, kindness, goodness, mercy, longsuffering, etc. If anyone of them is common to all men, they are *all* common. If one is *particular*, however, they *all* are particular.

It would go beyond our present purposes to discuss in detail all these various attributes of God, which are mentioned and defined in Scripture, to show that in every case they are attributes which are shown *only to the elect*. There is a *prima facie* case to be made for the truth that always God is

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126. Macleod says this in spite of Scripture’s testimony: “The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee” (Jer. 31:3).

<sup>125</sup> Meeter, Henry, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing), p. 73.

<sup>126</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. I, p. 63. Not all defenders of common grace are prepared to admit that the blessings of common grace are rooted in the cross. Sietsma, e.g., claims that these blessings are not something given through the cross, but some original goodness is preserved in man from the beginning in the office which man continues to hold. See Sietsma, K., *The Idea of Office*, p. 33.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 66.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

particular in His grace and mercy, His love and favor. The argument consists of two lines of thought.

The first is this. If all these attributes are, indeed, inseparably related to grace, and if grace in Scripture is something shown only to the *elect*, then it follows that these other attributes, as well, are shown only to those chosen in Christ from eternity.

The second line of thought goes like this. God's attributes are never mere characteristics of God. They are *living, powerful, working* attributes. They are the virtues of the living God who does all things. If, e.g., grace is, itself, the *power* whereby we are saved, so also is this true of love and goodness. We love God *because* He first loved us. We are good *because* God is good to us. We are called to be kind towards one another *because* God is kind to us. God's attitude is never merely *attitude*, powerless to accomplish what it is in Him. When God is gracious to a man, that grace *permeates man's being* and *makes* him gracious. God's mercy is more than an attitude of pity and longing to deliver. It is a mighty power that *rescues* us from our own hell and makes us blessed. It is a serious injustice to God to make His attributes mere *attitudes*, such as *our* attributes are.

Nevertheless, it is not amiss to call attention to one other such attribute: the attribute of *longsuffering*. We choose this particular one because it especially is mentioned as referring to God's attitude of favor to all men. Three texts especially are quoted in support of the idea that longsuffering is an attribute of God which He shows to all men. The first is found in II Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."<sup>129</sup> The other two passages are found in Paul's epistle to the Romans. The first is 2:4: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?"<sup>130</sup> The second is 9:22: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?"

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<sup>129</sup> See, e.g., the extensive treatment of this passage in *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, written by John Murray and Ned Stonehouse as part of the Report to the 15<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1948.

<sup>130</sup> The text was quoted in support of the First Point of the Three Points of Common Grace adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924.

The Greek words for longsuffering are μακροθυμῶ (*makrothumeō*) in the verb form, and μακροθυμία (*makrothumia*) in the noun form. The words are used often in the New Testament both as an attribute of God and as an attribute of God's people.

To take the latter, first, God's people are called to be longsuffering towards one another in James 5:8: "Be ye also longsuffering;<sup>131</sup> stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh." The interesting part of this verse is that it is found in the context of a description of the sufferings of God's people at the hands of the wicked rich. They are told to be patient unto the coming of the Lord because the Lord Himself is longsuffering *towards them* (v. 7).<sup>132</sup>

In Hebrews 6:15, this attribute is applied to Abraham: "And so, after he had *patiently endured* ('had been longsuffering,' in the Greek), he obtained the promise."

In I Corinthians 13:4, love is said to be longsuffering; and in I Thessalonians 5:14, God's people are admonished to be "patient (i.e., longsuffering) towards all." In Colossians 1:11, longsuffering is said to be an attribute of God's people for which the apostle prays. In II Timothy 3:10, the apostle speaks of longsuffering as characteristic of his own life. This mention of longsuffering as an attribute of the believer is common in Scripture.<sup>133</sup>

It is worthy of note that in every case in which the word is used in the New Testament, it is used as an attribute of the *believer*. Never does the word refer to a characteristic of the *ungodly*. This is already significant because the believer is *recreated in the image of God*; and the clear implication is that the believer is called to reflect in his life (and does actually reflect) God's attribute of longsuffering to him. This would already suggest that God's attribute of longsuffering is one shown *only to His people*.

But a study of the word "longsuffering" as an attribute of God very clearly supports this idea.

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<sup>131</sup> The AV has "patient" here, but the Greek has the usual word longsuffering: μακροθυμήσατε (*makrothumēsate*).

<sup>132</sup> Again, in the description of longsuffering as an attribute of God, the AV uses the expression, "and hath *long patience* for it." We shall refer to this text a bit later in our discussion of longsuffering as God's attribute.

<sup>133</sup> See Hebrews 6:12, James 5:10, II Corinthians 6:6, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 4:2, Colossians 3:12, I Timothy 1:16 (this passage speaks of Jesus Christ showing forth all longsuffering in Paul), II Timothy 4:2.

This is true of James 5:7: “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath *long patience* (longsuffering) for it, until it receive the early and latter rain.”

As we noticed, the Lord is speaking here of the suffering which His people endure in the world. The question might arise why the Lord does not deliver them, but waits until the coming of Christ. James uses a parable to explain this. He compares God with a husbandman who waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being longsuffering, for the early and latter rain must first come before the harvest can be brought in. The fruit of the earth here refers to the full harvest of the elect, when all the elect will have been born and saved. Only then can Christ return.<sup>134</sup> The husbandman, as much as he would like to harvest his field as quickly as possible, knows that he must wait until the grain is ripe.<sup>135</sup> He endures the great threats to his harvest because he knows that if he harvests his crop too early, the harvest will be spoiled. So, also, God is longsuffering towards His people in their distress, while He waits for the full harvest to come.

In Luke 18:7, the same idea of longsuffering on God’s part is vividly described. The widow who sought redress for wrongs done to her found an uncaring judge. It was only, finally, when she refused to cease pestering him that he was moved to help her and avenge her against her enemies. By way of application of the parable, Jesus says, “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he *bear long* (is longsuffering) with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.” It is, therefore, because of the longsuffering of God that Jesus tells us that we “ought always to pray, and not to faint.”

The same use of longsuffering is used in I Peter 3:20. We quote the entire passage:

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<sup>134</sup> The figure of a harvest to depict the salvation of the elect is common in Scripture. See Revelation 14:14-17 and Matthew 13:39-43.

<sup>135</sup> I well remember, when working on the farm in Montana, how true this was. The grain was not ready till early September. But in that high altitude, snow could come at any time and destroy the harvest before it was reaped. Every morning the farmer for whom I worked would anxiously go to his field to see whether the grain was sufficiently ripe for harvesting. But he would return to tell us that we had to wait yet a bit. When finally it was ready, everyone, in great excitement, would hurry to the fields to begin the combining.

For Christ hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water (vv. 18-20).

Apart from the difficulties of verse 19 in particular, it is clear from the passage that in the days of Noah also the true people of God were hard pressed by their enemies. In fact, so great was the pressure of the wicked world that by the time the flood came only eight souls were left among the believers. During that terrible time of suffering, Noah was building the ark in which he was saved. God did not deliver them immediately from their sufferings, because He had His own appointed time for their deliverance in the ark by the flood. But during that time of persecution God was *longsuffering towards His people*. When the time came for deliverance, God came in judgment upon the world and saved His church.

It is this idea which also stands on the foreground in II Peter 3:9. As we noticed earlier, this text is often quoted in support of God's favorable attitude of longsuffering towards all men.<sup>136</sup> The idea is, then, that God postpones deserved judgment because He earnestly seeks the salvation of all men. Only when men have clearly shown that they want no part of salvation does this longsuffering change to wrath.

Yet the text teaches nothing of the sort. In fact, it is quite difficult to see how this text can be quoted in support of God's attitude of graciousness or longsuffering to all men.

The theme of this passage is much like that in James 5, to which we referred earlier. The saints to whom Peter is writing were enduring severe persecution. It is clear from this chapter that the saints were expecting an early return of the Lord and were, in fact, puzzled by what seemed to them an unnecessary delay of this great event. Peter explains that God never delays, for He is not slack concerning His promise. The explanation is to

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<sup>136</sup> It is argued that God is longsuffering towards all men in this respect: that God *wants all men to be saved*.

be found in God's *longsuffering*. That longsuffering, Peter emphatically states, is to "*us-ward*"; that is, it is a longsuffering towards Peter and the saints to whom he is writing. That longsuffering reveals itself in this, that God is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." The reference is very obviously to the church which is yet to be born. We must remember that the number of the elect, destined to inherit the new heavens and the new earth, is a *fixed number*, determined eternally by God. That number of elect is not merely a conglomeration of individuals, an arbitrary group of people; it is the *body* of Christ, which with Christ constitutes the organism of the church. So completely is that organism one, that if one individual in it should not be saved, it would be impossible that *any* be saved. All the elect go to heaven, or none goes to heaven. And so Christ cannot return for salvation until every one comes to repentance. This is why the Lord cannot come as yet. And this is why God bears the sufferings of His people with much longsuffering. He endures their agony in the interests of their salvation.

That this is the meaning is indicated further by the fact that just a few verses later Peter writes: "And account that the longsuffering of our Lord *is salvation*" (v. 15). This is a strong statement. It means that God's longsuffering is identical with salvation. It is the same thing *as* salvation. When longsuffering is showed to a man, that constitutes his *salvation*. In the light of that strong statement, it is difficult to see how longsuffering can still be said to indicate God's attitude towards all men.

We come now to the two difficult passages which seem to indicate that longsuffering is not particular, but general. I refer to Romans 2:4 and Romans 9:22. To these we now turn.

Romans 9:22, to take this passage first, reads: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction?"

It would seem, on the surface of it, that the objects of God's longsuffering are the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. And yet, a closer look at the passage surely indicates that this cannot be. We call attention to the following objections:

- 1) We have, first of all, the broader context of Scripture itself in the light of which this verse must be considered. We have noticed that, with the exception of these two passages in Romans, every use of this term in the New Testament, as it is applied to God, indicates that God's longsuffering is *particular*, i.e., only for the elect. And we ought not to

forget Peter's strong statement that God's longsuffering *is salvation*. We must be careful to interpret Scripture in the light of Scripture. It would be strange to find that most of Scripture teaches that God's longsuffering is only towards His people, then suddenly to find a passage where this is not true. This is all the more the case when we remember that longsuffering is *salvation*. No one would want to maintain the position that the vessels of wrath, objects of God's longsuffering, are in fact *saved*.

2) The immediate context in verse 23 makes sharp distinction between the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction and the vessels of mercy, through whom God is pleased to make known the riches of His glory, and who are, in fact, afore prepared unto glory. Verse 23 is the continuation of the thought in verse 22, and verse 22 must take verse 23 into account.

3) The relation between verses 22 and 23 is all the more important when we consider that the word "longsuffering" in verse 22 is, in the Greek, in the form of a prepositional phrase: ἐν πολλῇ μακροθυμίᾳ (*en pollē makrothumia*). The text can, therefore, be translated: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured, in abundant longsuffering (or, perhaps even better, *while being abundant in longsuffering*), the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." The text, translated in this way, would not necessarily teach that God's longsuffering is towards the *vessels of wrath*.

In keeping, therefore, with the rest of Scripture, it is better to refer the phrase concerning God's "longsuffering" to His attitude towards the elect while He was enduring the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. This interpretation is certainly plausible if we consider that the apostle uses the word ἤνεγκεν (*ēnenken*) to indicate God's attitude towards the vessels of wrath. Although this idea is not very common in Scripture, it apparently refers to the very *opposite* of God's longsuffering. God *endures* the vessels of wrath, in contrast to His longsuffering towards His people. This endurance is *for the sake of His people*. As the wickedness of the world increases and evil is increasingly rampant, one often wonders why God does not come in judgment upon the workers of iniquity who transgress God's law, openly mock His precepts, and trample His commandments under foot. The only answer is that God endures their sin for a time. He does this, not to give them a chance to repent, which is an old Arminian interpretation; but He endures their sin *because the elect must still be gathered*. And until these are gathered, God cannot destroy the world.

4) Finally, the entire context is opposed to the interpretation that would make longsuffering apply to all men. When Israel was rejected, this was not because the Word of God had taken none effect (v. 6). God was accomplishing His purpose, “for they are not all Israel which are of Israel.” That purpose of God is to be found in election and reprobation. The elder (Esau) in the family of Isaac is to serve the younger (Jacob). And this is because God *loves* Jacob and *hates* Esau. Can Esau, whom God hates, be the object of God’s *longsuffering*?

And so it is throughout time. God has mercy on whom He will have mercy. Pharaoh was raised up and hardened that God might show His power in him (vv. 11-18). How can longsuffering be shown to those whom God *hardens*? Is *hardening* an indication of longsuffering? How can that be? God, willing to show His wrath, endures the vessels of wrath who are fitted to destruction. But He is longsuffering to the *vessels of mercy*. After all, they live in the world surrounded by the hatred of the vessels of wrath. They suffer greatly. They are led as sheep to the slaughter. God longs to deliver them, and, indeed, suffers *with* them. God also is impatient to pour out His wrath upon the wicked. But all must wait until the last elect is born and saved so that the riches of God’s glory might be revealed in them whom He had afore prepared to glory.

Romans 2:4 is also said to teach that longsuffering is an attribute of God towards the ungodly. The passage itself reads: “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?”

But there are obvious problems with this interpretation. We call attention to the following.

1) Nowhere does the text say that the *reprobate wicked* are the objects of God’s longsuffering. The text merely asserts that men *despise* God’s *longsuffering*. It can perhaps be argued that if men *despise* such longsuffering, this must mean that they are the “objects” of it. But such is not necessarily the case. It is surely possible that the wicked despise this attribute of God even though they are *not* the objects of it. I may, e.g., despise the wealth of a man without possessing that wealth myself. Or I may despise marital love in general, and the specific instance of it I see in my neighbour, without myself being married. This is the more plausible in connection with the longsuffering of God when we consider that the wicked *always* despise God with all their hearts. And, in despising God, they despise also all His *attributes*.

2) The argument that this text supports common grace is based on the statement that God's goodness leads to repentance. But surely this does not prove an attitude of goodness on the part of God to all. The text, so interpreted, proves too much. The text does not say that God's goodness *wants to* lead all men to repentance. Nor does it say that God's goodness *attempts to* lead all men to repentance. It emphatically states that God's goodness *does lead* to repentance. The interpretation of those who hold that this goodness is shown to all men proves too much. It says more than even the most passionate defenders of common grace want to say.

3) The passage is addressed to "man" in general: "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O *man* ..." (v. 1). "And thinkest thou this, O *man*..." (v. 3). Paul is here including all men, whether Jew or Gentile, under the severe judgment of God.

When all are included under the just judgment of God, then does God's grace towards His people become manifest. The following verses make that clear.

But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: for there is no respect of persons with God (vv. 5-11).

Thus the point is that Jew and Gentile are treated alike, for all come under God's just judgment. But to the contentious and those who do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, comes *wrath*—whether they are Jew or Gentile. And to those who work good, whether Jew or Gentile,

comes *blessing*. These (that “worketh good”) are those, among the general “O *man*,” who are led to repentance by the goodness of God.

And so we conclude our study of these terms. The Scriptures themselves are clear on the matter. God’s virtues of grace, love, mercy, longsuffering, and goodness are always *particular*.<sup>137</sup>



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<sup>137</sup> We shall have occasion to consider the attributes of love and goodness later on in this study.



## BLESSINGS FOR ALL MEN? (I)

**W**E HAVE thus far discussed the meaning of various concepts such as *grace*, *mercy*, *longsuffering*, etc.—all of which are related to the subject of common grace. We now enter into the substance of the idea of common grace.

Although the whole concept of common grace involves many different subjects,<sup>138</sup> we turn our attention in this article to the good gifts which all men receive in this life. The question which confronts us is: *Are these good gifts God's grace which is common to all?*

It is pointed out repeatedly by those who hold to common grace that the unregenerate receive many good things from God: rain and sunshine, health and strength, riches and prosperity, the privilege of living in a land where people are able to live in peace, etc. These good things, which all men without distinction receive, are said to be evidences of God's grace to all men. The very fact that these gifts are good and are sent by God is indicative of God's favor and grace.

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<sup>138</sup> A list of such subjects would include: the relation between common grace and the atonement of Jesus Christ, the free offer of the gospel, the internal operations of the Spirit in the hearts of all men, the restraint of sin, and the civic good of the ungodly.

The question is somewhat complicated by the fact that many have spoken of God's *providence* as "common grace." God providentially bestows many good things on men. This providential bestowal of good gifts is often called "common grace." Does God's providential bestowal of good gifts imply an *attitude of favor*? Many say not. Can these good gifts then be called *grace*? As we noticed in the previous chapter, grace indeed refers to an "attitude of favor." Providence itself, therefore, is not grace in the biblical sense of that term.

The question which we face in this article is: *Does Scripture teach that God's good gifts are evidences of His favor?*

### A Statement of the Idea

So that we may have a clear understanding of what is meant by common grace as "the good gifts of God," we turn to various defenders of this position to hear what they have to say on the matter.

Already in 1924 when the Christian Reformed Church adopted the well-known "Three Points of Common Grace," the Synod spoke of "the favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect," and "a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general."<sup>139</sup> In support of this teaching, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church quoted Psalm 145:9; Matthew 5:44-45; Luke 6:35-35; and Acts 14:16, 17.

This same idea can be found in various writings of supporters of common grace, and this idea is made explicit in its application to various spheres of life.

Herman Bavinck speaks of the fact that the *continued existence of the wicked* is due to common grace, by which he means that God's favor to the wicked is evident in the fact that the wicked are *not destroyed immediately*.<sup>140</sup> This grace of God was especially shown in the *preservation of the nations*

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<sup>139</sup> Quoted from Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (1947), p. 317.

<sup>140</sup> Bavinck, "Common Grace," tr. by R. C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal*, p. 40.

*outside Israel during the Old Testament*, and was with a view to the salvation of a catholic church.<sup>141</sup>

This last idea of Bavinck is an important aspect of common grace to which he returns when he states that common grace “prepares the way” in the whole creation and in the human race for special grace by which the whole cosmos is saved.<sup>142</sup>

Bavinck places great emphasis on this “preparatory” aspect of common grace, for he discusses the same idea elsewhere. He writes:

It is common grace which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service.<sup>143</sup>

Louis Berkhof treats common grace in detail and points out that, by it, he means God’s attribute of grace which “appears also in the natural blessings which God showers upon man in the present life.”<sup>144</sup> Further, he states: common grace is revealed in “those general blessings, such as rain and sunshine, food and drink, clothing and shelter, which God imparts to all men indiscriminately where and in what measure it seems good to Him.”<sup>145</sup>

In summarizing Herman Hoeksema’s views of common grace, James Bratt castigates Hoeksema for holding a view which says that

those things usually seen as common gifts from God—a man’s talents, for instance, and the bounties of nature—were blessings only to the elect but curses to the reprobate since they were merely means to spiritual ends.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60ff.

<sup>143</sup> Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, p. 38.

<sup>144</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 435.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>146</sup> Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, p. 111.

Without any proof that Hoeksema was indeed haunted, Bratt insists that “in a phrase that came to haunt Hoeksema, it was ‘utterly inconceivable’ that God could show any favor to the reprobate.”<sup>147</sup>

H. J. Kuiper, shortly after the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church made its decisions on common grace, preached a series of sermons in support of the doctrines outlined in the Three Points.<sup>148</sup> He defines common grace as “the grace or favor which God, for the sake of Christ and His Church, shows to those who do not possess saving grace and through which He ... postpones their merited judgment ... bestows temporal blessings upon them ...”<sup>149</sup> In connecting common grace with the free offer of the gospel, Kuiper says: “He sends the wicked earthly blessings as the fruits of His kindness, in order to convince them of His sincere willingness to bestow upon them the greater gift of salvation in Christ.”<sup>150</sup>

Donald Macleod insists that common grace includes blessings enjoyed by the reprobate and explains this in terms of God’s love for all. God does not always love the elect, Macleod says, just as He does not always hate the wicked. “His attitude towards them (the elect, HH) is not simply one of love.”<sup>151</sup> Apart from our discussion of God’s good gifts, it is horrible to contemplate that God does not always love us. What assurance do we have that we shall finally be saved if this is the case?

John Murray not only speaks of the outward blessings of grace shown in the good things of life, but he does not hesitate, as some have,<sup>152</sup> to connect these blessings to the cross of Christ. Because of Murray’s influence over the years, we quote him at some length.

Murray too believes that common grace and special grace are related. Although common grace has other purposes, one surely is that it

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace: Three Sermons with Footnotes* (1925). In the forward, Kuiper says: “Our real purpose was to explain and defend the Three Points ...”

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. For Kuiper, this is evidence of God’s *universal love*. He writes: “There is no one here in this audience who can say, ‘God hates me.’ Suppose you knew that you will ultimately be lost; even then you could not say, ‘God does not care for me.’”

<sup>151</sup> Macleod, *Behold Your God*, pp. 117, 126.

<sup>152</sup> Cf., e.g., K. Sietsma, *The Idea of the Office*, pp. 27, 33.

“provides the sphere of operation of special grace and special grace therefore provides a rationale of common grace.”<sup>153</sup>

In discussing the benefits which all receive by virtue of common grace, Murray writes:

Many benefits accrue to the non-elect from the redemptive work of Christ. There is more than one consideration to establish this proposition. Many blessings are dispensed to men indiscriminately because God is fulfilling his redemptive purpose in the world. Much in the way of order, equity, benevolence, and mercy is the fruit of the gospel, and the gospel is God’s redemptive revelation centered in the gift of his Son. Believers are enjoined to “do good to all men” (Gal. 6:10) and compliance has a beneficial result. But their identity as believers proceeds from redemption ... Furthermore, we must remember that all the good dispensed to this world is dispensed within the mediatorial dominion of Christ. He is given all authority in heaven and in earth and he is head over all things. But he is given this dominion as the reward of his obedience unto death (cf. Phil. 2:8, 9), and his obedience unto death is but one way of characterizing what we mean by the atonement. Thus all the good showered on this world, dispensed by Christ in the exercise of his exalted lordship, is related to the death of Christ and accrues to man in one way or another from the death of Christ. If so, it was designed to accrue from the death of Christ. Since many of these blessings fall short of salvation and are enjoyed by many who never become the possessors of salvation, we must say that the design of Christ’s death is more inclusive than the blessings that belong specifically to the atonement. This is to say

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<sup>153</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. II, p. 116. See also p. 113.

that even the non-elect are embraced in the design of the atonement in respect of those blessings falling short of salvation which they enjoy in this life. This is equivalent to saying that the atonement sustains this reference to the non-elect and it would not be improper to say that, in respect of what is entailed for the non-elect, Christ died for them.<sup>154</sup>

After referring to Hebrews 10:26-27, Hebrews 6:4-5, and II Peter 2:20-22 in support of this view, Murray goes on to say:

But this suffices to show that there are benefits accruing from the death of Christ for those who finally perish. And in view of this we may say that in respect of these benefits Christ may be said to have died for those who are the beneficiaries. In any case it is incontrovertible that even those who perish are the partakers of numberless benefits that are the fruits of Christ's death and that, therefore, Christ's death sustains to them this beneficial reference, a beneficial reference, however, that does not extend beyond this life.<sup>155</sup>

Explaining Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27, 35, Murray writes:

There is a love in God that goes forth to lost men and is manifested in the manifold blessings which all men without distinction enjoy, a love in which non-elect persons are embraced, and a love that comes to its highest expression in the entreaties, overtures and demands of gospel proclamation.<sup>156</sup>

In explaining further the relation between these benefits to the ungodly and the atonement, Murray states that "the non-elect enjoy many benefits

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<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 63-64.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

that accrue *from* the atonement but they do not partake of the *atonement*.”<sup>157</sup> Thus, a distinction is to be made in the love of God. The love of benevolence is love which saves; the love of complacency is love which is conditional.<sup>158</sup>

Differing from Charles Hodge, Murray wants a broader definition of common grace: “Any gift or favor bestowed upon, and enjoyed by creatures”; “gifts bestowed upon other creatures as well as upon men”; “every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”<sup>159</sup>

Taking his cue from Herman Kuiper, Murray distinguishes between a *universal* common grace “which is common to all the creatures who make up this sin-cursed world ... a grace which touches creatures as creatures”; a *general* common grace which is “common to all human beings in distinction from the rest of God’s creatures ... a grace which pertains to men as men”; and a *covenant* common grace which is “common to all elect and non-elect covenant members.”<sup>160</sup>

Among many other elements, common grace also includes the fact that the creation is the recipient of divine bounty<sup>161</sup> and that men themselves are the recipients of favor and goodness.<sup>162</sup> The benefits mentioned in Hebrews 6 are “non-saving grace at its very apex.”<sup>163</sup>

We need not quote any more from proponents of common grace. The ideas referred to above are commonly and generally held.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 96.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>164</sup> Cf., e.g., David Silversides, *Paper on Common Grace*, (unpublished), pp. 35, 47; Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinist Conception of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), pp. 239, 240; John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing The Word Of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*, (Brentwood, TN, Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), pp. 130, 131; *et. al.*

A summary of the views of proponents of common grace with respect to the question of God's good gifts to men would include the following elements: 1) Common grace is identified with many other attributes of God, all of which are also common. We may mention specifically, love, mercy, kindness, benevolence, favor, and longsuffering. 2) This grace or favor is shown to a) God's creatures in the brute creation, b) mankind in general, c) both elect and non-elect within the covenant.<sup>165</sup> 3) The blessings of common grace include the continued existence of the wicked in the world, the natural bounties of the creation, man's talents, and a postponement of judgment. 4) Common grace prepares the way for special grace. While it is not always clear precisely what is meant by this, it seems as if those who teach this idea refer not only to the fact that common grace creates a climate in which the gospel can be preached successfully, but that also the effects of common grace have some *internal* significance upon man to make him more receptive to the gospel.<sup>166</sup> 5) Murray especially maintains that common grace is rooted in the atonement and endeavors to prove that the atonement is an expression of God's love for all men. 6) Various texts from Scripture are quoted in support of these positions.

## Various Problems

Before we enter into an analysis of these views, we note that it is clear that the whole presentation creates serious problems, especially for the child of God. We intend to treat in detail not only the different aspects of this view of common grace, but also the texts used in support of it. But before we do so, questions naturally arise which are scarcely, if ever, treated in connection with this doctrine

One of the great questions is: *If the natural bounties of the creation are grace or favor or love towards the non-elect, how does one explain the judgments of God in the creation?* Not only does God send rain and sunshine, He also sends floods

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<sup>165</sup> There is some difference of opinion on the question of whether the elect also are the recipients of common grace, or whether common grace is only bestowed on the reprobate, with the elect recipients only of special grace.

<sup>166</sup> Common grace convinces men of God's willingness to save them. Cf. Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace*, p. 15.

and drought. Not only does God send flourishing crops, He also sends hail and insects. Not only does God send fair weather, but He also sends foul weather in tornados and hurricanes which leave paths of destruction in their wake. It is true that parts of the world experience peace, but war rages in other parts, leaving devastation, starvation, and death in countless villages and cities. The judgments which God sends seem oftentimes to be more widespread and seem to affect more people than the bounties of nature. America is, generally, wealthy and enjoys a level of prosperity not found elsewhere in the world. But poverty and sickness, starvation and war, natural disasters of every sort, and pestilences of every kind are present throughout the world. Is God more gracious to America than to those in the slums of Argentina? Is God more gracious to the farmers of the Midwest than to the suffering people in Bosnia? Is the Nile Delta blessed while the Sahara is cursed?

The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that both prosperity and calamity are the lot of all. Not only do the elect enjoy prosperity, but also the reprobate—which is obvious and forms the ground of common grace. But the opposite is also true. Not only do the reprobate receive God's judgments, but the calamities of judgment come upon the elect as well. If God has His people throughout the world, the elect in Bangladesh suffer as well as the wicked.

How is all this to be explained?

The problem becomes acute if one looks at it from the viewpoint of the personal experience of the people of God. If prosperity is to be equated with favor and love, then it would seem to follow that adversity and suffering must be equated with hatred and the curse. And if this proposition is true, then God both loves *and* hates the wicked, but also, as Macleod claims,<sup>167</sup> God both loves *and hates* the righteous.

This problem becomes the more pressing when we consider what Asaph wrote as a general principle for all time. As far as the wicked are concerned, Asaph “saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men ... Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish ... Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches” (Ps. 73:3-5, 7, 12). But as far as the righteous are concerned, Asaph opines that

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<sup>167</sup> See above.

he has cleansed his heart in vain, and washed his hands in innocency, “for all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning” (Ps. 73:13-14). So great a grief was this to the Psalmist (i.e., before he understood the matter rightly) that he could not bear to think about it, for it was too painful for him (v. 16). And, indeed, if natural gifts *are* to be equated with blessings, then the admonition of Psalm 37 rings hollow: “Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity” (v. 1).

This is a problem of no small import. When a godly farmer sees his wicked neighbour receive an abundant harvest while his own land lies stricken with drought, he can only conclude that the blessing of the Lord rests on the wicked while he, himself, is cursed. Where, then, is the experience of God’s love for him? It vanishes with the hailstorm that destroys his crops. And for the prosperity of the wicked he has no solution.

It may perhaps be argued that the conclusion I drew above that grace is in the mere possession of earthly and natural gifts is unwarranted. But consider the fact that all the proponents of this view insist that these natural bounties are, *in themselves*, evidences of God’s favor and love. It may further be argued that, while natural bounties are blessings, natural calamities may not necessarily be construed as curses. But consider then the conclusion that these calamities and natural disasters are blessings upon all. Can this ever be a tenable position? No one in his right mind would claim such.

The problem is aggravated again by a consideration of the final judgment of hell which comes to the wicked. No man who is in any respect Reformed denies that the wicked are to be sentenced to everlasting judgment in hell.<sup>168</sup> The question will not disappear: How can God love a man in this life, show him kindness and mercy, give him favor and grace, bestow upon him countless good gifts, and then, when the man dies, throw him into hell?

The answer to this may very well be that God punishes a man for his rejection and misuse of the good gifts which he has received. And this is surely true. But the fact remains that this leaves us with a *changeable* God who loves men in this life and destroys them when they die. There is a

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<sup>168</sup> Increasingly in evangelical circles eternal punishment in hell is being denied. Is this perhaps the natural outcome of a commitment to common grace?

kind of cruel irony in this: God manifests His love in countless ways to ungodly sinners, but hurls them into hell when they depart this life. And again, if God is thus changeable, and bounties are blessings while calamities are curses, how does the righteous man know that perhaps God will not also change with respect to him and cast him at last into hell? If people whom God loves can be punished in hell, perhaps the same fate awaits the Christian.

The whole matter comes down to the question of whether God is, Himself, *changeable*. Reformed theology has always insisted that God's "eternity" implies His *immutability*. God is the *changeless One*: "For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6). It is, after all, a cruel God who loves men in this life and puts them in hell for eternity.

One could wish that the proponents of common grace would give an answer to these perplexing problems.

All this brings up the question of God's hatred. That Scripture speaks of God's hatred against the wicked is evident. Psalm 5:5 is decisive: "The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity."

Sometimes there is some confusion on this question. The confusion lies in the failure to distinguish properly between wrath and hatred. God is, indeed, filled with wrath against the wicked; but He is also angry with His people. David complains: "O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure" (Psalm 38:1). Yet, in His wrath towards His people, God still *loves* them. This is evident from the following considerations. 1) Wrath is not incompatible with love. A father may be very angry with his son who walks in sin and may, as a result of that anger, *chasten* his son. But this anger and chastisement, if it is godly, is a manifestation of *love*. In fact, the opposite is also true. If an earthly father did not chasten his son for wrongdoing, but allowed his son to continue in a way of sin, this would not be a manifestation of love at all, but of hatred. His hatred would be evident in his utter unconcern for the spiritual welfare of his son. It is love which makes him angry. 2) The text itself speaks exactly of such chastisement. As is so often true in the Psalms, Psalm 38:1 is also an incident of Hebrew parallelism. The last clause of the text is an explanation of the first. God's wrath is His hot displeasure, and God's rebuke is His chastisement. When His people walk in sin, God does not, in love, allow them to continue in their sins, but He turns them again to Himself through the rod of His chastisement. Chastisement hurts; it

hurts very much; it hurts so much that David fears it, as is evident in his anguished plea. But this does not alter the fact that chastisement is visited upon sons, for “whom the Lord loveth be chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Heb. 12:6).

But hatred is different from wrath. Hatred *includes* wrath—of course, God’s wrath is upon the wicked reprobate, but the wrath of God upon the wicked is *hatred*, not love. Only *sons* are chastened in love. “If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you *as with sons*; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (Heb. 12:7).

How is it possible for the proponents of common grace to deal with these questions?<sup>169</sup>

### Is the Atonement for All?

The problem of the relation between common grace and the atonement of Christ has always been a perplexing one. Those especially who have stood in the Reformed tradition have hesitated to say that common grace is merited for the wicked in the cross of Jesus Christ. Their hesitancy has reflected their fear of universalizing the atoning work of the Savior.

There is good reason for this hesitancy. It strikes at the very nature of the atonement. The Reformed churches, both on the continent and in the British Isles, who have stood in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation, have understood the Scriptures properly that the death of Christ was a *substitutionary* work of Christ so that He stood in the place of those for whom He died, bearing the wrath of God for them and paying the full penalty for sin. The atonement of Christ is so complete and perfect that for those for whom Christ died, sin and guilt exist no longer and righteousness and everlasting blessedness is merited for them.

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<sup>169</sup> It is true that increasingly in evangelical circles what is called “process theology” has come to the fore. This view of God sets aside God’s attributes, especially His attribute of immutability, and teaches that God only reacts with favor or disapproval to what man does with God’s good gifts. This is a denial of God’s eternity and unchangeable being. Has common grace brought about this view of God?

Thus the work of Christ accomplished two things: Christ bore away all the wrath of God against those for whom Christ died; and Christ, by His perfect obedience, secured all the fullness of salvation.

Those who taught (and teach) that the atonement of Christ is for every man head for head are, of necessity, compelled to alter this essential characteristic of Christ's atoning work. They stand confronted with the obvious fact that not all men are actually forgiven and not all men are saved. But if not all men are forgiven and if not all men are saved, then Christ did not secure for them who are not saved forgiveness of sins and everlasting blessedness. Hence, those who promote universal salvation must fall back on a different conception of the atonement.

Various theories of the atonement have been suggested over the years<sup>170</sup> and it is not our intention to discuss this question in detail. The works written on the subject are many. But, whatever the particular theory may be, the heart of it all is that Christ accomplished only one thing on the cross: He only made salvation *available* for all. He did not actually *secure* forgiveness and salvation; He only made these gifts *available*. They actually become the possession of those who, hearkening to the overtures of the gospel, accept Christ as their Savior by an act of their own will.

This conception is sheer Arminianism, and Reformed people have always, with good reason, shied away from it and condemned it as useless for their salvation. It has been well said: "A Christ for all is a Christ for no one."

This is the dilemma which the proponents of common grace necessarily face. God is a holy God who hates sin and must, to preserve His essential holiness, punish the sinner with death both temporal and eternal. If God would do anything to the sinner but punish him, His holiness would be besmirched and He would no longer be God. The only possibility for God's favor to rest upon man is if someone would come to bear himself the punishment which is justly due the sinner. This is the work Christ accomplished.

But now, so common grace teaches, God loves all men, is kind and merciful to them, bestows upon them many good gifts in this life, and blesses them with many temporal blessings which flow from the fountain of His grace and mercy. He loves and blesses those who are not saved and

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<sup>170</sup> As, e.g., the "moral" theory of the atonement, or the "governmental" theory of the atonement.

bestows good gifts on those who go to hell. How can this love and favor of God come upon those for whom Christ did not die and for whom Christ did not earn blessing?

It is obvious that such favor and blessing cannot come apart from the cross. And so, sensing the force of the problem, many have concluded that the death of Christ is, after all, for all men in some sense of the word.

This is the position which John Murray takes:

Many benefits accrue to the non-elect from the redemptive work of Christ ... Thus all the good showered on this world, dispensed by Christ in the exercise of his exalted lordship, is related to the death of Christ and accrues to man in one way or another from the death of Christ. If so, it was designed to accrue from the death of Christ ... This is to say that even the non-elect are embraced in the design of the atonement in respect of those blessings falling short of salvation which they enjoy in this life ... [It] would not be improper to say that, in respect of what is entailed for the non-elect, Christ died for them ... [It] is incontrovertible that even those who perish are partakers of numberless benefits that are the fruits of Christ's death ...<sup>171</sup>

The idea is, therefore, that while Christ actually accomplished salvation full and complete only for the elect, the suffering and death of Christ was so stupendous in its efficacy that *additional* blessings were also merited for the non-elect. It is (the figure is mine) as if Christ filled to overflowing the cup of salvation, but the overflowing blessings fall upon the reprobate as well.

But there are serious objections to such a conception of the cross.

On the one hand, it seems impossible for these blessings of common grace to come to the reprobate apart from the cross. If these blessings are rooted in God's love and mercy and are expressions of His favor, such love, mercy, and favor *can* come only through the cross.

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<sup>171</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings*, I, pp. 63-65.

On the other hand, it is impossible to see how these blessings, which are in their very nature of a temporal kind, can be merited by Christ when He died for *sin*.

The very first objection is that this view has *no scriptural basis*. It is a logical deduction without biblical foundation.<sup>172</sup> It is striking that Murray offers not one shred of evidence from Scripture for such a universalizing of the atonement. He argues for it in this way: 1) 'The reprobate receive many blessings; 2) These blessings flow from the love and mercy of God; 3) There can be no love and mercy for anyone apart from the cross; 4) Therefore, in some sense, Christ died for every man. This is, in itself, sound argumentation; the problem is with the first premise: "The reprobate receive many *blessings*." This is simply not true.<sup>173</sup> And, if the first premise is not true, the need for a universal atonement is not true. We may safely conclude that Scripture gives not the slightest hint that Christ's meritorious work on the cross accomplished the meriting of temporal blessings for all mankind.

Secondly, the question is one of *merit*. The Scriptures teach that the work of Christ is meritorious. He earned and merited for the elect that which they could not merit for themselves. He did this great work in obedience to the Father. The elect were given Him from all eternity as His own possession. When He died on the cross, the names of all His elect were in His heart and thought. He consciously and willingly died for each one of them. "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (John 13:1). "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep ... As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14-15).

This is a great blessedness for God's people. They, when by faith they flee to the cross for their salvation, know and understand that their names were on the lips of Christ when He entered into the depths of hell to die for them. He loves them more than any other person can possibly love them. When, therefore, Christ cried out: "It is finished," the believer understands that 2000 years ago on Calvary all his sins were completely

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<sup>172</sup> It is ironic that those who hold to common grace often accuse the Protestant Reformed Churches of "rationalism," while they themselves often argue rationalistically.

<sup>173</sup> We have not discussed this question as yet, but we will do so further into our discussion.

taken away so that they exist no longer. At that point all his sins are gone, completely gone, forevermore. Salvation full and free was earned for him so that he can look forward in certainty to everlasting blessedness in heaven. Christ merited this for him.

If then, the cross of Christ was also for the reprobate, did Christ have also all the names of the reprobate in His heart and mind? When He said to God: “I offer the perfect sacrifice for the sins of My people by enduring the fury of Thy wrath,” did He also say, “Father, I offer myself as the sacrifice for those who are not Thy people in order that I may earn for them temporal blessings, even though their end is hell?” This is manifestly absurd.

Thirdly, one may carry this whole idea back to God Himself and His love, mercy, and grace, for that is our starting point when we discuss this question of common grace: common grace flows from a universal love, mercy, and grace.

Did God out of His own eternal and sovereign love for the elect give them to Christ so that Christ might accomplish salvation for them? That is the heart of salvation, and, indeed, this is the blessed truth to which every child of God clings. But, in addition to that, did God give also the reprobate to Christ from all eternity, out of eternal love, in order that Christ might also die for them—even though the death of God’s own Son is for temporal blessings for the reprobate and their end at last the suffering of hell?

Put in this form, it becomes obvious that such cannot be the case. We may, rather abstractly, discuss the extent and the design of the atonement; but put in the concrete form of the believer’s relation to Christ, the whole question strikes at the heart of his faith.

Finally, although the proponents of this universalizing of Christ’s atonement are careful to limit it in such a way that only certain temporal blessings are earned for the reprobate, the fact remains that once having universalized the atonement, even in a limited way, the outcome is bound to be a complete universalizing of the atonement so that the Arminian position is once again brought into the church and a Christ for all is preached from every pulpit. Then salvation is not *accomplished*; it is only *available*, and salvation depends upon the will of man.

Various distinctions have been made to try to justify a line of argumentation which makes temporal blessings flow from the cross. Such distinctions have been applied to the love of God. Murray, e.g.,

distinguishes between a love of benevolence which saves and a love of complacency which is conditional.<sup>174</sup>

Similar distinctions have been made in the atonement of Christ, distinctions between such ideas as the extent of the atonement, the design or intent of the atonement, the efficacy of the atonement, etc. Very clearly, Murray speaks of the design of the atonement as being inclusive of the reprobate, although he uses also the term “extent” when he speaks of the blessings which God sends to the reprobate. He writes:

The topic is sometimes spoken of as the design of the atonement. In the discussion the term ‘design’ is frequently the appropriate and convenient term. But there is also an advantage in the term ‘extent’; it has a denotative quality and serves to point up the crux of the question: who are embraced in that which the atonement actually accomplished? For whom were obedience, sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption designed?<sup>175</sup>

Another distinction is made between temporal blessings and eternal blessings, the former for all men, the latter for the elect only. But whether the blessings are temporal or eternal, they remain *blessings* for all that.

Yet another distinction has been made between the sinner and his sin. God loves the sinner, but hates his sin. God loves the sinner *as creature*, and, therefore, this love for the sinner as creature is the same as His love for all His creatures, including rocks and elm trees. But the sin of the creature God hates.<sup>176</sup>

Yet these distinctions, too, are made in an effort to give some support to common grace without any scriptural basis. It is impossible to find in Scripture any distinction in the love of God. It is impossible, as we have noted, to find any references in Scripture to the effect that the atonement has a *broader* referent than the elect. It is impossible to find in Scripture

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<sup>174</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings*, II, pp. 70-72.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 63.

<sup>176</sup> Cf. Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace*, p. 11: “God hates the wicked *as wicked*, but he loves them as *His creatures*.” Although Kuiper does not make the distinction between sin and the sinner, his idea seems to be the same.

any distinction between sin and the sinner. In fact, to state that Scripture teaches that God “loves the sinner, but hates his sin” is in flat contradiction to Psalm 5:5: “Thou hatest all *workers* of iniquity.”

These distinctions, therefore, can only confuse. They are impossible to maintain. And the result is that the people in the pew come to believe that God loves everyone,<sup>177</sup> that Christ died for every man head for head, and that blessings come to all. The argumentation ends in blatant universalism.

The lines of Scripture are sharp and clear. God eternally loves His people in Christ. He gives them to Christ as Christ’s possession. For them Christ sheds His blood and earns for them forgiveness of sin and life everlasting. Through Christ and His cross the blessings of God come upon those for whom Christ died. They are the blest, while “the curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked” (Proverbs 3:33).

## Common Grace and Special Grace

Many supporters of common grace have spoken of a relationship between common grace and special grace. An example of this may be found in Murray who writes:

We may say that in the operations of common grace we have what we may call the vestibule of faith. We have as it were the point of contact, the *Anknüpfungspunkt*, at which and upon which the Holy Spirit enters with the special and saving operations of his grace. Faith does not take its genesis in a vacuum. It has its antecedents and presuppositions both logically and chronologically in the operations of common grace.

Both in the individual sphere and in the sphere of organic and historic movement, the onward course

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<sup>177</sup> Note H. J. Kuiper’s comment referred to earlier: “There is no one here in this audience who can say, ‘God hates me.’ Suppose you knew that you will ultimately be lost; even then you could not say, ‘God does not care for me’” (Kuiper, *The Three Points*, pp. 15-16).

of Christianity can never be dissociated from the preparations by which it is preceded and from conditions by which it is surrounded, preparations and conditions that belong not only to the general field of divine providence but also to the particular sphere of beneficent and gracious administration on God's part, yet gracious administration that is obviously not in itself saving, and therefore administration that belongs to the sphere of common grace.<sup>41</sup>

It is admittedly somewhat difficult to understand precisely how Murray views the relationship between common grace and special grace in these remarks. But it would seem that his argument is that, because God's common grace is indeed *grace* (and mercy, love, kindness, etc.), it is not only an outward attitude towards mankind in general, but also an inward operation of the Spirit which not only creates an objective "climate" in which the gospel can be more effectively preached, but also makes the sinner more receptive to the gospel.

Grace is, after all, an *attitude* of favor on God's part towards men. This attitude does not mean a thing unless the object of that attitude himself *knows* it and *experiences* it. I may have an attitude of love for a widow in Bangladesh who has just suffered the loss of her family in a terrible flood; but that attitude means nothing unless she *knows* of it through my own care for her and provision for her earthly and spiritual needs in a time of disaster.

Thus, the wicked are made more receptive to the "overtures" of the gospel because they themselves *know* that God loves them and is mercifully inclined to them so that they are made more receptive to the offer of the gospel.

That this is probably the meaning is evident from the fact, in the first place, that common grace is always connected with the free offer of the gospel; and, in the second place, from the fact that the "Three Points" of common grace connected God's general attitude of favor to all with both the free offer and the inward operation of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men restraining sin.

It is not our purpose to go into this aspect of the question in detail. First of all, it is not our intent in this study to discuss the free offer; and,

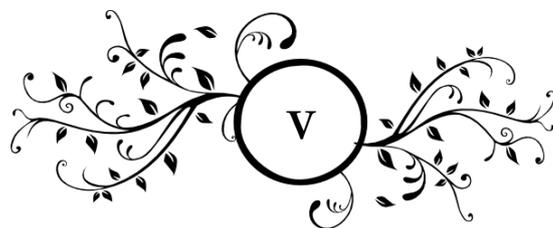
secondly, the subject will come up again when we come to discuss the whole idea of the “restraint of sin.”

Nevertheless, it is important to note already here that such a line of argumentation opens the door to blatant Arminianism. The simple fact of the matter is that the gospel *does* come to men in a spiritual “vacuum.” It comes to sinners, *totally depraved and unable to do any good*. It comes as *the power of God unto salvation*. It comes to *transform* sinners into saints and blasphemers into those who humbly confess their sins and seek salvation in the cross.

To speak of a general operation of grace in the hearts of all to “prepare men for the gospel so that they may be more receptive” is to open the door to the worst form of Arminianism. All who receive such common grace are in a state of receptivity because of *a divine work of grace*. Whether or not they actually *accept* the gospel depends upon their choice. The choice is possible because *God has done all He can to make them receptive*. He has, through the gospel, expressed Himself as willing and ready for men to believe. He has, by His Spirit, made them *capable* of receiving the gospel. Now the choice is in man’s hand, and his eternal destiny is determined, not by God’s sovereign determination, but by *man’s choice*. This is Arminianism. It is to be rejected by anyone who loves the truth of Scripture.

We have not yet dealt specifically with the question of temporal blessings. Nor have we examined the texts which are quoted in support of such temporal blessings. This will have to wait till our next article.





## BLESSINGS FOR ALL MEN? (II)

**S**O FAR, we have been discussing the idea that “God, in His common grace, gives blessings to all men.” We explained what was meant by this and quoted from a number of theologians who held to this position. We noticed that the main concern of those who hold to this aspect of common grace is that the good things in God’s world, which all receive, are “evidences of God’s favor, love, mercy, grace, and kindness towards all men in general.” These good things in God’s world are rain and sunshine, health and prosperity, life in God’s creation and the enjoyment of the treasures which God has placed in His world.

We examined a few questions which also arise in connection with this position. We talked briefly about the relation between these “blessings” and the cross of Christ, and noticed that some proponents of common grace believe these are merited through the cross, which is, in some sense, an atonement for all men; while others are not prepared, in the interests of maintaining a particular atonement, to say that Christ died for all—even to earn the limited blessings of common grace. We also briefly referred to the question of how the proponents of common grace explain the many judgments which come on the creation and which affect the lives of all those who experience sickness and suffering, drought and floods, hurricanes and earthquakes. If the good things in God’s world are *blessings*, how can these judgments of God be interpreted in any other way than

*curse*? And, just as it is obvious that the good things of life come to all men, so also it is obvious that God's judgments come upon the righteous *and* unrighteous, the elect *and* reprobate. How is this to be explained?

We are convinced that Scripture gives to us the key to understand this problem. Scripture tells us why, on the one hand, God gives good gifts to all men, elect and reprobate alike; and Scripture tells us why God sends His judgments upon all men, righteous as well as wicked. And, if we only understand what Scripture says of these things, we will also see that God's grace is always particular and for His elect alone.

## Sundry Matters

Some matters of importance must first be cleared up before we enter into the heart of the issue.

Those who hold to this theory of common grace teach, first of all, that common grace means "an attitude of God's favor towards creatures in general." God is favorably inclined towards trees and flowers, alligators and kangaroos, stars and rocks. So, e.g., the first point of common grace adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 speaks of the fact that there is "a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general."<sup>178</sup>

I do not have any serious objection to this idea as such. In fact, if we understand it properly, this is surely the teaching of Scripture. Psalm 145:9 reads: "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works."

The fact is, and Scripture clearly teaches, that this creation which God formed by the Word of His power is *His* creation. He formed it and He upholds it by His providence. He guides it in such a way that it serves His own purpose.

It is true that man, who was created as the head of creation, fell into sin. It is also true that, through his fall, the curse came on all the world, a curse which will not be fully lifted until the creation is redeemed. But this tragedy of unparalleled proportions which came on the world does not

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<sup>178</sup> Quoted from Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (1947), p. 317.

imply that God abandons His world and gives it over to total destruction. His providence sustains it and gives it its continued existence.

God loves His world. He has formed it; and, although man brought the curse upon it, the world remains *God's* world. He will not forsake it. This is partly the meaning of that well-known text, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

It is true that the reference in this text to "world" is primarily a reference to the world of elect men. This is evident from the fact that the last part of the verse, in defining "world," speaks of those who believe in Christ. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the term "world" is used here because it is the organism, the kosmos, of the entire creation with the elect under Christ as the new humanity which God loves.

The Psalms repeatedly speak of the creation as praising God. Psalm 148, e.g., reads:

Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light. Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord: for he commanded, and they were created. He hath also stablished them for ever and ever: he hath made a decree which shall not pass. Praise the LORD from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps: fire, and hail; snow, and vapour; stormy wind fulfilling his word: mountains, and all hills; fruitful trees, and all cedars: beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying fowl ... (vv. 3-10).

Not only does God love His world, but Christ also *died* for it. This is the clear teaching of Colossians 1:19-20:

For it pleased the Father that in him (Christ, HH) should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Paul is saying here that God reconciles all things to Himself *through the cross of Jesus Christ*. And, lest his readers misunderstand the import of the words “all things,” Paul goes on to say that this “all things” includes all things “whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.”

This is because Christ is

the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist (vv. 15-17).

Christ’s death indeed accomplishes universal redemption: not in the sense of an atonement for every man head for head, but in the sense of a *cosmic* redemption which embraces all God’s world.

Thus, also, the creation shall be redeemed. When, at the coming of Christ, this whole world is burned with fire (II Pet. 3:10-12), this great burning is not the annihilation of the creation, but its *destruction*. It is the *sin-cursed* creation that is burned. But the creation itself is preserved in order to be renewed and redeemed. It is transformed into a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness shall dwell (Rev. 21:1).

Paul speaks of this in Romans 8:19-22:

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

God loves His world, and He will save it.

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Another question to which we must give our attention is: Are the gifts which God gives *good* gifts?

In a way, this is an important question, for it is at this point that there is confusion and misunderstanding. The defenders of common grace often accuse those who deny common grace of refusing to acknowledge the *good* gifts of God.

Let it be clearly understood: the good gifts which God gives are indeed *good*. James 1:17 is decisive:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

It is quite obvious to anyone who thinks about it that God cannot give *bad* gifts. He is, in Himself, *good*. He is good in all that He does. The creation which He has made is a *good* creation. Even the curse which He brings upon it because of the sin of man is good. In all His works and ways our God is good, good in the absolute sense of the word.

Thus the gifts which He gives are also *good* gifts. They cannot be anything else. With open and lavish hand, He bestows good gifts on men. Rain and sunshine, health and well-being are good gifts. No one has, so far as I know, ever denied this.

Whether these good gifts speak of a “gracious attitude of God towards all” is quite another question. But the gifts are *good*; of that there can be no question at all. Those who refuse to believe that Scripture teaches any kind of common grace do not deny God’s good gifts. Let that be clearly understood.

It is also true that, from a certain point of view, God’s gifts are always *unmerited*. Man can never merit with God, nor the creature with the Creator. Even when we have done all that is required of us, we are still “unprofitable servants” (Luke 17:10). If God gives good gifts to men, these are surely *unmerited*.

There are those who refer to this *unmerited* character of God’s gifts, when they speak of “grace.” They mean nothing more than that “God gives gifts to men which are totally unmerited by them.” We have no objection to this idea in itself, although we noticed, earlier on, that the

word “grace” in Scripture means *more* than the giving of an unmerited gift. It also refers back to an *attitude of God*. Grace is unmerited *favor*, and favor is an attitude. The question is: Do the good gifts, God gives, express His *favor* towards the wicked?

We ought also to ask in this connection: What is the *purpose* of God in giving good gifts? But we will refrain from answering this question at this point, for it will be considered at some length a bit later in this study.

But all this does not yet explain the presence of judgments and calamities in this world. Not only does God give many good gifts, but He also sends many *catastrophes* of every kind. He brings abundant crops in one place, but total crop failure in another. He gives some people health, but He gives others sickness. Some people live lives that are relatively free from trouble; others know nothing but grief and travail in this world. Some are born healthy and robust; some are born crippled and mentally handicapped. It is easy to speak of God’s *good* gifts; it is not so easy to speak of God’s *judgments*, or whatever other name one wishes to give to those things which seem to us tragedies. It is perhaps rather natural to think of God’s favor when all goes well; it is quite different to think of God’s hand upon us when all things go wrong. If we are going to talk about *grace*, we ought not only to talk about good gifts, we ought also to talk about the evils which God sends into this sorry world. In fact, the latter far outnumber the former, and all life’s good things are overshadowed by the trials and afflictions which are our lot.

There is, it seems to me, a rather natural inclination for us to think in terms of good things as indicative of God’s *favor*, while we think of bad things in terms of God’s *anger*. Who of us has really escaped that? When all is well, we are inclined to bask in the sunshine of God’s favor upon us; when troubles and sorrows are our lot, we are inclined to think that God is *angry* with us and that we are receiving things at His hand which indicate His displeasure. What pastor, visiting one of his sheep in times of great distress, has not had to lead such a saint into the truths of Scripture which evaluate the sufferings of our lives in ways *different* from our evaluation?

But we do get things wrong. Our evaluations are not always governed by the Scriptures, and our opinions concerning what befalls us in life are not always those of God’s Word.

For one thing, it is important that we realize that we are poor judges of what is good and what is bad. We tend to weigh the worth of things according to our own personal likes and dislikes. It is a very personal and

subjective evaluation which we make. We want our way in life. When God's way is different from our way, we are unhappy and dissatisfied. We set up our judgments over against those of the God of heaven and earth and want only that which we happen to think we need.

If we are planning a vacation at the beach, rain is distasteful to us and interferes with our enjoyment of sun, sand, and sea. And we quickly grumble. But the very rain which spoils our vacation may be the moisture which the farmer needs for his crops. If the people who own golf courses were to decide the weather, their decisions would be quite different from the farmer who needs rain for his daily bread. We, often very selfishly, look at what happens in God's world from the viewpoint of our own personal desires without any regard for our neighbor's welfare, much less the great purpose and plan of God Who does that which seems good to Him.

Even more to the point, some things which are, indeed, *good* in themselves may be very bad in the hands of some people. A sharp knife is an indispensable tool in the kitchen where mother slices fruits and vegetables to feed her family. But no one thinks of giving that sharp knife to a small child. He may want it, scream for it, and create a tantrum when it is refused; but to give in to the child and hand him the knife would be reckless irresponsibility.

A child does not understand why it is necessary for him to go to the hospital and suffer the pain of surgery for a shattered bone. But it is good. The pain is good. The suffering is good. It is necessary for the welfare of the child.

A child may think ice cream is so good that all that he wants is ice cream. That it is good, no one will deny. That one eats only ice cream is bad. A child will die if all he is given is what he wants.

And, after all, we are all small children in the sight of God, children who have no idea of what is good for us and what is bad.

Surely these truths are obvious.

If a child should try to determine the love of his parents by what they give him and what they refuse him, he would be terribly wrong. If only ice cream indicates his parents' love, he can only conclude that his parents are very cruel and heartless and probably hate him. If getting what he wants is indicative of their love for him, he would conclude that their refusal to give him a butcher knife only shows that they are heartless parents, uninterested in his welfare.

We must be very careful that our evaluation of God's attitude towards men is not perverted by our own personal opinions about things. Sometimes God's gifts of prosperity are bad; sometimes affliction is good. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55:8-9).

To make doctrines based on our own personal evaluation of things is dangerous business. To find grace in what is pleasing to us and judgment in what is *not* pleasing is to impose our superficial opinions on matters of profoundest truth.

## The Perspective of God's Purposes

If we are to understand aright the problems which arise in our mind concerning God's good gifts to men, and God's judgments upon men, we have to look at them, as Scripture does, in the light of God's *purposes*.

A Reformed man looks at all that transpires here in the world *from the viewpoint of God*. This is the viewpoint of Scripture, which alone can give us the proper perspective and understanding of all that takes place in the world.

God's *purpose* is His everlasting and unchangeable counsel. From before the foundation of the world, God has determined all that shall take place in all history. This is the only explanation of providence. God not only created all things by the Word of His power; He continues to uphold every creature, so that it receives its life and existence from its Maker.

But this very truth that God upholds every creature surely also implies that God *controls and governs* all things. "All creatures are so in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move" (*Heidelberg Catechism*, LD 10, Q&A 28). The Reformed man believes that nothing comes by chance, but all things take place by the will of God.<sup>179</sup>

That purpose of God is to glorify His own great name. He is, Himself, the God of all glory. He is high and lifted up, far above heaven and earth. He is jealous of the honor of His own name and He does only that which will be for His own praise.

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<sup>179</sup> Cf. *Belgic Confession* 13, *Heidelberg Catechism*, LD 10, Q&A 27.

God has purposed to glorify Himself in His Son Jesus Christ.

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:1-3).

This theme is struck again and again in Scripture. Just a few verses from Ephesians 1 will illustrate this.

... according as he hath chosen us in him (Christ, HH) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace ... having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth ... that we should be to the praise of his glory ... (vv. 4-6a, 9-10, 12a).

This purpose of God to glorify Himself through Jesus Christ is realized in the salvation which God provides through the atonement of Christ on the cross. It is a salvation which embraces the whole cosmos—as we noticed above; but it is a salvation of all the elect in Jesus Christ, who form the organism of the human race in God's eternal purpose.

That salvation is fully realized when this present sin-cursed creation is transformed into the glory of the new heavens and the new earth. That creation, the elect shall inherit when they are brought, through the blood

of Christ, into the perfection of the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven. Then the wicked shall forever be cast into everlasting darkness as the manifestation of God's perfect justice, and then shall the righteous be delivered from sin and death to enjoy fellowship with God forever.

All things which take place in this world are to be explained and interpreted in that light of God's eternal purpose.

## God's Elect Organism

It is at this point that we must introduce the idea of the "organism" of the human race.

It has struck me over the years that this concept is one rarely understood in today's church world. I am not sure what the reason for this lack of understanding is. Sometimes I think that the problem is that Arminianism has had more influence in the church than we actually realize. Arminianism is always *individualistic*. Scripture is not. It is true that God deals with men individually; but it is also true that God deals with men *organically*. It is the latter which is so often not recognized.

The human race is an *organism*. This is true because God created the whole human race *in Adam*. He is the organic head of the human race, the father of all mankind, the one from whom the whole human race comes forth.

We can perhaps understand this somewhat better if we recognize that the human race is like a mighty oak tree. Just as the whole oak tree, which becomes a mighty tree over the course of many years, comes forth from a lowly acorn, so also does the whole human race come from our first parents, Adam and Eve. All the human natures of all men were created in Adam by God, just as the whole oak tree was created by God in the acorn.

Within the oak tree, there are smaller organisms as well. The leaf is an organism in its own right; so is the branch, the trunk, and an individual root. So, within the organism of the human race are lesser organisms: the race, the nation, the family. Each in its own right is an organism with which God deals; but each is an organism within the larger organism of the human race.

This organic unity of the human race implies also the *federal* unity of all mankind. Adam was not only the *organic* head of all men; he was also the *federal* head.

While we cannot go into detail on the question of the federal unity of the human race, it is important, at least, to understand it. That Adam was the *federal* head of all mankind is the same as saying that he was the *legal* head, or the judicial head.

This fact is important, for it is because of Adam's sin of disobedience in the garden that the *guilt* of Adam's sin became the guilt of *all mankind*. Adam's punishment for his sin was death: "The day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." This death was not only physical death, but it was also spiritual death. Adam was, at the moment of the fall, made *totally depraved*. The death of total depravity is a *penal* concept. It is a *punishment for sin*. It is *the judgment of God* upon man for his sin. This total depravity of man's nature was passed on to all his descendants; and, although this total depravity was passed onto all men through the organic headship of Adam (i.e., because Adam was the organic head of the human race), the total depravity which comes on all men is God's judgment upon all men *for their sin in Adam*. Because all men are *guilty* for Adam's sin, all men are also born spiritually dead.

This is the clear teaching of Romans 5:12-14:

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (for until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.

Death passed upon all men because *all* have sinned. But this death for sin came upon all men because *by one man (Adam) sin entered into the world*.

Thus, in connection with the sin of Adam and the punishment for sin, God did not deal with Adam as an *individual* only, but dealt with the *whole human race*.

Following this same pattern, God teaches us that He deals in a similar way with the smaller organisms within the one organism of the human

race. So He dealt with Shem, Ham, and Japheth from whom the races of the earth descended (Gen. 9:25-27). So God repeatedly dealt with the nation of Israel. Guilt for sin in Israel was *corporate* guilt. First of all, it was true that the sins of the *leaders* in Israel brought trouble upon *the nation as a whole* including wicked and righteous. A wicked king brought grief to the whole nation, and the effects of the wrath of God against a wicked king were felt by the whole nation. David's sin of numbering the people brought the angel of death in fury against Israel and brought death to 70,000 men (II Sam. 24). But even *individual* sins of *members* of the nation brought with it a corporate guilt. This is clear from many passages in Scripture. Briefly we can refer the reader to Joshua 7, in which chapter we are told that the *entire nation* suffered defeat at Ai because of Achan's sin. The text tells us in so many words: "*Israel* hath sinned, and *they* have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also ..." (v. 11). Far away, the majority of the people did not even know what Achan had done; yet "*Israel* hath sinned," and "*they* have taken of the accursed thing ..."

In like manner, although this was the pattern through Israel's entire history, Ezra *confesses as his own*, in a poignant manner, the sin of the nation which brought the nation into captivity and again threatened her existence:

And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, and said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day ... (Ezra 9:5ff).

So also Daniel prayed when he was in captivity. He prayed and made confession:

... O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments; we have

sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments: neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings ... (Dan. 9:4ff).

Daniel confessed the sins of the nation which brought them into captivity, but did so in the first person, thereby confessing that all these sins of his fathers, even before he was born, were *his own*.

The same federal unity is found in the family, for God “[visits] the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate [him]” (Ex. 20:5).

Life is filled with this. The leaders of a nation may declare war, the citizens may not be entirely in agreement with their rulers, but *all* the sons go to war; the homes of *all* are destroyed; *all* suffer the consequences of war.

It is with good reason that the *Heidelberg Catechism* tells us that when we confess that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we confess also that we believe that God forgives *our corrupt nature* against which we have to struggle all our life long (LD 21, Q&A 56), for we are shaped in iniquity and conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). We are responsible before God for our corrupt natures with which we are born.

If we understand our federal and organic unity in Adam properly, we can also understand that it is God’s purpose to create a *new* federal and organic union *in Christ*. This also is the clear teaching of all Scripture. Romans 5:14 says that Adam, as the federal head of the whole human race, was “the figure of him that was to come.” Paul, in speaking of the resurrection of the body, says: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (I Cor. 15:22).

We must now expand the figure somewhat.

If we look at the matter from the viewpoint of God’s *purpose*, then we are able to understand that the whole human race is, indeed, an organism, but it is an organism, from the viewpoint of Christ and His elect people, which *serves a specific purpose* which God has in mind in His eternal counsel: the salvation of the elect in Christ. It is out of the human race that Christ comes according to His human nature; it is out of the human race that the elect are saved in Christ.

It is perhaps better in this connection to use the figure which Jesus uses in John 15:1-8. Although the figure probably refers, in the first place, to the nation of Israel, it can be applied equally to the *whole human race*. God is the Husbandman of this vine; Jesus is, Himself, the vine. There are many branches in the vine, some of which do not bear fruit and some of which do. Whether the branches bear fruit or not depends upon whether they are in Christ, or *not* in Christ: "... He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (v. 5). The branches that do not bear fruit, though actually in the vine (i.e., in the human race), must be taken away, cast forth, and burned in the fire (v. 6).

This is the distinction between election and reprobation in the human race. The elect are in Christ and are saved; the reprobate are not in Christ and are cut off the vine and burned. But the vine is *one organism*.

This figure is apparent in all creation. The man who owns a vineyard must, for the sake of the branches that bear fruit, constantly prune the vine and cut away branches that are finally burned.

Scripture uses other figures as well.

A figure repeatedly used in Scripture is the figure of wheat. The whole plant grows together, but the wheat is finally gathered into the granary while the chaff is destroyed. The organism is one and grows as one, just as the human race is one and grows as one. But the whole organism grows for the purpose of *the few kernels of wheat which are finally saved*, while the greater part of the plant is burned when the wheat is ripe. The ungodly are like the "chaff which the wind driveth away" (Ps. 1:4). Christ is the One "whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12).

The human race, looking at it organically, is thus the wheat plant which grows throughout history. Christ comes for the harvest (Rev. 14:14-20) and gathers His harvest to bring the elect into His everlasting kingdom, but to destroy forever the wicked.

The human race is an *organism*, and the elect in Christ are the *fruit* gathered into eternal blessedness.

## Zion Delivered Through Judgment

The Scriptures, in connection with what we have said, lay down a fundamental principle which governs God's dealings with men. That principle is explicitly stated in Isaiah 1:27: "Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness." Parenthetically, we should notice that the text is intended to be an explanation to the people of God in Judah *why* captivity was to come, and *why* this terrible captivity was to take away the whole nation, including the people of God. This is evident from what is probably a more accurate translation of the last clause: "And her *returning ones* with righteousness." The Hebrew parallelism here makes the text mean, therefore, "Zion's returning converts are redeemed through righteous judgment."

The key word here is "judgment." This word, both in the Old and New Testaments, in its noun, verb, and adjective cognates, has different meanings. If we limit ourselves to the New Testament (although the same is true of the Old), we discover that the word has primarily the meaning of "rendering judgment." That is, the word means that act of a judge by which he passes a verdict on a matter or on a person expressing whether that matter or that person is right or wrong. It is the act of judgment itself, the weighing of the evidence, and the thoughtful consideration of the entire matter, the determination based on a standard of right and wrong. Such is the meaning, e.g., in John 8:15-16: "Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man. And yet if I judge, my judgment is true: for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me."

The same word can also refer to the verdict itself, the content of the verdict—that which a judge expresses, the statement of the determination to which a judge has come. As such, the word can have two different meanings. The word can refer to either an unfavorable verdict or a favorable verdict. It can be one of guilt and punishment, or innocence and blessing or favor. And, in this same connection, the words can refer to the actual *execution* of the sentence, i.e., the judgment of punishment and the judgment of favor. As an example of the former, Matthew 23:33 is pertinent: "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation ('judgment' in the Greek, HH) of hell?" And as an example of the latter, we find Lydia, a convert of Paul in Philippi, saying: "If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there"

(Acts 16:15). And this favorable idea of judgment is perhaps expressed in I Corinthians 6:3: “Know ye not that we shall judge angels?”

In Isaiah 1:27, the meaning of the word *judgment* is, clearly, the *execution of the sentence of God* upon wicked Judah for the sins of which the nation is guilty, sins which are eloquently described in the entire chapter. God has found Judah guilty, and now the judgment of the captivity must come upon the nation.

But it must be remembered that the great truth of the text is that Zion shall be redeemed through this judgment.

The reference here to “Zion” is to the true children of God within the organism of the nation. Zion was a mountain on which Jerusalem was built. It was the stronghold of the city. As long as Zion was not conquered, the city remained standing (cf. Ps. 48, especially vv. 2, 12-13). It is typical of the church of all ages from the viewpoint of her impregnable position in the world (cf. Ps. 87:5; Heb. 12:22-23).

As long as Zion continued standing, the city of Jerusalem was unconquered; and as long as Jerusalem could not be conquered, Judah remained as the people of God. But now Isaiah prophesied that Zion would be *laid desolate*, a catastrophe which seemed to indicate that Judah would no longer be the people of God.

This word of the prophet is God’s explanation of this catastrophe, about to befall the nation; and it is intended to be a word of comfort to God’s people when disaster strikes: *Zion shall be redeemed with judgment*. The judgment of the captivity, into which the whole nation had to go, would be *the redemption of the true people of God*.

It is evident, then, that the word “redemption” in Isaiah 1:27 refers to the restoration of the nation at the end of the captivity when the faithful, in the nation, would, through God’s preserving care, be brought back and kept as the people of God till Christ should come. But it is typical, also, of how God deals always with His church, in the midst of the world. A principle is laid down which covers all history.

Thus, the word “redemption” has a broader significance. Objectively, it refers to the work which Christ performed on the cross, and, indeed, in Scripture, the word is often used to describe Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Its basic meaning refers to *the payment of a price to secure another’s freedom*. It was used, e.g., in the purchase of slaves. A man might pay a fixed price to purchase a slave so that that slave could become his possession. But

especially when a man purchased a slave in order to free the slave is the word “redemption” apt.

We are the slaves of sin. Christ pays the price of His own precious blood (I Pet 1:18-20) to secure our freedom. But, by means of the freedom purchased for us through that great price of Christ’s blood, we are not only delivered from the bondage of the slavery of sin; we are also made Christ’s possession. Both ideas are merged into one. For true freedom is to be a slave of Jesus Christ. Redemption, then, means that Christ purchases us so that we may be His own.

That price of Christ’s blood is the objective accomplishment of redemption. But such redemption is actually and subjectively accomplished in that work of Christ, whereby His sacrificial merit is given to us and we are *actually delivered* from our bondage, become His possession, and enjoy that perfect freedom of belonging to Christ.

Redemption, therefore, comes objectively through the judgment of God, for our sins, upon Jesus Christ. The whole world is under the just wrath of God for sin. That wrath of God is terrible, for it drives the sinner into untold grief and trouble, and, finally, brings him to death, the grave, and hell. But God has chosen His elect people in Christ. The judgment of God against sin, rightfully due these elect as well as the wicked, is assumed by Jesus Christ, who suffered the death of the cross to take it away.

It is in this light that we must understand Isaiah 1:27. The passage lays down a principle which really is an explanation of the application to all history of what happened at Calvary; and, understanding this, we will have help to understand the strange mixture of good gifts of God and His judgments (in the sense of the expressions of God’s wrath as He punishes the world for their sins), which are the experience and lot of all men here below.

Not only does God give many good gifts to man; God also visits the world with many judgments. Good gifts and judgments are the pattern and norm for life here below. Never must good gifts be considered alone without taking into account the fact and reality of judgments.

This pattern of His works is true of the history of the human race, for, throughout the world, the good gifts of God come along with judgments. Not only does all the world receive rain and sunshine; it also receives drought and floods. The rain and sunshine are, indeed, the good gifts of God; the drought and floods are His judgment. And all, without exception, receive both. The reprobate receive rain and sunshine, but so do the elect.

The reprobate receive the judgments of God, but so do the elect. Floods and tornados do not spare the righteous.

Why is this?

The answer is that *Zion shall be redeemed through judgment.*

That is, *the organism of the elect in Christ is redeemed through the way of judgments which come upon the earth.*

This truth can be applied on different levels.

It has application, in the first place, to the individual child of God. God causes His people to endure much affliction in this world, afflictions, which, as far as their objective character is concerned, are no different from those judgments which come upon men for sin. God's people get cancer, as well as do the unbelieving. Disease and trouble, sorrow and pain, come to the righteous, as well as to the wicked. But these evils, which are judgments upon wicked men for sin, are *blessings* for God's people, though, in themselves, judgments, for *Christ* bore God's judgment which was rightly theirs. Hence, for the righteous, all these things are *chastisements from the hand of the Lord* (Heb. 12:5-13); the Lord *loveth* every son whom he chastens. They are fiery trials which burn away the dross of sin, in order that faith may be purified (I Pet. 1:7). They are the way in which the child of God is *made ready for heaven*. Each child of God is redeemed through judgment.

The same is true of the church. The church of Christ, in the course of the years, becomes gradually weaker, more worldly, more carnal, and less faithful to the truth. The only way in which God can *save* His faithful people is through judgment. Sometimes this judgment takes the form of persecution; sometimes it takes the form of church reformation—for, indeed, church reformation, with its suffering and pain, its distress and personal agony, is judgment. But it is a judgment of God upon a *faithless* institute which brings reformation. But, again, *Zion* is redeemed *through* judgment, for the church is purified through the dark way of church reformation.

But more broadly this is true of the whole church of Christ in the world. And this is of immediate concern to us.

Why is *Zion* redeemed only through judgment? The answer is, very clearly, that the whole human race has sinned, and sin can be destroyed only through judgment. The elect—a part of that human race—can only be saved out of it *through the way of judgment upon all men*. The nations have

sinned, and the elect can be saved out of the nations *only through judgment upon the nations*.

There is no other way. Zion can be redeemed only through judgment. But it is precisely this judgment which both destroys and saves.

It is with good reason that the Holy Spirit is compared to a *fire* and His work to that which *burns* (Acts 2:3). Judgment begins at the house of God:

For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? (I Pet. 4:17-18).

The nation of Israel suffered these dreadful judgments of God, for repeatedly the nation forsook God and turned to idols. Nor were the elect immune from these sins, for they joined with them, or, at best, did nothing to prevent them. The elect are not saved because they are better than others. And so, throughout her history, famines stalked the land, foreign invaders laid the nation waste, pestilences of every kind destroyed the crops and herds, and finally the nation went into captivity. The purpose was that Zion might be redeemed through judgment, for Zion are God's true elect in the organism of the entire nation. And the elect were purged, chastised, delivered, and saved through all these terrible judgments. They were a part of the nation. The sin of the nation was also *their* sin. Only in the way of judgment could Zion be redeemed.

And so it is throughout history. Judgments come upon the earth. They come because of sin. Within that sinful mass are the elect—sinners, as all the rest. But Christ bore their judgment. So when judgment comes upon the world, it is the destruction of the wicked, but it is also the means of *separating the elect from the wicked in organic connection*, with which they are born.

Here, too, figures from God's creation will help us. The figure is especially clear in the threshing processes of Bible times. When the wheat was to be separated from the chaff, the farmer threw the bundles on the threshing floor, which was a smooth piece of ground where winds would ordinarily blow. He turned his oxen loose in the wheat, so that it could be trampled by the oxen. The purpose was to separate the kernels of wheat from the chaff.

When, finally, all was reduced nearly to powder and the kernels freed from the straw, the farmer would, when a strong wind was blowing, throw all in the air with a winnowing fork. The lighter chaff would be blown away while the heavier wheat would fall to the threshing floor.

It was all laborious work, and the wheat had to undergo brutal punishment under the hooves of the oxen to be separated from the chaff.

It is an interesting figure. During the time the wheat plant is growing, the chaff is absolutely necessary: the wheat cannot grow without the chaff. The kernels of wheat are even a very small part of the entire plant. Yet the entire plant is grown *for the purpose of the kernels*. And when the wheat kernels are ripe, not only are they separated from the chaff, but the chaff, having served its purpose, is now useless and is blown away by the wind.

So it is in the organism of the human race. Within that organism is God's elect—the wheat that needs harvesting. As long as the world exists, the wicked serve the righteous and both must be together (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43). But when the wheat of the elect are ready, the final judgment comes. Separation takes place and the wicked are burned forever, while the righteous are saved. But because the elect are being constantly saved from this world and brought into heaven, so judgments come all the time to separate the elect from the reprobate. But these judgments which separate are also the means of *purifying and cleansing the elect*, who are wicked in themselves. Their separation is precisely their salvation, as sin is destroyed in them and they are made holy.

Zion is always redeemed through judgment.

## Blessing and Cursing

It is in the light of all that we have said that we must consider the problem of common grace. We have asked and answered the question: *Why do judgments come upon wicked and righteous?* But we have not yet asked and answered the question: *Why do 'good' things also come upon the wicked as well as the righteous?*

It surely is true that God gives many good gifts to men; not only to the elect, but to *all* men. It is also true that, in this life, these good gifts are strangely mixed with all kinds of judgments. But judgments are curses to the wicked, for they are God's means of *destroying* the wicked. And

judgments are *blessings* for the elect, because they are the means of Zion's redemption.

Now the question is: *Are the good gifts God's 'grace' to all men?*

Once again, we must remember that the human race must be considered as an *organism*. We may use here the example of a vineyard with many grapevines in it. God works with the human race in the same way a husbandman works with his vines. He gives his vines fertilizer and irrigation water, and upon these vines the sun shines and the rain falls. All that the vine receives is good for the vine.

But at the same time the vinekeeper prunes away from the vine branches that do not bear fruit. This is important, for only when the vine is properly pruned will the good branches bring forth their fruit. Good things must be given to the vine.

Let us look at this vine from the viewpoint of the vine itself. The rain and sunshine, the fertilizer and irrigation, all have the effect of making all the branches grow. But, through the growth of the branches, it soon becomes apparent that some branches do not bear fruit and others do. The fruitless branches are cut away so that the fruitful branches may bear "more fruit" (John 15:2).

But we must also look at the vine from the viewpoint of the owner of the vineyard. He knows with certainty that all the care which he bestows upon the vine will result in the growth of the fruitless branches, as well as the fruitful branches. Does he perhaps say to himself: "I will withhold from the vine fertilizer and water because the fertilizer and water make the fruitless branches grow?" He would be foolish if he did, for his vines would, through neglect and lack of food and moisture, die. Does he, perhaps, give this care to the vine *in spite of the fact* that the fruitless branches grow too, thinking to himself: "I cannot do anything about it; I might as well face the fact that the fruitless branches will also grow?"

No, the vineyard keeper has a *purpose* in it all. His purpose is finally *that the vine may bring forth abundant and delicious fruit*. But his purpose is also that, through the growth of the fruitless branches, he may *know what branches have to be pruned*. It is only in pruning the useless branches that the fruitful branches bring forth "more fruit."

This is the way God deals with the human race. He gives an abundance of good gifts so that the whole human race may grow. But the whole human race must grow and develop because God's purpose is realized in this way. God's purpose is *that the wicked may reveal themselves as wicked* when

they spurn God's good gifts. In that way, they become fit to be pruned away. They are burned. But God's ultimate purpose is that the elect people of God may bring forth more fruit and manifest themselves as those who belong to Christ.

This figure is not a figure of my invention; it belongs to Scripture.

Psalm 80 compares Israel with a vine, taken out of Egypt and planted in Canaan. God prepared room before it, and caused it to take deep root so that it filled the land. But God also broke it down through the boar out of the wood which wasted it and the wild beast of the field which devoured it. It is burned with fire. Then comes the plaintive cry:

Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand,  
upon the son of man whom thou madest strong  
for thyself. So will not we go back from thee:  
quicken us, and we will call upon thy name. Turn  
us again, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to  
shine; and we shall be saved (vv. 17-19).

The figure is explicit in Isaiah 55:

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from  
heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the  
earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it  
may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:  
so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my  
mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall  
accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper  
in the thing whereto I sent it (vv. 10-11).

Still more clearly is this figure used in Hebrews 6. It is strange, to say the least, that this text should be used in support of common grace. Let us listen to it.

For it is impossible for those who were once  
enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift,  
and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and  
have tasted the good word of God, and the powers  
of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to

renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame (vv. 4-6).

Then the figure which explains it all:

For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.

All receive the rain. That rain brings forth herbs which are blessed by God. But that blessing is for the *herbs*. The same rain causes the land to bring forth briers and thistles. They are rejected and cursed and their end is to be burned.

### God's Blessings for All?

If we take this organic viewpoint, we will properly understand God's good gifts, but also His judgments. And so we will be able to understand not only rain and sunshine upon the ungodly, but also droughts and famines upon the people of God—for all that happens in the creation happens to all alike. Let us begin with the figures we have used.

When a vinekeeper applies fertilizer to his vines, he knows that the result will be that the fruitless branches will grow. The question is: *Is he 'favorably inclined' towards these fruitless branches? Are the good gifts which he bestows on the plant evidences of his favor towards the 'fruitless' branches?*

To ask the question is to answer it. No, the presence of fruitless branches is a nuisance to him and only means more work as they are carefully pruned away.

Is the growth of the fruitless branches only a necessary evil which he must tolerate? In a way it is, but he wants them to grow too *so that he can identify them*. Only *after* they grow can they be identified as fruitless branches.

But in the *fruitful* branches he finds delight. All the work is finally for *their* purpose. He rejoices in the fruit and in the wine which makes his heart glad. All his labor is forgotten in the joy of the abundant harvest. He has favor and love towards the *good* branches.

So it is with the works of God. He gives good gifts to men. He does so because in this way the world develops and grows. These good gifts are, themselves, *the means to reveal the wicked as wicked*, for they despise God's good gifts, use them to sin against Him, and reveal themselves as reprobate. They are not blessings for *them*. God is not favorable to *them*. He has no love for *them*. He does not send His good gifts to them so that perhaps they may, by these good gifts, be "changed to elect." He knows His own. He knows also who are not His own. "The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked" (Prov. 3:33).

Asaph finally understood these things when he went into the house of God. The prosperity of the wicked was God's way of setting them in slippery places and casting them down into destruction (Ps. 73:17-19). And when, in God's sanctuary, he understood these things, then he could say: "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee" (v. 22).

But these same good gifts which God gives are always blessings to *God's people*. They are indications of God's favor and love, for by them God's people know that their Father in heaven takes care of them. Even as the curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked, so "He blesseth the habitation of the just" (Prov. 3:33). And Asaph could say, even when he suffered: "Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (Ps. 73:23-24).

But all these things put also judgments into their proper perspective.

The judgments which come upon the world and upon our nation are God's "pruning" so that the elect may bring forth more fruit. Not only do they see that God is judging the world now, but they see these judgments as the rumblings of the thunder of the great judgments of God which shall come on the world when Christ comes back again.

When these judgments come upon them personally or when they suffer because of the judgments upon the world, they know that these are necessary for their salvation. They are chastisement to correct and save (Heb. 12:5-11). They know that all things work together for their good, for they are called according to the purpose of God (Rom. 8:28). They know that all things are theirs, for they are Christ's, and Christ is God's (I

Cor. 3:21-23). They can be patient in adversity and thankful in prosperity, for they know that nothing can separate them from God's love (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 28).

God's favor and love rest upon them, while the wicked are consumed.

Although it is not our intention at this point to go into this matter in detail, let it be clearly understood that all that we have said centers in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the cross, Christ bore the judgment of God against the sin of all His people. The judgment of God's wrath can no more come upon them. It is gone through Christ's perfect sacrifice for sin. The cross is the center of the truth that Zion is redeemed through judgment. But Christ bore the judgments of God which are deservedly the portion of the elect. He died for them and endured their judgment that they might never have to be punished for their sins. And so, when the judgments of this present world come upon men, the people of God hide themselves beneath the shadow of the cross where all the judgments that come upon the world are turned into blessings for them.

But, at the same time, the cross is the judgment of the world, as Christ Himself makes clear: "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31).

If only we are willing to take the perspective of Scripture and let the light of God's Word fall upon these perplexing problems of life, if only we do not try to interpret what goes on in this world by our own ideas and notions; then it will be clear to us that God, the sovereign One, works His great and glorious purpose in all things, that His own people may be brought out of this sinful world into glory with Christ.

## Proof Texts

We have not yet had an opportunity to look at the texts which are quoted to support common grace.

There are not so many texts which are quoted, but we ought to look at those which the supporters of common grace appeal to in defense of their position.

John Murray appeals first of all to Hebrews 10:26-27:

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.<sup>180</sup>

Murray himself does not explain why he chooses this text in support of his defense of common grace, but one may deduce from his writings that his reference to this text is based upon the fact that the text speaks of those who perish as those who receive the knowledge of the truth. The argument then is: *That the reprobate receive the knowledge of the truth is indicative of God's favor upon them.*

It ought to be quite obvious that such a line of argumentation is invalid.

In the first place, no one denies that all men receive a certain knowledge of the truth, whether that be the heathen who never hear the gospel and who receive this knowledge through creation, or whether that be those who are born and raised within the church and who know the truth through the preaching of the gospel.

It is important to God that all men receive such knowledge of the truth. God Himself sees to it. But the good gift of the knowledge of the truth is not indicative of God's favor. It is not God's purpose to show them His love and grace. Paul tells us exactly what that purpose is: It is the revelation of the wrath of God from heaven and it is given "so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:18, 20). It is important *that the wicked reveal themselves as wicked* so that when God punishes them in hell, their punishment is the just and perfect manifestation of God's wrath against all that sinned. They will never be able to say that they did not serve God "because they did not know Him." God *shows* Himself to them. They are without excuse.

It is more puzzling that Murray should refer to Hebrews 6:4-5 in support of his views on common grace. He apparently means, by appealing to this text, that the enlightenment of the wicked, the heavenly gift given to them especially in the Holy Spirit, and the powers of the world to come which they taste, are all *blessings*.

But this will never do.

In the first place, the apostle is speaking, here, of people who are born and raised in the church—for their sin is crucifying the Son of God afresh

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<sup>180</sup> See page 56 for Murray's use of this text.

and putting Him to open shame (v. 6). The good gifts which they receive are, therefore, the *outward* good things of the preaching of the gospel. These wicked even have a certain understanding of the blessedness of the preaching and can appreciate the blessings of the world to come. Nevertheless, they never receive these gifts in their hearts.

That this is the meaning is evident from the fact that these gifts are compared to the rain which falls upon the earth (v. 7). But that rain brings forth thorns and briers.

If an inward gift of these blessings were referred to in the text, then one can only conclude that the text speaks of a falling away of saints. After all, if these people who commit the unpardonable sin actually receive these blessings inwardly, then they are actually saved. But we know that Scripture teaches exactly the opposite: the preservation of the saints.<sup>181</sup>

More to the point are the texts which were quoted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 in support of a general attitude of God's favor upon all men—texts to which John Murray also refers.

The first is the passage in Psalm 145:9: "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works."

As is so often the case in the Psalms, this verse makes use of the rhetorical and poetical device known as *Hebrew parallelism*. That is, the two parts of the verse are so related that they explain each other. God's goodness is explained in terms of His tender mercies, and the "all" of the text is explained by "all his works."

The text, therefore, teaches that God is good to His entire creation, which includes all His works. We have noted earlier that this goodness of God towards all His works is evident in the fact that also the creation is saved in Christ. He loves His creation and shows His favor and goodness towards it.

But even if this Hebrew parallelism is ignored and the word "all" is interpreted to mean "all men," then still the meaning of the text is *not* that God is favorably inclined towards the reprobate. How can this be, when "the curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked"? But the gifts which God gives to men are always *good* gifts. He cannot give bad gifts, for He is good in Himself and in all that He does.

Perhaps no single text has been quoted as often in support of common grace as the passage in Matthew 5:44-45:

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<sup>181</sup> Cf. John 10:26-30.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

Similar passages, also often quoted, are to be found in Luke 6:27, 35 and Acts 14:16-17. Luke 6:27, 35 reads:

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you ... But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and evil.

And Acts 14:16-17 reads:

Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.

Let us begin with the passage in Acts 14, which is not difficult to explain.

The text clearly refers to the fact that God, even in the old dispensation, did not leave Himself without witness. This witness was through rain from heaven and fruitful seasons which filled men's hearts with joy and gladness. It was part of the witness in the creation of which Paul speaks in Romans 1:18ff. It was to make known to all men that God is a *good* God who gives *good* gifts and who must, because of His goodness, be served and worshiped as God alone. But God's purpose was *that men might be without excuse* when they are punished for their evil.

That these wicked continued in their own evil ways is evident from the text itself: all nations walked in their own ways.

If we only will understand that the gifts of rain and sunshine are good gifts of God, then we will have no problem understanding either that these good gifts are not, in themselves, “testimonies of God’s favor and love towards the wicked.” They are the rain and sunshine which cause the fruitless branches of the vine of the human race to reveal themselves as wicked.

Matthew 5:44-45 is an important passage. The supporters of common grace apparently argue in this fashion in their interpretation: We must love our enemies and in this way love all men. When we love all men we are children of our Father in heaven. Our Father in heaven also loves all men and reveals His love for all by giving them rain and sunshine, for He sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Thus God loves all men and shows grace to all men, for all men receive rain and sunshine.

We need not repeat here what we have already said about the fact that all God’s gifts are good and that He gives these good gifts to all men. Nor need we repeat what we have said about the purpose of God in giving good gifts to men. But let it be clearly understood that this text too must be explained in the context of all the other passages of Scripture to which we have referred.

Let it also be understood that it would be a serious problem for the people of God if they had to contemplate the fact that God loves all men, and not only loves them. It would be a terrible thing if God loved those who walk in every sin; and it would be a terrible thing if God loved those who kill the people of God, persecute them, destroy them from the earth, and do so blaspheming God’s name while never repenting of their sin.

This would be a terrible thing because it would be (and I speak as a man) a kind of adultery on God’s part. His church is His bride, His beloved, to whom He is married in an everlasting bond of marriage. The world is not so. The world is the enemy of God. James is right when he severely castigates the church for loving God’s enemies and calls them adulterers and adulteresses: “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Yet so, common grace defenders say God loves those with whom we must not be friends.

If God loves anyone but His bride, it is tantamount to my loving a woman other than my wife. Nor would she be placated by my statement: “Yes, wife, but my love for this other woman is a love of complacency, not a love of benevolence.” She would tell me in no uncertain terms that I ought to be loving her alone. And she would be right.

What does Matthew 5 teach?

The love of which Christ speaks when He enjoins us to love our enemies is a *genuine* love. By that, I mean that it is a love which is not sloppily sentimental, not simply the giving of material help; it is a love which is *like the love of God*. God’s love seeks (and accomplishes) the salvation of sinners. So also our love must seek the salvation of sinners, although we cannot accomplish that salvation; it is God’s work. But we must, even when we do good to those who hate us, *seek their salvation*. We must call them to forsake their evil way, repent of their sins, and believe in Christ.

In this connection, it must be immediately understood that God knows those who are His own. We do not know them. God pours out His love upon His people, and by the power of His love He saves them. We have no such power in our love. We can only reveal to others God’s love for us. But because we seek their salvation, we reflect God’s love for us.

If that expression of love is shown to an elect, it will be the means God uses to bring that sinner to Christ. If the one to whom we show love is a reprobate, it will be the means to *harden* that sinner in his sin so that he will no longer want even the good that we show to him.

And so we reflect God’s love for us and show that we are the children of our Father in heaven. God also loves us when we are unthankful and evil. He does not give love to those who *deserve* it; He gives His love to *undeserving* sinners, such as we are. It is this very consciousness of God’s unmerited love that moves us to show our love to those who hate us, persecute us, and curse us. Undeserving sinners who are the objects of God’s love, show love to other undeserving sinners.

We show this love by doing good to sinners. God also “does good” to sinners—not only to the elect, but also to the reprobate. In this way, too, we reflect the love of God. God’s good gifts to reprobate sinners harden them in their sins so that they are without excuse; God’s good gifts to elect sinners bring them to repentance and faith through the work of the Spirit in their hearts. Our love, which we show to our enemies, does the same.

The only difference is that God *knows* His own; we do not know those who belong to Him. He accomplishes His sovereign purpose; we are instruments in His hand to accomplish that purpose.

But of God's "love" or "favor" to reprobate sinners, the text says not a word.

The passage in Luke 6 teaches the same thing. How churlish and ungrateful we would be if we, the objects of God's unmerited love, would show love only to those who are *deserving* of our love. Even the publicans do that. But we are children of our Father in heaven. We must be different.

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Thus, we come to the end of our discussion of this part of the doctrine of common grace. If we look at things from the viewpoint of God, and learn to think theologically, instead of thinking in a man-centered way, we will have no problems.

All we can do, finally, is adore the riches of God's sovereign and particular grace as we humbly confess that, though we are wholly unworthy of any of God's blessings, we are given, through Christ, the riches of everlasting salvation.





## THE RESTRAINT OF SIN: ITS MEANING

**W**E HAVE thus far been discussing that aspect of common grace which teaches that God is favorably inclined to all men, which favorable inclination includes the bestowal of blessings, such as rain, sunshine, health, prosperity, etc.

The doctrine of common grace is by no means exhausted by this idea. The proponents of common grace teach that common grace includes also the “restraint of sin by the work of the Holy Spirit, which restraint of sin results in the unregenerate man being made capable of doing some limited good works.”

It is to this idea of common grace that we turn in this and in succeeding chapters.

We must understand at the outset that, on the one hand, a restraint of sin in the hearts of the unregenerate is related to God’s blessing upon elect and reprobate alike; and, on the other hand, the restraint of sin in the lives of the unregenerate is a view which carries with it various other implications, some of which we will mention a bit later.

We shall, in the course of this study, take a look at all these things.

## The Teaching

It is best to learn what is meant by the restraint of sin by referring to and quoting from others who hold to this doctrine.

*Louis Berkhof*

Louis Berkhof gives a very concise and thorough definition of the whole idea of common grace, including this aspect which we now treat. He writes in a summary of common grace, that common grace includes:

... those general operations of the Holy Spirit whereby [God], without renewing the heart, exercises such a moral influence on man through His general or special revelation, that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted.<sup>182</sup>

Berkhof is somewhat hesitant to say that common grace is rooted in the cross as its judicial basis, but speaks nevertheless of benefits from the cross which come upon all men.<sup>183</sup>

When Berkhof is speaking of the means by which sin is restrained, he mentions general revelation, government, public opinion, and divine punishments and rewards, although he does not mean to deny, by these outward restraints, the inner working of the Spirit. Both operate.<sup>184</sup>

The following elements in the restraint of sin can be found in Berkhof's position: 1) Sin is restrained by means of the temporal operations of the Holy Spirit; although other means may also be employed such as government, public opinion, divine punishments and rewards, etc. 2) These operations of the Holy Spirit take place without renewing the heart of man, i.e., without actually accomplishing the work of regeneration and salvation. The man so restrained remains unconverted and eventually perishes, if no saving work follows. 3) This restraint of sin is specifically

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<sup>182</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 436.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 437-438.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 440-441.

connected with revelation, something of such importance that we shall have to look at this more closely in a different connection. 4) While Berkhof hesitates to claim that the atonement of Christ forms the judicial basis for common grace, the restraint of sin is, nevertheless, connected to Christ's work on the cross and is a blessing which flows from it.

*James Daane*

James Daane, in discussing common grace, emphatically speaks in general of “gracious operations of the Holy Spirit” in the hearts of men. He writes:

The traditional manner in which Reformed theology accounted for this difference between absolute and total depravity was by reference to a general, gracious operation of the Holy Spirit upon unregenerate human hearts.<sup>185</sup>

This matter of “gracious operations of the Holy Spirit” in the heart is, for Daane, crucial. In order to support his contention that this is the traditional manner in which Reformed theologians defended common grace, he refers to Abraham Kuyper and quotes from him:

... “Thus common grace is an operation of divine mercy, which reveals itself everywhere where human hearts are found to beat and which spreads its blessings upon these human hearts” ...<sup>186</sup>

Daane sums up the matter by saying: “Thus it is evident that 1924<sup>187</sup> teaches, in harmony with traditional Reformed thought, that there is a restraint of sin in the life of the unregenerate ...”

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<sup>185</sup> Daane, James, *A Theology of Grace*, p. 88.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89. The quotation is from Abraham Kuyper's *Gemeene Gratie*, I, p. 251.

<sup>187</sup> The reference is to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, which, in 1924, adopted three distinct points concerning the doctrine of common grace.

Daane's emphasis that this restraint of sin takes place *within the hearts of men* is important—for no one, so far as I know, denies that a restraint of sin actually exists in the world. Whether it takes place by an *inward work of the Spirit* or by *outward constraints* is the question at issue.

*A. A. Hodge*

A. A. Hodge treats common grace in connection with the internal call and writes:

“Common grace” is the restraining and persuading influences of the Holy Spirit acting only through the truth revealed in the gospel, or through the natural light of reason and of conscience, heightening the natural moral effect of such truth upon the understanding, conscience and heart. It involves no change of heart, but simply an enhancement of the natural powers of the truth, a restraint of evil passions, and an increase of the natural emotions in view of sin, duty, and self-interest.<sup>188</sup>

Although Hodge does not say so, in so many words, it is clear that he also considers this restraint of sin to be an *inward work of the Spirit*. He speaks of the Spirit working through conscience and having an effect upon heart and conscience. He speaks of the effect being a restraint of evil passions and an increase of the natural emotions—all of which can take place only by *internal* influences.

*Charles Hodge*

Charles Hodge, though almost reluctant to speak of common grace, nevertheless also defines it in terms of a restraint of sin. He writes:

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<sup>188</sup> Hodge, *Outline of Theology*, pp. 449-450.

The Bible therefore teaches that the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth to Him good ... This is what in theology is called common grace.<sup>189</sup>

This same idea appears also when he says, in connection with Acts 7:51:

[God is] everywhere present with the minds of men, as the Spirit of truth and goodness, operating on them according to the laws of their free moral agency, inclining them to good and restraining them from evil.<sup>190</sup>

In connection with his discussion of Romans 1:25, Hodge claims that the very fact that God *gives the wicked up* implies some prior restraint; and he refers this to the Holy Spirit.<sup>191</sup>

From these quotations it is clear that Hodge maintains, concerning this aspect of common grace: 1) that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of all men without distinction, and not only in the hearts of the elect. 2) That this work of the Holy Spirit is especially upon the minds of men. 3) That the fruit of this work of the Spirit is a restraint of sin and a consequent enabling of the sinner to do good. 4) And, strangely enough, Hodge ascribes this work of the Spirit to the Spirit as the “Spirit of Truth,” whom Christ specifically promises only to the church.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, p. 667.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 668.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 669.

<sup>192</sup> See the references to the Spirit of Truth in John 14:16-18, 26; 15:26; 16:7-11, 13, 14.

*Herman J. Kuiper*

Herman J. Kuiper makes some extremely interesting and important observations about this aspect of common grace.<sup>193</sup>

Kuiper makes the interesting point that “if you accept the first [point], you have in principle accepted the others.”<sup>194</sup> His argument, undoubtedly correct, is that if one accepts God’s *gracious attitude of favor towards all men*, one must accept also the idea that this attitude of favor towards all men, and grace which He confers on all men, *must* include an inward restraint of sin in the hearts of all men by the Holy Spirit. In other words, this conferring of grace on all men *cannot* simply be an *outward* display of good gifts, such as in rain and in sunshine, but it *must* be also an *internal* work of God in man’s heart.

Undoubtedly, the necessity of this internal work of God lies in the nature of *grace*. Grace is an attitude of favor, of love, of compassion, or mercy. God’s *attitude* of love and mercy is not shown if it is limited to outward gifts; it must include the sinner’s *conscious experience* and *knowledge* of God’s favor. This is true, if we stop to think about it, also of relationships between men mutually.<sup>195</sup>

There is another point, here, which needs to be made, although it is somewhat beside the point of our discussion.

The point has to do with the relation between the free and general offer of the gospel and the internal operation of the Spirit by which sin is

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<sup>193</sup> Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace: Three Sermons with Notes*. It is important to remember that H. J. Kuiper preached these sermons to defend the statements concerning common grace which had been adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924. In those statements, three in number, the first one spoke of *an attitude of favor which God shows to all His creatures and to all men*, the latter of which is especially evident in the free offer of the gospel. The second statement spoke of the *inward restraint of sin in the hearts of all men by the Holy Spirit*. The third statement spoke of *the good which the unregenerate are capable of doing* because of the work of the Spirit. Against the background of these statements, Kuiper makes his remarks. Hence, he states in the preface: “Our real purpose was to explain and defend the three points.”

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>195</sup> Whether Kuiper himself was completely aware of these implications, I do not know. His sermons do not include such a line of argumentation. But his statement is emphatic: *Acceptance of an attitude of favor towards all necessarily implies an internal work of grace.*

restrained and man is enabled to do good. It is undoubtedly this relation, too, that Kuiper had in mind when he insisted that to accept point one was to commit oneself also to point two. Point one taught not only a general attitude of favor on God's part towards all men, but it stated also that this attitude of favor was especially evident in the *general offer of the gospel*.

Although it is impossible to tell whether Synod *had* such ideas in mind, the fact, nevertheless, remains that if one connects the well-meant offer of the gospel with an inward operation of the Spirit in the hearts of all which restrains sin, then it follows that this work of the Spirit is *preparatory to the preaching of the gospel*. That is, the work of the Spirit restraining sin and producing good *prepares* all men for the gospel in such a way that they are in a moral and ethical condition to accept or reject the overtures of the gospel. And, of course, the decision to accept or reject is theirs to make. God intends the salvation of all and expresses this intention in the gospel itself. God does all that He can to make men aware of this desire on His part. God even gives His Spirit to all men so that their sin may be restrained and they are enabled to do some good, though not *saving* good. God, having now done all He is capable of doing, leaves the final decision with man himself, who, through the work of the Spirit, is made capable of making such a choice.

Whether this idea was, in fact, in the minds of the authors of the statement, concerning common grace at the Synod of 1924, is impossible to say. What is clear is that this notion has become generally accepted by those who hold to common grace and the free offer of the gospel.

But anyone with any Reformed sensitivity will readily see that this notion is *Arminianism* at its worst.

However all this may be, Kuiper also very clearly distinguishes between *inward* restraint of sin and *outward* restraint of sin.<sup>196</sup> After examining the question, Kuiper comes to the conclusion that Scripture teaches both. He admits that the Reformed confessions actually teach only an outward

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<sup>196</sup> This is important, for, on the one hand, not all defenders of the idea of the restraint of sin make such careful distinctions; and, on the other hand, while the Bible clearly teaches an *outward* restraint, it is quite another question whether it teaches an *inward restraint by the Holy Spirit*.

restraint (although an inward restraint, so Kuiper claims, is implied), but Scripture itself is clear.<sup>197</sup>

The scriptural proof which Kuiper offers is interesting.

He appeals first of all to the “repentance” of the Ninevites under the preaching of Jonah as an example of inward restraint. His argument is that Nineveh’s repentance was *not true repentance*, but an *outward remorse rooted in terror of destruction*. Because Jonah himself speaks of God’s grace in this connection, we have here, Kuiper says, an example of common grace in the form of an inward restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit.<sup>198</sup>

Further proof is found in Psalm 81:11-12. Here the line of proof is much like that of Hodge, in connection with his comments on Romans 1:25. Kuiper argues that, because God *gave Israel over*, an *inward restraint* of sin is implied, for one cannot “give another over” who has not previously been “restrained.”

#### *William Masselink*

William Masselink gives his own insights into this matter of the restraint of sin, when he specifically connects common grace with general revelation.<sup>199</sup> Although general revelation and common grace differ, according to Masselink, in origin, purpose, and how we acquire knowledge of them, they are related.<sup>200</sup> Masselink writes:

They are related, however, because in common grace God uses the truths of general revelation to restrain sin. The two results of general revelation are: God-consciousness and moral consciousness. By means of these two results, through God’s common grace, sin is curbed in the natural man.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-25.

<sup>199</sup> Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

Masselink claims that Reformed theology all but went into eclipse for 200 years after the Reformation, because “the great fact of the Christian’s relation to the world was neglected.” But Kuyper and Hodge were the ones who *revived* Reformed theology once again.<sup>202</sup>

In referring especially to Kuyper, Masselink speaks of a *negative* element, in the restraint of sin, which restrains “the devastating effects of sin,” and a *positive* element, which is “the constant operation of the Holy Spirit upon all mankind by which civil righteousness is promoted.”<sup>203</sup>

### *Donald Macleod*

Macleod also includes restraint of sin in his discussion of common grace.<sup>204</sup> He seems, however, to speak mostly of *external* restraints, for, in mentioning the instruments of this element of common grace, he speaks of God’s general revelation, the presence of the church which restrains sin and postpones judgment, ordinances of law and government which create a good climate, influence of public opinion, God’s judgments which remove wickedness, and the external call of the gospel.<sup>205</sup>

### *John Murray*

Because of John Murray’s prominence as an orthodox and biblical theologian, whose influence has been widespread and great, we refer to his views in some detail.

The reader will recall that our earlier references to John Murray made clear that, while some theologians who held to common grace were reluctant to root common grace in the cross of Jesus Christ, Murray does not hesitate to do this. He speaks forcibly about benefits of the atonement to the non-elect,<sup>206</sup> of the non-elect enjoying “many benefits that accrue *from* the atonement,” although, Murray insists, the non-elect do “not

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<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>204</sup> Macleod, *Behold Your God*.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-123.

<sup>206</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings*, I, p. 68.

partake of the *atonement*.”<sup>207</sup> Among these “benefits” are also those internal influences of the Holy Spirit.

Referring to A. A. and Charles Hodge’s definition of common grace as “the influence of the Spirit of God on the minds of men,” Murray finds this deficient and pleads for a *broader* and *more inclusive* definition which embraces *any* gift or favor “of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”<sup>208</sup>

The various elements of common grace include restraint “upon the expressions and consequences of human depravity and of unholy passion.”<sup>209</sup> This restraint is, in tum, broken down into: 1) Restraint of sin which is “restraint upon the workings of human depravity” by which God “prevents the unholy affections and principles of men from manifesting all the potentialities inherent in them.”<sup>210</sup> 2) Restraint upon the divine wrath so that judgment is postponed and God’s attributes of forbearance and longsuffering are revealed to the non-elect. 3) Restraint upon evil by means of which God sends “correcting and preserving influences so that the ravages of sin might not be allowed to work out the full measure of their destructive power.”<sup>211</sup>

Murray never states explicitly that these restraints upon the wicked are caused by the *internal operation of the Spirit in the hearts of the non-elect*. Indeed, when he speaks of the agency of restraint, he mentions specifically civil government and points out that the purpose of civil government, as defined in I Peter 2:14, is, at least in part, achieved.<sup>212</sup> But he seems to imply such internal workings when he speaks of a restraint which “prevents the unholy affections ... of men from manifesting all the potentialities inherent in them.”

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<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 96.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98. For proof, Murray cites Genesis 3:22-23 and 4:15. With respect to Cain, Murray speaks of “a halo of sanctity” which “was placed around his life” (p. 99). Further proof is found in Genesis 20:6, but the assumption here is that Abimelech was an unbeliever, something difficult, if not impossible, to prove (p. 100).

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

While many others speak of the fact that common grace “serves” special grace, Murray not only makes a special point of this, but goes on to make a very strange assertion in this connection. He writes that the salvation of the church is “not the only purpose being fulfilled in history and not ... the one purpose to which all others may be subordinate.”<sup>213</sup>

This is strange, to say the least. While Murray does not enter into this idea at all, questions arise which seem to be unanswerable to a Reformed man. What *other* purpose is there in history but the *one purpose of the salvation of the church*? Does God have *multiple* purposes in His counsel—if, indeed, Murray believes that history is the temporal realization of God’s counsel? Does God glorify Himself (the one great purpose for which God does all things) in *other* ways than the salvation of an elect people in Christ? If so, does God have *other* purposes in His works apart from Christ? What a strange statement of Murray this is.

But whatever Murray may have meant, it is clear that Murray, too, held firmly to a restraint of sin as a part of common grace.

#### *Kornelis Sietsma*

Slightly different is the view of Sietsma on the restraint of sin. Sietsma is not ready to find the origin or judicial basis for the blessings which the wicked receive in the cross of Jesus Christ. He prefers to explain the *lingering elements of good* in man, in terms of remnants which man preserves after the fall and which are remnants of the office in which man was created.<sup>214</sup> He writes:

Of course, Satan did not succeed in destroying man completely. Man is not a devil, full of conscious and deliberate hate for God. We believe, according to what we designate “common grace,” that there are active in the world and in man many energies or powers of the Word and Spirit of God which

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<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>214</sup> Strangely, and in seeming contradiction to what he writes, Sietsma does speak of original goodness preserved in man as being related to Christ (Sietsma, *The Idea of Office*, p. 34); but he never explains what that relationship is.

prevent the transformation of all that God once created good into its very opposite. The Lord sees to it that the thoughts of the human mind, the affections of the human heart, and the works of the human hand still manifest His glory and the rich qualities of His creation. There remains a rich form of human life, even where there is no regeneration of the heart and even where the grace of salvation has not been bestowed.<sup>215</sup>

*Abraham Kuyper*

Perhaps no one is more responsible for developing this aspect of common grace than Dr. Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper did not, of course, hold to the free and general offer of the gospel, and, in fact, sharply *repudiated* it. But later in life, after Kuyper had resigned from the active ministry in order to devote himself to politics, he developed his own theory of common grace. His views on common grace are to be found especially in his three-volume work, *Gemeene Gratie*,<sup>216</sup> and in his “Stone Lectures” published in book form under the title *Calvinism*.

After speaking of the magistrate as “an instrument of ‘common grace,’”<sup>217</sup> Kuyper broadens his definition and speaks of common grace as that which arrests sin. It does “not kill the core of sin, nor does it save unto life eternal, but it arrests the complete effectuation of sin.”

God by His “common grace” restrains the operation of sin in man, partly by breaking its power, partly by taming his evil spirit, and partly by domesticating his nation or his family.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>216</sup> Kuyper deliberately called his view of common grace *gemeene gratie* to distinguish it from the more common term, *algemeene genade*. Though it is impossible to distinguish between the two terms in an English translation, Kuyper chose the former so that his view would not be confused with the general offer of the gospel.

<sup>217</sup> Kuyper, *Calvinism*, p. 82.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

*Henry R. Van Til*

Henry Van Til, though disagreeing with Kuyper in some respects, gives an excellent summary of Kuyper's position, as outlined in his *Gemeene Gratie*. He writes:

Creation would have returned to the void unless God in his common grace intervened to sustain it; thus the creative will is now achieved through common grace. Common grace does not merely have a restraining or negative influence but it is also positive and progressive in motivating cultural activity. Culture is a gift of common grace since through it the original powers deposited in nature were brought to fruition. The very antithesis between light and darkness is possible only on the basis of common grace.<sup>219</sup>

*The Christian Reformed Church*

Finally, we quote the "second point" of the doctrinal decisions of the Christian Reformed Church taken in June of 1924 by the Synod of these churches and declared by that Synod to be the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

Relative to the second point, which is concerned with the restraint of sin in the life of the individual man and in the community, the Synod declares that there is such a restraint of sin according to Scripture and the confessions. This is evident from the citations from Scripture and from the

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<sup>219</sup> Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, p. 229. The reader will notice that Kuyper also speaks of a positive "good" resulting from this restraint of sin. This positive good is taught by all who hold to common grace. This is understandable. The restraint of sin results in "good." This latter aspect of the question, however, we hope to treat separately.

*Netherlands Confession*, Arts. 13 & 36, which teach that God by the general operations of His Spirit, without renewing the heart of man, restrains the unimpeded breaking out of sin, by which human life in society remains possible; while it is also evident from the quotations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed theology, that from ancient times our Reformed fathers were of the same opinion.<sup>220</sup>

With that quotation, we bring our discussion of this idea to a close. It is possible to quote many more writers who have expressed themselves on this view, but a sufficient number have been quoted to give us a correct view of what defenders of common grace mean by the restraint of sin.

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Although this matter of the restraint of sin will be discussed in detail, later in this study, we conclude this section with a few observations and general remarks.

### The Relation between General Favor and the Restraint of Sin

Although we have discussed the aspect of common grace which teaches God's attitude of love and favor upon all men *separately* from our present discussion of the restraint of sin, one must not get the impression that these are two unrelated matters. All proponents of common grace connect the two ideas.

We have talked about this matter earlier in this chapter, but must discuss it a bit more.

That they belong together is evident on the surface from the fact that both are *grace*. They are not saving grace, but *grace shown to all men*. God's attitude of favor and His gracious restraint of sin are both *grace*, common to all.

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<sup>220</sup> Quoted from Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, p. 354.

The relation between these two is clear. Not only are the gifts of *rain and sunshine* evidences of God's attitude of love and favor upon all men, but also His *gracious restraint of sin* is evidence of His attitude of love and favor—after all, the inward restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit is *grace*. And *grace is favor*, by definition. So the relation is this: God shows His love and favor to all men in many different ways. Two of them are the good gifts He gives and the work of the Spirit in restraining sin.

But this connection between the two does not exhaust the ideas which proponents of common grace have in mind. Although they are not always as clear as one could wish on these questions, certain ideas nevertheless emerge.

The best way to get at this matter is to proceed from the question: *What is considered, by the defenders of common grace, to be the relation between common grace and saving grace?* More than one defender of common grace speak of this.

Herman Bavinck writes in connection with his discussion of general and special revelation:

Grace is the content of both revelations, common in the first, general in the second, but in such a way that the one is indispensable for the other.

It is common grace which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service.<sup>221</sup>

In a similar fashion, but more explicitly, John Murray discusses this point:

Apprehension of the truth of the gospel that is prior to faith and repentance, and therefore prior to the regeneration of which faith and repentance are the immediate effects in our consciousness, cannot strictly belong to the saving operations of the Spirit. They are preparatory to these saving

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<sup>221</sup> Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, p. 38.

operations and in the gracious design of God place the person concerned in the psychological condition that is the prerequisite of the intelligent exercise of faith and repentance. In other words, they place in his mind the apperceptive content that makes the gospel meaningful to his consciousness. But since they are not the saving acts of faith and repentance they must belong to a different category from that of saving grace and therefore to the category of non-saving or common grace.

We may thus say that in the operations of common grace we have what we may call the vestibule of faith.<sup>222</sup>

Thus, the whole idea of common grace is connected to the free offer of the gospel. David Silversides, e.g., says of common grace:

God enjoins his ministers to present a genuine and benevolent invitation to sinners to come to Christ expressive of his love and favour to them.<sup>223</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that the connection between God's gracious attitude of favor towards the wicked and the restraint of sin include the following.

First of all, both are manifestations of God's grace shown to all men in common. Perhaps it would not even be an exaggeration to say that the idea is that God's restraint of sin is an *evidence* of His attitude of favor, just as rain and sunshine demonstrate this favor. That is, God expresses and shows His love and benevolence for all men by restraining sin in their evil hearts.

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<sup>222</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings*, II, p. 115.

<sup>223</sup> Silversides, *Paper on the Two Natures of Christ*, p. 35.

Secondly, among the evidences of God's favor is the free and gracious offer of the gospel.<sup>224</sup>

Thirdly, the relation between common grace and special grace is twofold. On the one hand, common grace, evident in the free offer of the gospel, speaks of God's love and favor towards all because it expresses *objectively* God's earnest desire and will to save all. But, on the other hand, because the *subjective* restraint of sin by an operation of the Holy Spirit within the heart is also grace, it is a *preparatory* grace which puts the sinner in a position to receive the gospel. It is, to use Murray's words, the "vestibule of faith."

So the conclusion of the matter is that, although common grace is not in itself saving grace, it is nevertheless *indispensable* for the saving operations of the Spirit.



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<sup>224</sup> That the free offer of the gospel is an evidence of God's gracious favor to all is evident from the First Point of common grace adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, which speaks of the fact that this general offer is proof of God's favorable attitude towards humanity in general.



## THE RESTRAINT OF SIN: IS IT BIBLICAL?

**A**N IMPORTANT aspect of the doctrine of common grace is the teaching that the Holy Spirit of God restrains sin in the world and in man.

Defenders of common grace present the restraint of sin as taking place in many different ways, among which are: 1) The temporal operations of the Holy Spirit through government, public opinion, knowledge of divine punishments and rewards, etc.; 2) General revelation which comes to all men without exception through the creation; 3) The work of the Holy Spirit enlightening the mind and conscience of man; 4) Such influences of the Holy Spirit which prevent man from becoming a devil or a beast and which enable man to engage in cultural activities which are for man's good.

The result of these restraining influences are: 1) That man is not as bad as he would otherwise be;<sup>225</sup> 2) That he retains some ability to do good; 3) That judgment and divine wrath are postponed as God reveals forbearance and longsuffering towards men while making overtures towards them to persuade them of the desirability of salvation.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> The distinction is often made between “total” depravity and “absolute” depravity.

<sup>226</sup> See the previous chapter for a detailed description of the many views on this subject that emerge from the writings of defenders of common grace.

It is generally agreed that these restraints of sin, while in many respects *outward*, are nevertheless also *inward*; i.e., they are brought about by an inward operation of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of men which, though not renewing the heart unto repentance and salvation, nevertheless checks the workings of sin.

It is this aspect of common grace which we consider in this chapter.

## Restraint and Original Sin

As I mentioned in the last chapter, I do not know of anyone in the history of Reformed or Presbyterian thought who has denied that God outwardly restrains the manifestations of sin by His providence. This is so clearly taught in Scripture and so obvious from life that no one could possibly deny it without being accused of irrationality.

The careful reader will notice, however, that in the above paragraph I used the words, “God restrains the *manifestations of sin*,” rather than saying merely, “God restrains *sin*.” There is good reason for that difference in wording. And it involves the point at issue.

In this discussion the word “sin” can and must be used in two different ways. Sin certainly can refer to all the wicked and evil *deeds* of man—not only those which he commits in his outward speech and actions, but also those which are part of his inward life of thought and desire. But sin can also refer to the *spiritual quality* or *condition of his nature*. I do not suppose that there are any in the tradition of Reformed and Presbyterian thought who would disagree, but the point ought to be emphasized nevertheless. It is often overlooked or ignored, though it is of crucial importance. The latter is called *original sin*.

Scripture and the confessions of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches speak of “original sin.” By original sin is meant original guilt and original pollution. Original guilt is the guilt which comes upon all men for the sin of Adam’s disobedience in eating of the forbidden tree. Adam became guilty before God for this act of disobedience; but, because he was created as the federal or legal head of the entire human race, the guilt of this sin of Adam was imputed to all men who are born from Adam. They are guilty for that sin and deserve to go to hell for that sin alone.

Original pollution is the just punishment of God upon those who are guilty of Adam's sin. It is part of the death which God said would surely come upon man for disobedience: "The day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely *die*." It is what Paul refers to in Ephesians 2:1 when he describes all men as "*dead* in trespasses and sins." It is *spiritual* death. It is a spiritual corruption of the nature of man so that he is incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil. It is what brought forth David's lament: "Behold, I was *shapen* in iniquity; and in sin did my mother *conceive* me" (Ps. 51:5). It is with original pollution that we are concerned.

Original pollution is what is referred to in the *Heidelberg Catechism* in Q&A 57: "What believest thou concerning 'the forgiveness of sins'? That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, *neither my corrupt nature, against which I have to struggle all my life long ...*" The *Belgic Confession* also speaks of the corruption of the nature when it describes original sin in this way:

We believe that, through the disobedience of Adam, original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature, and an hereditary disease, wherewith infants themselves are infected even in their mother's womb, and which produceth in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof; and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God, that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind.<sup>227</sup>

In similar fashion, the *Westminster Confession* says:

They (Adam and Eve, HH) being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.

From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly disposed, disabled, and made opposite of all

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<sup>227</sup> *Belgic Confession* 15.

good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.<sup>228</sup>

Let it be unmistakably clear: the defenders of common grace mean, by their doctrine of the restraint of sin, two specific and quite different things. They mean, first of all, that sin, in the *first* sense mentioned above, is restrained. That is, they mean that sin as *deed* is restrained. Men's words are restrained—as in the case of a man who will not take God's name in vain in polite company. Men's actions are restrained—as in the case of a driver who will not speed when he notices a police car in the median of the expressway. Even, in a certain sense, men's thoughts and desires are restrained, although they are part of those deeds which belong to the activity of his mind and will. The restraint of his inward psychic activity is also part of external restraint which comes about by the providence of God.

No one ever denied this. This is simply taken for granted in all discussion of Reformed theology.

But the defenders of common grace mean more than all this. They mean an inward restraint which, in some fashion, *changes man's corrupt nature*. They refer to a restraint of sin which does away with the full corruption of man's nature, though it does not save. As a result of this change in his nature, the natural man is capable of performing some good deeds.

Although the terminology I have used is not that commonly employed by the defenders of common grace, this is nevertheless what is meant by the restraint of sin. This is evident from three considerations.<sup>229</sup>

In the first place, the defenders of common grace speak of a restraint of sin by the work of the Holy Spirit upon the *heart* of man. It is not a saving change which is wrought; but it is a change which alters the heart sufficiently so that man is not as wicked as he would be without this work of the Spirit.

In the second place, some defenders of common grace speak of a distinction which must be made between "total depravity" and "absolute depravity." By the latter is meant that the depravity *of the human nature* is as

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<sup>228</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* 6.3-4

<sup>229</sup> For quotes of various writers which support these considerations, I refer the reader to the previous chapter in this study.

complete as it can possibly be. Man is as wicked as it is possible to be *in his nature*. Although it is not always clear exactly what is meant by “total depravity” in distinction from “absolute depravity,” generally speaking the defenders of this distinction mean that, although *every part* of man’s nature is corrupt, *every part* is not as corrupt as it could be. This surely implies some modification of the corruption of the nature by the work of the Holy Spirit.

And finally, that the defenders of common grace speak of a restraint of sin in terms of an *alteration in the spiritual condition of the nature* is evident from the fact that they speak of this restraint of sin as *a work of God the Holy Spirit which prevents man from becoming a devil* (as John Murray spoke of it), or a beast (as Abraham Kuyper said). Now it is apparent that this description of the restraint of sin is a reference to the *nature* of man. Whether man is a devil or a beast, or whether he remains a rational and moral man is a question of his *nature*, not his deeds. Thus it is clear that the restraint of sin has to do with a significant alteration in the *spiritual condition* of man’s nature.

Now this is crucially important. And its importance lies in the fact that such a description of the restraint of sin is, indeed, a denial of the biblical, Calvinistic, and Reformed doctrine of total depravity.

While we want to look at this a bit more closely later, let it be clearly understood that the real issue here is the doctrine of *total depravity*. In the Reformed conception, if sinful deeds are restrained by God’s providence, that can and is done by God without altering in any respect the *nature* of man. Man remains a totally corrupt man, incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil. The *manifestation* of that corrupt nature in a man’s conduct may be restrained without any change in man’s nature whatsoever. But an *inner work of the Holy Spirit operating upon the heart of man* is a fundamental change in man’s very nature, so that he is no longer totally depraved, though he still is not saved and will eventually go to hell.

## Outward Restraint

Although the doctrine is not in dispute, we ought briefly to affirm the doctrine of the outward restraint of sin in the lives of men.

What needs emphasis here, of course, is the truth that this outward restraint of sin takes place by God's *providence*.

God's providence is the sovereign execution of His eternal and unchangeable counsel.

From before the foundation of the world, God has determined all that comes to pass. His counsel is His own living will. It is God's sovereign determination with regard to all things.

It is a counsel that is, in the absolute sense of the word, all-embracing. It determines all that happens in all the brute creation, in all the lives of all men, in all of heaven and among the angels, and in all of hell among the devils. No power outside of God exists. Nothing happens by chance and apart from His will. His counsel determines it all.<sup>230</sup>

That counsel is sovereignly efficacious. That is, the counsel is, itself, the power of its execution. We must remember that God's counsel is His own will. It is not a mere plan. It is not a blueprint for history which is filed away in some filing cabinet in heaven, consulted by God as the need arises. It is not subject to change or alteration, depending on circumstances which may force God to amend His plan. It is not a "good guess" as to what shall transpire in history, or a divine prediction which is always right. The power of the execution of God's counsel lies in the counsel itself. And thus the determinations of God's counsel infallibly come to pass. None can withstand His will; none can resist His purpose. None can force God to change His mind or alter that which He has determined to do.<sup>231</sup>

But there is one more truth of God's counsel which must be remembered. God's counsel is not a mere collection of decrees, arbitrarily thrown together without any rhyme or reason. It is a *unified* plan and purpose, with each single decree perfectly related to the whole, and the whole perfectly adapted to the goal. God has determined to glorify Himself in the highest and best possible way. That way is the way of the salvation of an elect church through Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Mediator

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<sup>230</sup> Any other position introduces into theology an intolerable *dualism* which speaks of two autonomous powers: God and evil.

<sup>231</sup> God's counsel is also determinative of sin. Sin does not take place outside God's counsel and will so that it takes God by surprise. Although we are not concerned about the question in our present discussion, the great theologians of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition have all held that God's sovereignty extends also to sin.

of the covenant. All things which God determines to do are perfectly and marvellously willed so that God's great purpose may be accomplished. God's purpose in the creation and in the lives of all men is for the salvation of the church in Christ to the glory of God's grace. All things that happen in heaven and among angels serve the great purpose of God to glorify Himself in His Son. Hell and Satan and all Satan's hordes are under the sovereign control of God and for His own glory.

Providence is the *execution* of God's counsel. Providence is not some vague and impersonal force which men generally worship—as in the language of Deists.<sup>232</sup> Providence is not just a rather general way of saying that God “does all things in the world.” Providence is God's *sovereign execution* of His own eternal counsel so that His purpose in Christ may be accomplished.

Outward restraint of sin comes about through this providence of God which has, as its purpose, the glory of His own name through the salvation of His church in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

It ought, I think, to be evident that this definition of providence in relation to the outward restraint of sin puts some important limitations on the question.

But be that as it may, God's providence restrains sin in many different ways.

God's providence restrains sin in the lives of individual people by determining all the circumstances of their birth and life. God's providence determines the time in history when each man shall be born, and the time of his birth determines how his sin is restrained. After all, Lamech, who was the first bigamist, could commit adultery, but he could not commit adultery as easily and readily as is possible today with the invention of birth control devices and the approval of abortion. He was restrained from sinning in certain respects because of the time in which he was born and during which he lived. Nor could Cain sin with a TV or an automobile, for the time of his birth, determined by God, prevented him from sinning in these respects.

Other circumstances of a man's birth also restrain sin. A man may be born in very poor circumstances or “with a golden spoon in his mouth.” The man born of poor parents is never going to be able to commit the

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<sup>232</sup> One can find examples of this in the writings of the early fathers of our country as, e.g., *The Declaration of Independence*.

sins which multi-millionaires or billionaires commit. The circumstances of his life restrain sin in this respect. There is, so to speak, no possibility of a poor man committing the sin of a Kennedy. But God's providence determines the circumstances of a man's life and thus determines his sin. So, through providence, God restrains certain sins in the lives of certain people.

But there is more. God's providence also determines *where* a man is born, and this, too, has much to do with the sins of which a man can, in the course of his life, become guilty. A native of the jungles of Samoa is in a position quite different from that of a man born in London or Chicago. The native of Samoa cannot possibly sin in the same way as a man from Chicago's northwest side. These circumstances are determined by God. In this way God determines certain limitations of man's sins.

Let it be clearly understood that all men are exactly the same as far as their *spiritual condition* is concerned. Cain and Mr. Rothschild are equally depraved. Lamech and Magic Johnson are equally depraved. A native of New Guinea and a Wall St. banker are both equally corrupt in their nature. But the *activity* of a corrupt nature is quite different. The family man on 132 Elm St. in Elmhurst lives under circumstances different from those of the head of a Mafia clan in Hoboken. They are both totally depraved, but the *manifestation* of their sin will be quite different.

## Outward Restraint and Government

But most will have no trouble with these things. There are other questions which are more difficult. What about *government*? Or what about man's *self-restraint*, if I may for the moment call it that?

There are those, among whom is Abraham Kuyper, who find in the institution of government a common grace of God because of the fact that government restrains sin.

Now, apart from anything else, it ought to be apparent that even though it is true that government restrains sin, such restraint is, after all, an *outward* restraint and by no means an "internal work of the Holy Spirit."

But here is a problem. Although by no means do the defenders of common grace clearly explain what their position is, it is important that we attempt to figure out what the underlying idea is all about.<sup>233</sup>

The difficulty lies in the fact that the institution of government is said to be *a gift of God's grace*. The question is: How can that which only *outwardly* restrains be a gift of *grace*? Supposing, e.g., that I have a vicious pit bull dog which would attack anyone who ventured past my house. It would be possible to restrain that dog by putting it on a chain and anchoring the end of the chain firmly in the ground. I would, in this way, be restraining the dog, but one could hardly call that restraint a kind of *grace* to those who pass by. The point is that government may be a means by which God restrains sin in the world as a chain restrains my pit bull, but it is not at all clear that this is yet *grace* to those who are affected by the outward restraint of government. It is merely God's means of preserving good order in society *for the sake of the church*.

But the defenders of common grace seem also to mean that government comes into being by an *inward* restraint of sin in the hearts of men. It seems the idea is that *man's willingness* to establish government and his *willingness* to live in obedience to government is due to God's gracious influences upon man's heart which enables him to do these good things.

It is in connection with these ideas that some have introduced the notion that, without the restraint of sin, outwardly through government and inwardly by the Holy Spirit operating on the heart of unregenerated man, man would have become a beast.

Dr. Abraham Kuyper and many others have argued that, if God had not intervened in His common grace after Adam's fall, this present earthly creation would have become a wasteland, a wild howling wilderness, an abode of jackals and predators; and man himself would have become an animal or a devil. The result would have been, except for the intervention of common grace, that society would have been reduced to chaos and all culture would have been absolutely impossible. But since common grace intervened, and the Holy Spirit restrains sin inwardly so that man did not become a beast or a devil, the creation, though under the curse, is still a very beautiful place to live, and society functions quite well on the whole,

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<sup>233</sup> One sometimes wishes that the defenders of common grace would make themselves clear in their own writings, which are often characterized by *vagueness*, and not leave it to others to explain precisely what they mean.

with law and order prevailing for the most part and with criminals put away where they cannot bring chaos upon society's institutions.

There are here important questions.

Once again I remind the reader that we must view this question from the viewpoint of God's *providence*, and not merely from the viewpoint of *what we see around us*. Surely this means, fundamentally, that all which is ascribed to God's common grace and some inward restraining power of the Spirit is, in fact, God's *providence*.

But, of course, this does not automatically solve the problem. It may still be argued that God's providential control over all things includes a gracious attitude of favor towards all men, revealed in the work of the Holy Spirit, who successfully restrains sin.

It must, however, be remembered that God's providence is not an arbitrary rule of all things, but is *God's salvation of His elect church in Jesus Christ*. Whatever best serves that purpose, God has decreed to do. God may use government to restrain sin in the world to make the world a place where the church can be gathered. The world is like a leashed pit bull held by the chain of government to prevent the church from being mauled. But the fact that government is the leash and the world the fierce dog does not involve a *change for the good* in man's nature, either in government itself or in the world whose vicious character is restrained by government. The question is: Is that work of providence *grace*? And is that work of providence accomplished by the restraint of sin through the operation of the Holy Spirit?

That question shall finally have to be answered, of course, on the basis of Scripture itself. And we shall examine such scriptural passages which have been quoted in support of this position.

But for the moment, there are other considerations which we do well to take into account in evaluating these ideas. And we consider it legitimate to work in this way because the defenders of common grace gain most of their proof for their position from *what they see in the world about them*, and only *after* coming to certain conclusions on the basis of their observations do they seek some scriptural support.

The first question which we face is this: Is it true that man, after the fall, would have become an *animal* or a *devil*, if God had not intervened in His common grace to restrain, through the Holy Spirit, these effects of the fall? And let there be no mistake: It is not a question merely of man

becoming *as wicked as* a devil or *as ungovernable as* a beast; rather, man would have become *in fact* a beast or a devil.

Now it ought to be evident immediately that this notion does not come from Scripture, and no one, so far as I have been able to tell, has ever made an effort to prove this rather strange idea from God's Word. It is a deduction which comes from man's thinking, not from Holy Scripture. It is a conclusion only, and is not taught in God's sacred Word.

It ought further to be evident that, from a certain point of view, it would have been *preferable* for man to become an animal after the fall, than to remain a man. Common grace, it would seem, would be more clearly revealed if man *had* been changed into an animal than if common grace preserved him as a man. After all, animals cannot sin, and be punished, and go to hell. But men can.

Nevertheless, all this is impossible on the very surface. If the fall means that man would have become a beast or a devil apart from God's common grace, then the *essential nature* of man would have been changed. Man would have ceased to be man. That is flatly impossible. God created man. Man sinned. Man fell. Upon man comes God's judgment. Man dies while he remains man. Man is judged by God and endures the awful punishment for his sin. To claim, as some do, that the fall, apart from common grace, would have *altered man's essential being* is absurd on the face of it. The horror of life here in this world is that man always *remains* man.

But what about government? It simply is not true that government is an institution which was added to man's life by God in God's common grace. Government belongs to the *creation order*. Man was created as friend-servant under God. He was, by virtue of his creation, God's representative in God's world to carry out God's purpose in God's name and to God's glory. As such, he was made the head of the creation. He ruled over the creation and all in it.

If God had given Adam and Eve children in the state of perfection, which surely would have happened (Gen. 1:27-28), Adam would have been ruler over his family. And from that one family unit would have come forth the human race over which Adam would have been the head.

And so, even though the fall intervened, all the relationships of life which involve authority and obedience develop originally from the *family*. This is why the *Heidelberg Catechism* can interpret the fifth commandment, which requires obedience of children to their parents, as a commandment

which obligates us to “show all honor, love and fidelity, to my father and mother, and *all in authority over me*” (Q&A. 104).

Government was not, therefore, instituted by God as a fruit of His common grace; it was the *natural and organic development of the family* in the more complex relationships of life. Government is an institution of society created by God, which can be either good or bad, depending upon those who occupy the positions of authority in government. It has *nothing* to do with any operation of the Holy Spirit restraining sin.

That government actually *does* restrain sin is obvious. Indeed it is true that, if no government existed, society would fall into total chaos. Where there is no law and order there is chaos. But society would not long endure under those situations.

Government is part of God’s providential rule of man. By it, God restrains sin. He restrains sin so that there may be peace and quietness in the world where the church lives so that the church can perform its calling to preach the gospel to every creature. If chaos prevailed, the church would be destroyed. That government functions is due to God’s providence, which creates an environment in which God can accomplish His purpose in Jesus Christ. Thus providence is for *God’s eternal purpose to save His church in Christ*.

We are even commanded to pray for magistrates, partly because God is pleased to save magistrates too, but also because, through the magistrates, God enables us to lead quiet and peaceful lives (I Tim. 2:1-4). But such restraint is *outward* only and not necessarily grace, except to the church.

Nevertheless, it is also true and readily to be admitted that God’s providential rule over governments involves also a desire, on the part of men, to establish an orderly state in which laws are made and enforced which will bring tranquillity to men in the civil realm. Most men see clearly, whether regenerated or unregenerated, that it is *advisable* to have society institutions which enforce certain laws and precepts that make life in human relationships possible.

## Restraint of Sin and Good Works

The question is: Does the fact that unregenerated men *recognize the value* of government necessarily imply common grace and the operation of the Holy Spirit?

There is another question involved in this, of course. That question is: Is it a *good work* on the part of men, whether regenerate or unregenerate, to have some regard for virtue and good order in society?

This is a question which is answered in the affirmative by those who teach common grace. They insist that *such regard* for virtue and good order is a good work. It is not our intention to enter into that question at this point—although, admittedly, it is inescapably bound up in the problem before us now. But that question of the “good” of which the unregenerate are capable, is a question to be discussed later in our study.<sup>234</sup> For the moment, we only quote an important article in the *Canons of Dort* which deals with this question.

There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay, further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> It ought to be obvious to all that, if the regard for virtue and good order in society, which unregenerate men are capable of showing, is *the fruit of the Holy Spirit* in their hearts, these works are also *good works*, for the simple reason that the Holy Spirit *always* produces nothing but good works. He is incapable of producing evil works.

<sup>235</sup> *Canons* 3–4.4

But the point which we now need to consider is the fact that it is not necessary for the natural man to have, in his heart, the work of the Holy Spirit, which changes his nature in order to have some regard for virtue and good order in society.

He is a rational and moral creature. He remains such even after the fall. He did not become a beast or a devil. He still possesses a mind and a will. His mind and will are wholly corrupted and incapable of doing anything aright. But he still has such a mind and such a will.

Because he possesses, and continues to possess, his rational and moral nature, he is also capable of seeing and understanding that order in society is *far preferable* to chaos. He can understand that it is *better for himself, his wife, and his children* if murderers are locked up rather than permitted to roam the streets. It does not take a work of the Holy Spirit to show him that it is preferable to have traffic lights in busy cities and policemen to see to it that everyone stops when the light is red, than to have everyone flying around without any laws governing his conduct behind the wheel of his automobile. If there is no speed limit enforced by government agencies and no traffic lights to control traffic, he would almost certainly be in an accident before long and he would never make it to work on time. Why does the *Holy Spirit* have to give him this knowledge by restraining sin in his heart? Any man can see that.

In other words, a man will surely see that his own life in the world, and, in large measure, his own comfort in the world, are dependent upon government. In fact, as law and order continue to break down in our society, a man can see that even a *dictatorship* is preferable to a democracy, if a democracy no longer seems capable of maintaining law and order. And that is precisely what will presently happen in our society. The liberals, who are intent on maintaining society by pleading for the rights of everyone but the law-abiding citizen, will soon learn that they are destroying democracy and paving the way for a dictatorship in which no one will have any rights. But no rights in a safe society is preferable to all kinds of rights in a society where I may be robbed or shot in the next fifteen minutes. There is no need for a gracious operation of the Holy Spirit to understand that. Even a totally depraved man can see that an orderly society is better for his pursuit of sin, and will enable him to enjoy sin more fully than if he is a prisoner in his own house.

This understanding of the benefits of civil government puts the benefits of government under the *providence* of God, who rules sovereignly

over all in order that His own purpose in the salvation of the church may take place.

It is interesting to observe how all these principles operate in society today.

Governments and peoples are interested in their own carnal pursuit of pleasure and prosperity. The only reason sin is somewhat *restrained* is because man sees that, to refrain from curbing sin in all its manifestations is necessary to create a climate and environment where he need not suffer the consequences of sin. But if the least possibility of sinning and escaping its consequences presents itself, he will quickly turn to sin.

Sometimes, of course, even *suffering the consequences* of sin is insufficient to deter people. It is, e.g., a fact that the transmission of the HIV virus comes about through sexual contact (especially among homosexuals) and drug usage. There are some who advocate sexual restraint, but, for the most part, the terrible sins which bring about these horrible consequences continue unchecked.

Nevertheless, as a general rule, the consequences of sin can act as a powerful restraint. But such restraint does not change the *nature* of man, for if a man determines that he can sin and avoid the consequences of sin, he will surely favor the sin. If the consequences of immorality can be avoided by various birth-control devices, or, as a last resort, by abortion, he will be as promiscuous as it is possible for him to be. There are still, quite naturally, the consequences of divorce, broken homes, one-parent families to consider, and, in some instances, these consequences will prove to be something of a deterrent; but as the social stigma of divorce disappears and the law itself becomes more lenient, divorce, with its sad consequences, is no longer a restraint of sin.

The reason is that, although God in His providence has created many ways in which sin is restrained, the nature of man remains unchanged. He is always the same totally depraved man he always was and will always be apart from the regenerating grace of God.

And that is, after all, the nub of the matter. Restraint of sin by an *internal* operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man is a change in his *nature*. And a change of this sort, in his nature, is a change in the corruption and depravity of his nature.

## Total and Absolute Depravity

The distinction between “total” depravity and “absolute” depravity will not hold up. It is, first of all, a distinction not found in the Scriptures. No one who has supported this distinction has ever, so far as I know, made any effort to find it in Scripture. Scripture and the Reformed confessions teach, in keeping with the Calvinism of the historic Reformed and Presbyterian faith, that man is *totally* depraved.

If by *total* depravity, in distinction from *absolute* depravity, is meant that man is depraved in every part of his being, though every part is not totally depraved, this is a denial of total depravity on the very surface of it. Total depravity means that depravity is *total*. And any effort to mitigate that simple truth is a playing with words which cannot be tolerated in any theological discussion.

Scripture and all the confessions of Reformed and Presbyterian people teach that *man is as bad as he can possibly be*. That does not mean that he sins in every possible way, is perpetually guilty of the most heinous crimes, lives like a mafia gangster or heroin addict, behaves like a lust-filled homosexual every single second of his life. Of course not. Total depravity has to do with man’s *nature*. That nature—the nature of a man, a rational and moral nature—has, since the fall, become corrupt. It is *totally corrupt in every respect*.

That total corruption means on the one hand that such a man is totally incapable of any good. The *Heidelberg Catechism* is, e.g., quite clear on the point: “Is man then so wicked and corrupt that he is incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil? Indeed he is, except he is regenerated by the Holy Spirit” (Q&A. 8).

That total corruption means, therefore, that he cannot think one thought pleasing to God; he cannot desire one good thing; he cannot even *will to be saved*—his will wants only sin. He is incapable of any good word or deed which is according to God’s law and is pleasing to Him.<sup>236</sup> He is, indeed, as wicked in his nature as it is possible to be.

That sinful nature does not always reveal itself in overt sins of the most heinous kind. It is apparently this that confuses those who want to find good in man. Does a man have to spend every moment lying, cheating,

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<sup>236</sup> The whole question and problem of good works will be discussed later in our study.

murdering, fornicating, blaspheming, etc., to be totally depraved? By whose standard? According to whose criteria?

Sin is, after all, not limited to the *outward* violations of the law which are manifestly wrong. The sins which are particularly awful in the sight of God are often of other kinds. The man who smiles at his fellow member in the church with hatred in his heart, and who will destroy his neighbor with his tongue just as soon as he is out of earshot, is hateful in God's sight as much as (or more than) the man who sticks a knife in his neighbor's back. The man who sits in his pew in church looking pious while figuring out ways to cheat at his business is just as bad as (if not worse than) the man who lies on his income tax. The latter may be caught and imprisoned as a thief, but the former is as great a sinner, though he has done no overt wrong.

The fornicator may contract the HIV virus and show to all the world that he is guilty of crass fornication, but the man who is outwardly faithful to his wife in a monogamous relation and works every day to support his family may be considered a man with an abundance of common grace; but God knows that in his heart he lusts after every woman he sees. Who can say that the one is a greater sinner than the other?

The totally depraved sinner can do no good in the sight of God. His total depravity does not manifest itself as fully as it did in Hitler or Stalin. But that does not mean that his nature has been *improved* to the point that it is *no longer totally depraved*, though it remains depraved in all its parts. This is nonsense on the surface of it. A man may not be "as bad as he can be" in his *outward* actions, but this does not mean that he is not "as bad as he can be" in the depravity of his *nature*.

That the notion of total depravity as proposed by the defenders of common grace is absurd is evident from the fact that common grace of this sort proposes to us the possibility of a man who is no longer totally depraved (in the sense, at least, of being as bad as he can be in his nature), but is nevertheless unconverted and can very well go to hell. The Holy Spirit works in his heart so that sin is restrained by a change in his nature which, while leaving *every part* of his nature depraved, results in a nature which is partially *good*. Yet he remains unregenerated and unconverted, and unless regeneration and conversion is given him, will still go lost. Such a man is a spiritual and ethical monstrosity.

But such a denial of total depravity leads to outright Arminianism. For, after all, common grace teaches that part of the *good*, which such a man in

whom sin is restrained by an inward operation of the Holy Spirit is capable of doing, is to *accept the overtures of the gospel* and *hear* the pleadings of God who expresses in the gospel a desire to save him. Two points may be observed in this connection. The first is that common grace implies a revelation of God's love and favor towards all men by expressing in the gospel His *desire to save* all men. The second point of connection is that by an *inner* restraint of sin upon the heart through the work of the Holy Spirit, man is put into such a spiritual condition that he is *able to accept or reject* the offers and pleadings of the gospel—which reaction to the gospel will determine his ultimate fate in heaven or hell. It is impossible to separate the restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit from the “well-meant offer of the gospel.” The Holy Spirit enables the sinner to accept or reject the gospel, on the basis of which decision he will be saved or perish. And here is the *Arminianism* of it all. Total depravity means, after all, that salvation is by grace alone. It is the free gift of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. Common grace means that now man is *able* to make a decision, by the activity of his own free will, which becomes decisive in salvation.

One more point needs to be made. Should the proponents of common grace hold to a total depravity which is indeed *total* and still maintain a restraint of sin which is *able to produce good works*, it is a strange total depravity indeed. A depravity which makes it impossible for one to do any good is nevertheless a *total* depravity, which, under the restraining power of the Holy Spirit, can make room for *good*. A thoroughly rotten apple still has good parts to it. A totally dead man still has some signs of life. A totally dead tree still produces some branches which bear fruit. This is a strange depravity which is a flat contradiction in terms.

Thus the Reformed faith is lost and the truth of Scripture is cast to the winds. God's glory is sacrificed on the altar of man's pride.

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There are those who speak of a *providential* restraint of sin in the lives of men. With those we have no quarrel at all. There are those who speak of “common grace” as nothing more than a providential restraint of sin. With these, too, we have no quarrel, although we could wish that the defenders of this position would not call such a restraint “grace,” for, as we noticed earlier on, it is far from that.

But there is nothing biblical or confessional about an operation of the Holy Spirit which so restrains sin that the *nature* of man is spiritually altered and man is *capable of doing some kind of good*. This view is destructive of Calvinism, inimical to the Reformed faith, and an intolerable concession to Arminianism and Pelagianism. For such error there can be no room in Reformed theology.





## THE RESTRAINT OF SIN & GENERAL REVELATION

**I**N DISCUSSING that aspect of common grace which has to do with the restraint of sin, we concentrated, in the previous chapter, on the fact that an “inward restraint of sin by the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the unconverted” necessarily implies a moral change in man’s *nature*. This change, in man’s nature, involves an *improvement* of the nature which leaves an unconverted man in a state other than one of total depravity. The Holy Spirit so works that the natural and unconverted man is no longer *totally* depraved, though he remains unconverted. This, as we noticed, is a denial of the biblical and confessional doctrine of total depravity.

Other elements of the doctrine of the restraint of sin have also been discussed by various theologians in the course of their defense of common grace. One of the chief of these is the relationship between general revelation and common grace. It is to this aspect of the doctrine that we turn in this article.

### The Teaching

The whole concept of “general revelation” has, through the years, become closely associated with common grace.

In his work, *Common Grace*, Herman Bavinck refers to this relationship when he claims that common grace is important because it “prepares the way,” in the whole creation and in the human race, for special grace, by which the whole cosmos is saved.<sup>237</sup>

More clearly, Bavinck speaks of this relationship in his book *Our Reasonable Faith*. In speaking of general and special revelation, he writes:

Grace is the content of both revelations, common in the first, special in the second, but in such a way that the one is indispensable for the other.

It is common grace which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service.<sup>238</sup>

Louis Berkhof, in a lengthy discussion of common grace, includes general revelation as a means by which common grace operates. Appealing to Romans 2:14-15, Berkhof speaks of the fact that general revelation gives to the unregenerate many gifts, including the knowledge of God, which gifts are tokens of God’s grace to the reprobate.<sup>239</sup>

A. A. Hodge connects general revelation and the restraint of sin when he writes:

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<sup>237</sup> Bavinck, “Common Grace,” tr. by R. C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal*, XXIV (April, 1989), pp. 60ff.

<sup>238</sup> Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, p. 38.

<sup>239</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 440-441.

restraint of the evil passions, and an increase of the natural emotions in view of sin, duty, and self-interest.<sup>240</sup>

No one has devoted more time to this relationship than William Masselink, who wrote an entire book to demonstrate the close connection between general revelation and common grace. In this book, entitled *General Revelation and Common Grace*, he notes that the two cannot be identified because they differ in origin, purpose, and how we acquire knowledge of them. But he then goes on to say:

They are related, however, because in common grace God uses the truths of general revelation to restrain sin. The two results of general revelation are: God-consciousness and moral consciousness. By means of these two results, through God's common grace, sin is curbed in the natural man.<sup>241</sup>

Masselink rather strangely claims that Reformed theology all but went into eclipse for 200 years after the Reformation because "The great fact of the Christian's relation to the world was neglected." Kuyper and Hodge are to be thanked for reviving this crucial element in Reformation theology.<sup>242</sup>

Donald Macleod, in his crassly heretical book and vicious attack on those who deny common grace, includes God's general revelation as one of the instruments of the restraint of sin, a restraint which enables man to perform civil good.<sup>243</sup>

It is clear from these quotations, and their number could be multiplied, that general revelation assumes an important role in the whole doctrine of common grace, and that it is associated with that element of common grace which has to do with the restraint of sin.

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<sup>240</sup> Hodge, *Outline of Theology*, pp. 449-450.

<sup>241</sup> Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, p. 69.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>243</sup> Macleod, *Behold Your God*, p. 121.

## The Relation Between the Two

As we have noticed before in our discussions of common grace, it is not so easy to define specifically what the defenders of common grace mean by their assertions. They tend to speak in rather general and vague ways which give some very general notions of their ideas; but when one asks specific questions, the answers are not all that easy to find.

The same is true of our present subject. What precisely do the proponents of common grace mean when they speak of a “relation” between general revelation and common grace, or general revelation and the restraint of sin? The answers are not easy to find, and one must take guesses as to what they have in mind.

It seems, however, that the general idea is this: God reveals Himself in two ways to men. He reveals Himself in Scripture and He reveals Himself in creation and history. The former is God’s revelation in Jesus Christ; the latter is His revelation in the works of His hands in which Christ is not made known. The former is God’s speech through the gospel which results in the salvation of the elect; the latter is His speech to all men.

Nevertheless, both are *grace*. The former is God’s gracious speech in the overtures of the gospel; the latter is God’s gracious speech to all. The former is God’s gracious speech through Jesus Christ; the latter is the revelation of His love and kindness towards everyone. The former is the revelation of God’s special grace; the latter is the revelation of His common grace.

We might note here, in passing, that even at this point there is some confusion. While it is generally admitted that the grace revealed in general revelation is *general*, there is no consensus on the question of whether general revelation is grace to reprobate and elect alike. Some maintain that general revelation is grace only to the *reprobate*; others maintain that it is grace to *reprobate and elect alike*.

But even more confusing is God’s revelation in Scripture. While all agree that the revelation of God in Scripture is not revelation to all men (for all do not hear the gospel in the history of mankind), nevertheless, the defenders of common grace maintain that special revelation, i.e., the revelation of God through Scripture and the preaching of the gospel, is shown to *reprobate as well as elect*, for the preaching of the gospel expresses God’s desire to save all men and is, therefore, grace to reprobate, as well

as elect. This is the point of connection between common grace and the “well-meant gospel offer.”

But the question of the “well-meant gospel offer” is not our concern in this study.

The question remains, however: How is general revelation *grace*, albeit ‘common’ grace?

The primary texts which are quoted in this connection are Romans 1:18-25, particularly the expression,

... because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse (vv. 19-20).

and Romans 2:14-15:

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.

The argument goes like this. In creation, God reveals “His eternal power and Godhead” and writes “the work of the law” in the hearts of all men, so that the consciences of all men bear witness to the truth. Thus all men possess the knowledge of God and of God’s law. This knowledge of God and of His law is *graciously* given. Without such revelation, those outside the preaching of the gospel *would not even know* God, nor would they possess any knowledge of His law. They would be totally ignorant of God and of His will. They would live like beasts without any consciousness of God or His holy will. But God *graciously* gives them, through creation, such a knowledge that they still may know Him and what He has willed for them.

This knowledge of God, though not saving knowledge in Jesus Christ, is the means God uses to restrain sin in them. Knowing something of God, they retain some knowledge of the truth. Knowing the law of God, they retain some regard for virtue and good order in society—as the *Canons of Dort* express it in 3–4.4. And this knowledge which they possess is God’s *grace* to them. It is grace for different reasons. 1) It is grace because it is an act of grace that such knowledge is given at all. 2) It is grace because this knowledge, though not saving knowledge, gives them a possession which is a good gift of God. 3) It is grace, because, by means of this knowledge, they are restrained in their sin, and are, in fact, enabled to do some good. Hence, general revelation is grace.

Although not specifically mentioned by the proponents of common grace, it seems also as if another question enters the discussion at this point. It appears as if the defenders of common grace also want to connect this grace of God in general revelation with the *image of God in man*. Our readers will recall how we pointed out in an earlier article that it is often maintained by the defenders of common grace that, apart from common grace, man would have become a beast, after the fall. It is common grace that *preserves man as man*. And because he is still man, he still bears God’s image, though in a corrupted way. And this image, by which man knows God and knows the difference between right and wrong, is preserved in man through the common grace of general revelation.

And so we face three questions, each of which we shall have to examine. 1) What is general revelation? 2) Is this so-called “general revelation” *grace* towards the reprobate? 3) Is man still an image-bearer of God?

## What is General Revelation?

That God makes Himself known to all men through creation<sup>244</sup> is surely the teaching of Scripture, especially Romans 1:18ff. Whether it is proper to call this manifestation of God, through the things that are made, by the term *revelation* is quite another question.

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<sup>244</sup> We leave out of consideration here the idea that history belongs to general revelation. While in a certain sense this can be said to be true, it is not immediately relevant to our discussion.

As far as the term itself is concerned, Scripture utilizes the term in a very precise way.

The Greek term itself, ἀποκαλύπτω (*apokalýpto*), in its verb form, and ἀποκάλυψις (*apokálupsis*), in its noun form, has a very precise meaning. It means, “to uncover that which is hidden.” The figure is sometimes used of the unveiling of a painting or the public unveiling of a new piece of sculpture by an artist. A large crowd may be gathered for the occasion, and, at the proper time, a work of art, hitherto hidden under a large sheet, is withdrawn for all to see.

Now it is clear already, from the term itself, that such “revelation” or unveiling implies the ability on the part of the audience to *see* what is unveiled. If among the throng there are fifty blind people, it is obvious that, as far as the unveiling is concerned, there is no “revelation” of the work of art to these blind folk. The work of art may be unveiled, but the blind are unable to see it.

So it is when Scripture uses this term in connection with God’s *revelation* of Himself, or in connection with God’s *revelation* of Jesus Christ or the work of salvation which He has performed through Christ. God *uncovers* the greatness of His glory and *unveils* the riches of His grace in Jesus Christ. But there is no real “revelation” if there are blind people present.

And Scripture very sharply makes this distinction. It does so on the grounds that the fall of man, which resulted in the total depravity of the human race, makes it *spiritually impossible* for the totally depraved sinner to “see” the revelation of God or the truth of the gospel.

Jesus makes this very clear when He explains to His disciples why He speaks in parables (Matt. 13:11-16). While the wicked must hear the parables because “they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand,” to the disciples “is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” while “to them it is not given.” And the disciples know because, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.”

God’s work of revelation, therefore, implies the subjective spiritual work of grace in the hearts of the elect, by means of which they are given the spiritual ability to *see* that revelation. They are blind as the others, by nature. But when *revelation* takes place, this very work of revelation *includes* the subjective and inner work of the Holy Spirit, giving eyes to see and

ears to hear. This inner and enlightening work of the Holy Spirit is always implied in Scripture's use of the term.

The term, "revelation," therefore, includes in it various ideas according to Scripture.

In the first place, "revelation" is always *particular*. Whenever Scripture speaks of God's *revelation* of Himself, or of His revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, or of His revelation of the mysteries of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ, this is always particular and never general. It is always a work of God performed for His elect people and never embraces the reprobate.

This is sharply set forth in many passages of Scripture. In Matthew 11:25-27 we read:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.<sup>245</sup>

In the second place, because the term is used in a particular sense, the term always carries with it the connotation of *grace*. Revelation is always a work of grace—not general or common grace, but *particular* grace. Revelation is a part of the work of *salvation in Jesus Christ*. It is not incorrect or an exaggeration to say that the Bible never once speaks of *general* revelation.

Apparently the defenders of common grace are aware of this, for they, themselves, always connect revelation with grace. They understand that revelation and grace do indeed always belong together. That is, when

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<sup>245</sup> This same truth is found in Luke 10:21-22. That that revelation is particular, and not general, is evident from many other passages. See, e.g., Matthew 16:17, I Corinthians 2:10, Galatians 1:16, Ephesians 3:5, Philippians 3:15, I Peter 1:12. In fact, whether the verb form or the noun form is used, when "revelation" refers to God's work of making Himself known, the term is always used *particularly*—i.e., as a work of God for the *elect*. The reader can consult any concordance on the matter.

general revelation is spoken of, it is always spoken of in the context of *grace*. The trouble is that, because they maintain that revelation itself is *general*, they wrongly conclude that grace also is general. But the point is that grace can never be separated from revelation.

In the third place, because revelation includes the subjective work of God, by means of which a man, spiritually blind by nature, is enabled to see what God has revealed, revelation is *ascribed to the work of God the Holy Spirit*. This is true, e.g., in I Corinthians 2:10: “But God hath revealed them unto us *by his Spirit*: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.” And we must not forget that this is in contrast with what Paul says in verse 14 of the same chapter: “But *the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God*: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are *spiritually discerned*.”

This same emphasis is clearly found in Ephesians 1:17-18:

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the *spirit of wisdom and revelation* in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.<sup>246</sup>

In every use of the word, in Scripture, *revelation* is connected to God's *gracious work of salvation for the elect*. It is not used in connection with the wicked. There is no such thing, in Scripture, as *general* revelation, in the sense in which it is spoken of in connection with common grace.

#### *Romans 1:18-25*

The question may be asked at this point: What about Romans 1:18ff?

Dr. Abraham Kuyper, as well as others, appealed to this passage in support of the doctrine of the “inward restraint of sin by the work of the Holy Spirit.” Those who hold to this position appealed especially to the expressions “Wherefore God also *gave them up* ...” (v. 24) and “For this

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<sup>246</sup> The interested reader may pursue this matter further by studying such texts as Romans 16:25, Galatians 1:12, Ephesians 3:3, Revelation 1:1, etc.

cause God *gave them up ...*” (v. 26). They argue that if God “gave these idolaters up,” He had, prior to giving them up, “restrained” them.

Now, on the surface, this will not do. In the first place. God’s act of giving up the wicked to their vile affections does not imply that, prior to giving them up, God had indeed *restrained* them. Such a conclusion is invalid on the very face of it. But, in the second place, if indeed God *had* restrained them, prior to giving them up, surely anyone can see that the text makes no mention of the fact that such restraint was accomplished by an “inward work of the Holy Spirit in the heart.”<sup>247</sup>

But however that may be, the text makes no mention whatsoever of any kind of grace of God towards these wicked; nor does it speak of any kind of revelation of God in grace.

The text *does* use the word “reveal”: “For the wrath of God is *revealed* from heaven ...” (v. 18). But notice, this is not the revelation of “grace and kindness,” but of *wrath*. And we ought to take note of the fact that this statement in verse 18 is really the theme of the entire passage which ends with the end of the chapter. The Holy Spirit is talking about the revelation of the *wrath* of God from heaven in the entire section.

The reason why God’s *wrath* is revealed from heaven upon these ungodly is said to be that “they hold the truth in unrighteousness.” The word “hold” is, in the Greek, *κατέχω* (*katécho*), which means literally, “to have down” and can be translated, “suppress, hold under.”

The idea is, then, that these wicked people *suppress* or *hold under* the truth. They *deny* it. They refuse to let it enter their consciousness. They do all in their power to keep it from being taught and believed.

Now it ought to be clear that if the wicked *suppress* the truth, they *know* that truth. One cannot suppress what he does not know.<sup>248</sup> And the apostle goes on to explain how it is that they know this truth.

One must remember that Paul is speaking here of the heathen who live outside the sphere of the preaching of the gospel. He is talking about the people of the Roman Empire, who, in his day, were characterized by all

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<sup>247</sup> In the previous chapter, we pointed out that we had no objection to the idea of the restraint of sin, as long as that restraint was *outward*, by means of God’s *providence*.

<sup>248</sup> This same idea—now in the case of the unbelieving Jews—is expressed in Jesus’ words from Matthew 13, which we quoted earlier: “Seeing they see ...” There is, therefore, a certain *formal* knowledge of the truth which the wicked suppress. But revelation always gives *saving* knowledge.

the sins which the chapter goes on to describe in such vivid detail. And in speaking of those outside the preaching of the gospel, he is speaking of all in heathendom, from his day to the present, who have not the preaching of the gospel.

How is it that these who have never heard the gospel nevertheless know the truth?

The answer is very clear.

We ought to note, at the outset, that, in explaining this idea, the apostle does not use the word “reveal.” The wicked do not know the truth by *revelation*, in the biblical sense of that term. The apostle uses here the word “manifest”: “That which may be known of God is *manifest* in them.” The Greek has here φανερόν ἐστίν (*phaneron estin*). The word φανερόν (*phaneron*) is the adjective of the verb φανερόω (*phanerōō*). It is clear, therefore, that the Scriptures make a distinction between *revelation* and *manifestation*, and that Romans 1 is not referring to the former, but to the latter.<sup>249</sup>

However that may be, God *does* manifest Himself outside Scripture and Christ to those who have no knowledge of Scripture. Concerning that manifestation of God, the text in Romans 1 teaches the following:

1) This manifestation of God to those outside the sphere of revelation is the means by which all men without exception know the truth, the truth which they suppress in unrighteousness.

2) The truth is manifest in the wicked because God *shows* it to them (v. 19). That is, God Himself is determined to show Himself to the wicked so that they may truly *know* His truth.

3) This manifestation is “from the creation” and is understood by the wicked “through the things that are made.” That is, the creation itself, created by God, is the means by which God shows Himself to the wicked outside the gospel. It is evident in the creation that God is the Creator and that He has formed all things and still upholds all things by the Word of

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<sup>249</sup> We are not interested in a controversy over the use of terminology for its own sake. But it is my conviction that to use the biblical concept of revelation to describe God’s manifestation to the heathen is a mistake which has had serious consequences in the history of Reformed thought. As we mentioned earlier, just because *revelation*, when it refers to God’s work of making Himself known in Christ, is part and parcel of *grace*, the conclusion has been made that “*general* revelation” is also somehow *grace*.

His power.<sup>250</sup> The trees and flowers, rain and sunshine, rivers and oceans, monkeys and ants—all manifest God as the Creator.

4) What is manifested by God, in His works in creation, is “his eternal power and Godhead” (v. 20). Not all that may be known of God is clearly shown in creation. Basically, *two* things are shown: God’s eternal power and His Godhead. If one thinks about it, what Scripture has in mind here is this: In creation is manifested the great truth that *God alone is God and that He alone must be served and worshiped*. These fundamental truths are known to everyone. The lowliest pagan, the most uncivilized heathen, the natives in the darkest jungles of remote ocean islands—all know, through the things that are made, that *God is God and that He alone is to be worshiped and served*. No one can escape that knowledge. God Himself sees to it that that is known by every person alive.

This does not include, of course, the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. It might be well at this point to make a slight digression. The knowledge of God through Jesus Christ is the only knowledge of God by which men can be saved. The wicked who have a certain knowledge of God do not have such knowledge as will *save* them. There is only *one* name under heaven given among men whereby we can be saved, and that is the name of God in *Christ*. Never can salvation come through God’s manifestation in creation.

It has been argued that this is cruel and unfair, since God does not give pagan man sufficient knowledge to be saved. And this objection seems to be strengthened by the fact that the apostle adds: “*So that they may be without excuse.*” The question then is this: How can they be “without excuse” if they have *insufficient knowledge to be saved*? But it must be remembered that fallen man was created by God good and upright, able in all things to know and love God. The fact that this is no longer possible, and that He needs knowledge in *Christ* to be saved, does not detract from his responsibility. That man fell is *his own* fault—not God’s. That pagan man can never be

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<sup>250</sup> While our present interest is not in the theory of evolution—a theory which denies God’s creative work—it is clear, also from this passage, that to deny creation, in the interests of evolutionary theory, is to deny that God makes Himself known to the wicked through creation. The whole truth of Romans 1:18ff rests upon a *literal* interpretation of Genesis 1-3.

saved with the knowledge that he possesses is not injustice on God's part, but is the result of man's own consummate folly.<sup>251</sup>

5) This truth the wicked suppress. They know it. They cannot deny it. They are confronted with it. But in their sin they will have none of it. They hate it because they hate *God*. They not only make every effort to deny it, but they also suppress it in their own consciousness.

6) Yet God reveals all His power and Godhead to them “*so that they may be without excuse.*” In the Greek, this appears as a *purpose* clause. It is a definition of God's *purpose* in making Himself known to all men. Very clearly this means that God has His own sovereign purpose in making Himself known. In the judgment day, no one in all the world will be able to say that the reason why he did not worship and serve God was because he was ignorant of Him. God will tell him: “You knew. You knew Me. I told you of Myself. You have no excuse. When I now send you to everlasting hell, I do so justly.” And every wicked man will have to admit, before the great white throne of Christ, that that is indeed true.

7) The text goes on to say that this suppression of the truth is *the explanation for their idolatry*. Twice over, the apostle makes this clear. In verse 21 he says: “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” And in verses 22-23 he adds: “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.” And once more, in verse 25, the apostle says, “... who changed the truth of God

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<sup>251</sup> This important truth implies the truth of original guilt. Man is responsible, not only for his own sin, but, also, for *the sin which Adam committed in Paradise* in eating of the forbidden tree. All men are guilty for this sin, and man's total depravity is *his* fault, for which he is accountable before God. This is the clear teaching of Romans 5:12-14, and this truth is maintained by all the historic Reformed and Presbyterian creeds. It is, as a matter of fact, the great *dividing point* between the Reformed faith and all forms of Arminianism. Scripture is clear on the doctrine that total depravity is the *just punishment of God* upon the human race, who are guilty, in Adam, for Adam's sin. See a clear statement of this truth in *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 4: “Doth not God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in His law that which he cannot perform? Not at all; for God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own wilful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts” (Q&A 9).

into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than<sup>252</sup> the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.”

This is very clear language, and its repetition emphasizes how important it is. When the pagans worship idols of every sort, this idol worship is not *ignorance*. So often it is presented as such. The wicked, so it is said, worship idols *because they do not know any better*. They have not the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so they do not know that they must worship *God*, nor do they know *how* they can do this. Sometimes it is even added that the wicked *long* to worship the true God, but they do not know how to do this, and so they worship idols as an expression of their desire to worship God. Such notions are flatly contradicted by the apostle. Their idolatry is deliberate.

The wicked know the truth full well. They know it beyond denial. But they suppress it. And the way they suppress it is by changing God’s glory into a creaturely image and thus changing the truth into a lie. Note here the all-important word “change.” They *deliberately and consciously*, with malice aforethought, willfully and in rebellion against God, *change* His glory into a creature, and that creature they worship. They profess to be wise, but they are fools. They seek in every way possible to destroy God and to suppress that which they know about Him. This is their dreadful sin and the depths of their depravity.

8) Hence the wrath of God is upon them. And that wrath of God upon them is especially revealed, according to the apostle, in giving them over to the terrible sin of homosexuality. We ought to note that: God punishes sin *with sin*. And He, in His holy wrath, punishes idolatry with homosexuality. “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves” (v. 24). And again, “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature ...” (vv. 26ff.).

One need only read the rest of the chapter to see what are the dreadful consequences of man’s suppression of the truth of God.

But in this passage there is no mention, at all, either of any general revelation or of any grace of God revealed in so-called general revelation. It is clear to anyone who reads the passage that there is, therefore, no restraint of sin in this general revelation at all.

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<sup>252</sup> The Greek here can be better translated “rather than.”

## Romans 2:14-15

The same general truth is taught in Romans 2:14-15, although here from the viewpoint of the law of God.

We will not enter into this passage in any kind of detail. We wish to point out only a few things.

1) It must be remembered that this passage is written particularly in the context of the Roman Empire. Pagan Rome had developed a vast system of jurisprudence, a system which has even become the basis for Western legal theory. The question which the apostle is answering is: *How was this possible?* After all, the Romans had not the gospel of Jesus Christ. How could they develop such an intricate and elaborate system of law?

2) The apostle is not saying that these same Romans have not discovered and codified laws which reflect the law of God and which are important for the survival of society. Indeed this is the case. But it must also be remembered that this same Rome is the nation that gave itself over to every form of idolatry and was judged by God with every form of sexual vice including homosexuality. They, therefore, have not the law in the sense in which Israel had it, but they do the things *contained* in the law (v. 14).

3) This doing of the law does not mean that they kept the law of God perfectly or in any sense as a duty and obligation to be obedient to the God of heaven and earth. They do the things contained in the law because *they are able to see that this is for their own advantage*. Laws against murder and theft are codified and enforced. To do anything different would result in the dissolution of society and the fall of the empire. It does not take grace, not even common grace, to understand this. Anyone can see that.

4) How do they know the law? The apostle says that they “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another” (v. 15). Notice, the apostle does not say that they show *the law written in their hearts*. This is true only of those who are saved by grace. But they show the *work* of the law written in their hearts. That is, God testifies, through their conscience, the work of the law. He testifies of what is in keeping with His law and what is contrary to His law. Every heathen knows this. It is implied in the fact that all men not only *know* that God is God, but they know, too, that God alone must be served.

5) This also takes place through God's manifestation of Himself in creation. After all, when God created all things, He imbedded in the creation His own law. It is woven into the warp and woof of creation. It is part of man's obligation which he knows by virtue of his own creatureliness and the created character of the creation within which he lives. He cannot escape knowing that the creation clearly shows that murder and theft, adultery and fornication are wrong. Creation itself shows that God alone must be served. And God so impresses this truth upon man's conscience that they accuse or else excuse one another.

6) But again, there is no mention of *grace*, even and especially a grace shown through some gracious revelation of God. It is, in fact, the way in which the wicked *become accountable* in the judgment.

### *The Confessions*

There are two articles in the Reformed confessions which deal with these matters we have been discussing. They too have been appealed to repeatedly in support of common grace and the restraint of sin through what is called general revelation.

The first is in *Canons 3–4.4*:

There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in

unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes  
inexcusable before God.<sup>253</sup>

The second article is *Belgic Confession*, Article 14. We quote here the pertinent part.

And being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he hath lost all his excellent gifts, which he had received from God, and only retained a few remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse.

In support of the doctrine of the restraint of sin, appeal is made to the fact that the *Belgic Confession* speaks of man retaining a few remains of the excellent gifts which he lost because of the fall; and that the *Canons* speak of “glimmerings of natural light” which fallen man retains, by which he has some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil. And further, that, because of these glimmerings, he discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.

It is clear that both articles refer directly to the passages in Romans 1 and 2 which we discussed above. Both use the same language in some respects, and both creeds specifically refer to the fact that God continues to give fallen man some remnants of His excellent gifts that he might be without excuse.

Both articles speak of natural light—the *Belgic* by referring to remnants of excellent gifts, and the *Canons* by referring to glimmerings of natural light.

What are these “remnants of natural light”? Very obviously, the creeds refer to the fact that, even after man fall, man did not become a beast or animal—as Dr. Abraham Kuyper (and others) insist would have happened, if it had not been for common grace. He remained a *man*. His

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<sup>253</sup> We have quoted the entire article. This was not done by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 when it adopted the idea of the restraint of sin through the operation of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all men. Mysteriously and inexcusably, the quotation was ended just before the words, “But so far is this light of nature ...”

natural light (in distinction from spiritual light) are those gifts which guarantee that he is still a man. Man is still rational because he retains a mind. He is still moral because he retains a will. He is still a creature with a soul—which soul shall endure beyond death so that he may stand in the judgment and be justly and righteously punished for his sin.

These gifts of natural light are, according to the creeds, the means by which he still has some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil. It is because he has natural light, in a measure, that he is still able to have some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. If he lacked these he would no longer be man.

But they are, after all, only *glimmerings* and *remnants*. Even as far as the natural light which man continues to possess is concerned, man has only *bits and pieces*. That is, the fall was so devastating in its consequences that even man's *natural* powers of mind and will, which he retained, are remnants and glimmerings. They are the few scraps a seamstress has left over when her dress is completed, essentially worthless. They are the sputterings of a candle in comparison with the light of the sun. Man's natural powers of soul were far greater before he fell than after God visited him with death.

But these glimmerings and remnants are enough to hold man accountable before God. They are enough to give man some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil. And so man still is responsible for what he does. If he had not these glimmerings, he would not be accountable before God for his idolatry and sin. But now he is.

But if you should inquire whether this is *grace*, the creeds make no mention at all of such grace. And if you should think that these glimmerings "restrain sin," the creeds are quite emphatic that they do not. Man's regard for virtue and good order in society and his efforts to maintain an orderly external deportment are *for his own selfish benefit*, for he is *able to see* that society would sink into chaos, and life would be impossible, if God's law were not externally observed.

The *Canons* are quite insistent on making the point. All these glimmerings are not only insufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God and to true conversion, but man is even *incapable of using this natural light aright in things natural and civil*. He suppresses the truth, renders it holy

polluted, holds it in unrighteousness, and corrupts it in every way possible. And so he becomes inexcusable before God.

## The Image of God in Man

We turn now to our final question concerning the image of God in man.

It is not our purpose to enter into this question in detail, for it rightly belongs to a study which would include the history of the doctrine over the centuries and a careful exegetical and theological analysis of what has proved to be a very difficult subject. We are only concerned about the question insofar as it touches on the subject of common grace and the restraint of sin.

It is our judgment that much of the discussion concerning the image of God has gone astray because of the failure of theologians to define the image according to *biblical* principles. Many theologians have included in the image many elements which Scripture itself does not include.

Louis Berkhof, who may be considered representative of many in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, includes many elements in the image which do not properly belong there. After correctly emphasizing that the image of God includes true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, he goes on to say:

But the image of God is not to be restricted to the original knowledge, righteousness, and holiness which was lost by sin, but also includes elements which belong to the natural constitution of man.<sup>254</sup>

In this list are included intellectual power, natural affections, moral freedom, spirituality, and immortality.<sup>255</sup>

It is our judgment that this is a mistake.

The key passages which define the image of God in man clearly limit this image to true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:22-24:

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<sup>254</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 204.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205.

That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts: and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in *righteousness* and *true holiness*.

And in Colossians 3:10 he writes:

And have put on the new man, which is renewed in *knowledge* after the image of him that created him.

Although these passages refer to the renewal of the elect in Jesus Christ, they specifically mention that these elements are elements of the *image*. The elect are *renewed* after all. They are given *what was lost in Adam*. Restored, in them, is what Adam possessed, but lost because of his sin. And the elements that are mentioned are limited to *knowledge, righteousness, and holiness*.

It is true that man continues to be a rational and moral being. It is also true that only a rational and moral being is able to bear the image of God. No tree or hippopotamus, no dog or thistle is able to be an image-bearer. Only man can bear that image. And only he can bear it because he is created with a soul, i.e., with a mind, a will, and affections. But to include that which belongs to the nature and essence of man as man, in the image, is to broaden the image *beyond that which Scripture sanctions*.

It is such a broadening of the image, which has led to all kinds of trouble. Because man retains his rationality and morality, be they only remnants, man retains the image of God in a measure. And if he retains the image of God, he remains *like* God in certain respects, even though fallen. And it is easy to make the jump from saying that man, even in his fallen state, because he is still image-bearer, is *still under grace*, is *less than as bad as he can be*, and is *capable of doing good things*. And so the retention of the image becomes the avenue to introduce common grace as a restraining inner influence in fallen and unregenerate man.

But if the image is truly lost in the fall, in its entirety—as Scripture teaches—then man is truly depraved, incapable of doing any good and

inclined to all evil. Then he is not the object of grace, but of wrath. And grace comes to him only through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then we can understand what the *Belgic Confession* states in Article 14:

We believe that God created man out of the dust of the earth, and made and formed him after his own image and likeness, *good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will, agreeable to the will of God.* But being in honor, he understood it not, neither knew his excellency, but willfully subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death, and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil. For the commandment of life, which he had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life, *having corrupted his whole nature*; whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death.

This same truth is echoed by the *Canons* in 3–4.1:

Man was *originally* formed after *the image of God*. His *understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright; all his affections pure; and the whole man was holy*; but revolting from God by the instigation of the devil, and abusing the freedom of his own will, he *forfeited these excellent gifts*; and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections.

Two passages of Scripture are quoted to prove that man retained the image after the fall. The first is Genesis 9:6: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.” The second is James 3:9: “Therewith (that is, with the tongue, HH) bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.”

Murderers are to be killed because they shed the blood of a man who was created after God's image, and violations of the ninth commandment are such dreadful sins (especially when hypocritically a man blesses God and curses his fellow man) because man was made in God's image.

These texts are referred to as proof that man is still image-bearer.

However, a careful scrutiny of the texts, and the contexts in which they are found, will clearly show that the reference is to the *original* creation of man by God. Man is unique in God's world. He alone, among all creatures, was originally created as image-bearer of God. That unique character of man remains even though he fell. The image does not remain in the sense that man still bears the image, but it remains in the sense that he is still *unique* and still *capable of being* an image-bearer, because he is rational and moral.

There is an important point here. Even fallen man is image-bearer because of his rationality and morality. But fallen man has become image-bearer of *Satan*—for the wicked are of their father the devil whose works they do. But the elect are destined in God's grace to be renewed after the image of Christ. And, as renewed in the image of Christ, they are renewed to bear the image of their Father in heaven with whom they will dwell in glory.

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The whole concept of general revelation ought to be abandoned by Reformed theology. While God manifests Himself to all, He does so *that He may be vindicated in His justice and righteousness when the wicked are punished*. To the elect, God reveals Himself in Christ. This is *grace*. Other than that great grace of God in Christ, there is no grace.

And so we can find no proof of an inner restraint of sin in this whole concept, and Reformed theology finds such notions contrary to all that belongs to Scripture.

We must still treat Article 2 of the *Belgic Confession* which speaks of the fact that God may be known

... by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate

the invisible things of God, namely, his power and  
divinity ...

But this must wait until the next chapter.





## GENERAL REVELATION & COMMON GRACE

**A**N IMPORTANT aspect of the doctrine of common grace is the doctrine of the restraint of sin; that is, those who hold to common grace also maintain that the grace of God which is common to all men serves as an “inward restraint of sin in the hearts of the unregenerate so that they are not as bad as they could be, and that, indeed, they are capable of doing good.”

This grace which restrains sin, is, according to the proponents of common grace, connected to what is called *general revelation*, i.e., a revelation of God in the creation by which God reveals Himself to all men graciously.

We took a long and hard look at the whole concept of general revelation in the last chapter, and we examined many of the texts which are used to support this concept, notably the passage in Romans 1:18ff. It was our conclusion that Scripture speaks only of a revelation which is, indeed, connected with *grace*, but is connected with *saving* grace, and is, therefore, *particular*.

This position does not deny that God makes Himself known also to the unregenerate, through creation, but this work of God cannot in any sense be construed as *grace*. It has, as its purpose, “that man may be without excuse.”

In connection with our discussion of these truths, we also took a look at two important articles in the Reformed confessions: *Canons* 3–4.4, and *Belgic Confession*, Article 14. While both of these articles have also been cited as proof for the doctrine of common grace, we showed that such an assertion is impossible in the light of the very clear language which both articles employ.

One question remains to be discussed. That question we referred to at the very end of our last article. It is the question of the meaning of Article 2 of the *Confession of Faith*. That article seems, indeed, to teach a certain general revelation and has often been appealed to as teaching precisely this doctrine. The article reads:

We know [God] by two means: first, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely, his power and divinity, as the apostle Paul saith, Rom. 1:20. All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse. Secondly, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

It is to this article and its implications we now turn.

### The Meaning of the Article

While it is true from a certain point of view that Article 2 of the *Belgic Confession* speaks of “the creation, preservation and government of the universe” as “a most elegant book,” it must be remembered that the article appears in a *confession of faith*. The article is not simply talking in the abstract about certain doctrinal truths of one form or another. It is a statement about what the *believer* confesses to be the truth of the Scriptures, a truth

necessary to believe for salvation; indeed a truth which the believer will continue to confess even if his confession brings upon him torture and death. It is a living confession which arises out of the very heart of the child of God.

If we keep this in mind, then we will understand as well the opening words of the article: “*We* know him by two means ...” The believer, in company with his fellow saints, is telling the world how he knows God. He is not, in the first place, saying anything about how the *wicked* know God. He is talking about the means by which *he* has come to know God his Redeemer. This is, you will remember, a confession of faith. It is a confession of faith in God through Jesus Christ as the God of our salvation. The confession of the believer here is not: “I will tell you a moment how I happened to make the acquaintance of God.” Nothing of that sort at all. The whole question is: I will now, as an article of my faith in God through Jesus Christ, tell you how I have come to know God who is my Redeemer through Jesus Christ our Lord. And, as contradictory as that may seem, the believer is also saying: I *believe* that I know God from two books, because the Scriptures tell me that I know Him from two books. It is not as if I have discovered the book of creation *on my own* and read it with enjoyment and profit, and, through reading it, have come to know some things about God. *Scripture* tells the believer that he, as believer, can know God through the elegant book of creation.

The believer is saying, therefore, that he has come to know God as Redeemer in Jesus Christ through the means of two books. One book is “the creation, preservation and government of the universe”; the other book is “God’s holy and divine Word.”

The *believer* knows God by means of these two books. Up to this point, nothing has been said as yet about the *wicked and unbelieving*. The article will have a bit to say about that, too; and we will come to that in a moment. But the approach of the article is not to tell us how creation is revelation to the *unbeliever*; the approach of the article is to tell us how the *believer* comes to know his God as the God of his salvation in Jesus Christ.

## The Contents of Book I

The article describes the book of creation in various interesting ways. But in every case it must be understood that the various descriptions of the book apply only to the fact that *the people of God* are the only ones who can make any real use of it. The book is, so to speak, for *them*.

It may be compared to a book which is written in the Dutch language and contains the charter, constitution, and guarantee of freedom for the Dutch people. As far as the people in the Netherlands who are able to read the book are concerned, the book is the most important book which they have as a nation. They cherish the book as they cherish their own liberty. They protect the book against everyone who would seek to alter it. They make sure that their government adheres strictly to what the book contains. In the keeping of the book is bound up the existence of the Dutch as a nation.

But if a man from *China* would pick up the book, he would discard it almost as soon as he took one look between its covers. He might be able to detect that the book belongs to the people of the Netherlands, but he is a citizen of China. And, in any case, he can't read a word of it and so cannot understand one bit of what it is all about. And even if he could read a word here and there, he would say to himself: The book is of no concern to me because it has nothing to do with me at all.

So it is with the book of creation. It is a book belonging to the *believer*. The article very sharply claims this book of creation for the believer. So to speak, the article writes the name of the believer on the inside cover so that everyone may know that this book belongs to him.

In the second place, the contents of the book are described: "The creation, preservation and government of the universe."

Although we cannot speak of this in detail, two things especially are worth some attention.

In the first place, the book deals with two truths: the doctrine of creation, and the doctrine of providence—the latter because both preservation and government have to do with what is called providence. Especially the government of the universe includes "history," for God not only creates man, but also upholds him and governs him. All that happens in the world, both in the brute creation and in the history of mankind, is a part of that book.

In the second place, the article emphasizes the fact that the book tells of *God*. I must return to that in a moment, but here already this is underscored. The book says that *God* created the universe. To teach a form of evolutionism (whatever that form may take; even if it is a form of so-called ‘theistic’ evolutionism) is to deny the book.

The book also says that God continues to give to every creature in the universe, as well as the universe itself, its existence and being. This is what the book says. The book speaks of the preservation of the universe. Preservation is a work of *God*. The book says that the creation is not independent, not existing by its own power, not continuing by virtue of inflexible laws of nature according to which things take place. The book says that *Someone* gives it its existence, and that Someone is God.

The book also says that God is sovereign in all the universe. The universe is governed by someone else. It is governed in every respect and in every detail. Not only are planets and galaxies governed, but also trees and flowers. And not only are trees and flowers governed, but also salamanders and bears. And not only are salamanders and bears governed, but also men and women. They are all governed absolutely because they are all given their very life and existence by the One who governs them. And so anyone who gives a certain independency to man to decide his own way in life, or anyone who curses the notion that all that happens in the world comes from God, is a fool who cannot read the book.

Thirdly, the article emphatically states that indeed *only God’s people* are able to read the book. It is not only the believer confessing the truth that he knows God through two books; but that believer says that even Book I is *for him*. It is a book which is “before *our* eyes as a most elegant book.” It is a book which leads “*us* to contemplate the invisible things of God.”

In the fourth place, it is an elegant book. It appears as if the article really means, by this use of the word “elegant,” to point us particularly to the book’s *purpose*, namely, to lead us to contemplate God. But the book is elegant in its own right. It is true that the curse is on the creation. And that curse is of such a kind that the creation is far less beautiful than the creation was during the time of Paradise I. It is also true that the creation today is as nothing in comparison with what it will be in Paradise II. And it is certainly true that there are many ugly things in the book: lions killing and eating baby gazelles; people beating baby seals over the head to slaughter them for their fur; floods and earthquakes leaving devastation in their wake; barren deserts and impenetrable jungles where poisonous

snakes lurk; weed-infested fields where no crops will grow. But in spite of all these ugly blotches on the book, which are there because of God's curse, the book is still elegant. In fact, it is so elegant that one who takes the time to read the book cannot help but wonder at times: "If this creation is so beautiful that it is breath-taking, how can the *new* earth be even yet more beautiful?" Can anything surpass the glory of today's sunset? Can the tremulous quiet of an early morning broken only by the far-off call of the whippoorwill be surpassed anywhere? Can the trees find more beautiful garments than the coat of many colours which they wear in an autumn in Maine? Can anything fix one's attention by its elegance more powerfully than that multitude of places where sea and land meet? It is an elegant book!

Finally, that book serves a purpose. That purpose is to lead us "to contemplate the invisible things of God." Notice once again that the article speaks emphatically of the book leading *us* to contemplate God. But let that be. The book leads us to contemplate *God*. Augustine has a moving and eloquent passage in his *Confessions* which speaks of this. I refer to what he writes in X, vi, 8 & 9.<sup>256</sup> Augustine begins paragraph 8 with the words: "Not with doubting, but with assured consciousness, do I love Thee, Lord. Thou hast stricken my heart with Thy word, and I loved Thee. Yea also *heaven, and earth, and all that therein is*, behold, on every side they bid me love Thee ..." But then, after some of the most beautiful words in his entire work, Augustine goes on to say:

And what is this? I asked the earth, and it answered me, "I am not He;" and whatsoever are in it, confessed the same. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the living creeping things, and they answered, "We are not thy God, seek above us." I asked the moving air; and the whole air with his inhabitants answered, "Anaximenes<sup>257</sup> was deceived, I am not God." I asked the heavens, sun, moon, stars, "Nor (say they) are we the God whom thou seekest." And I replied unto all the things which encompass

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<sup>256</sup> I quote from a translation by Dr. E. B. Pusey, from "Everyman's Library"; E. P. Dutton and Co, Inc. the publisher. It is a 1950 edition.

<sup>257</sup> An ancient Greek philosopher who held that air was ultimate reality.

the door of my flesh; “Ye have told me of my God, that ye are not He; tell me something of Him.” And they cried out with a loud voice, “He made us.”

It is indeed as Augustine says it is. To read the book of creation is to be led to God! And there in His book is to be found those great truths concerning Him who has formed all things and governs all things by His power.

### Can the Wicked Read This Book?

Someone may argue that the article which we have been discussing refers as well to the wicked. It does not speak of the fact that only the believer reads this book, but specifically states that the book is able to be read by the wicked as well. The statement in the article is a reference to Romans 1:20: “All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse.”

The argument is that if this elegant book is sufficient to leave all men without excuse, then it certainly is capable of being read by all men. It is inescapably true that all men must appear in the judgment to give account of what they did in the flesh. And when the wicked, who have not the Scriptures, must give an account of the reason why they did not serve God, they will never be able to say, “We did not know Him. We did not know there was a God. We did not know He had to be served. We did not know how to serve Him.” That will not serve as an excuse because these things are *present* in the book, even, perhaps in large print. And they are able to read that book.

Now we do not, nor ever have, denied this. Paul is too clear in Romans 1 even to think about denying it. But that is, after all, not the point. The question is: Is that book *revelation* to the wicked? And, as revelation, is that book *grace* for the wicked? Neither the article nor the whole of Scripture so much as breathes a word about that. By no stretch of the imagination can that ever be said of Book I.

It is as if the article makes the statement concerning the unbelieving incidentally. It is really an after-thought. Not that the confession is not sure about this truth. It certainly is. It is an important truth in its own right.

But the fact is that Article 2 is really saying: “Creation is a most elegant book in which *God’s people* are able to see God’s handiwork, and, by which book, *they* are led to contemplate the great truths of God Himself. And, oh, by the way, that same book is open to the unbeliever to read—even though he is barely able to make out the words. And God insists that he read it too, for by reading it he becomes without excuse before God.”

This is the elegant book of creation.

## The Book of Scripture

But the same article speaks of another book, the book of Scripture. Concerning that book it states:

Secondly, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

It might be objected that the article says very little about Book II, the Holy Scriptures, especially in comparison with the rather detailed description of Book I. But it must be remembered that Book II is really the book in which the confession is interested. It does not have much to say in this article about Book II because it devotes no less than five additional articles to a discussion of the Scriptures.

It is not within the scope of our purpose to discuss this book of the Scriptures in this study. The only question which concerns us is the *relation between* these two books. Are they two separate books lying side by side, both speaking of God, but dealing with different aspects of God’s truth? Are they both necessary to read to get a clear picture of who God is? Are they essentially and fundamentally unrelated to each other—except that both deal ultimately with the same subject?

The answer to this question must be emphatically, No! It is true that Article 2 of the confession does not enter into the relation between these two books, but that is probably because the confession is really interested in Book II, and refers to Book I only incidentally.

Nevertheless, it is important that we understand the relation between the two books for all that.

## The Relation between the Two Books

In order to understand the relation between the two books, it must first of all be understood that no man of himself is able to read the book of creation easily. When God created the universe, the entire creation was a sparkling, clear, beautiful book, unmarred, pristine, and gloriously illustrated. That book was given to man who was endowed with powers beyond anything we can understand. He had, of course, such spiritual powers as stem from the fact that he was God's image-bearer. But he possessed also physical and psychological powers which enabled him to read and understand the book of creation with ease. And always, through it all, He was led to God.

But sin spoiled that completely. And it spoiled that for two reasons.

For one thing, the book itself was *marred*. The curse came into the creation because of sin, and with the curse came death. The book was extremely difficult to read because it shouted loudly of God's anger against sin and His hatred of all that is evil. It was as if the book was doused in water for eight days and became warped and faded. Various pages were torn out. The print was so faded as to become almost invisible. The pages were tattered and torn. The binding was broken and it was impossible to keep all the pages together.

All of that would have been bad enough, but the situation is worse. Man became *spiritually blind*. He is so blind that he is unable to see spiritual things.<sup>258</sup> This spiritual blindness involves the terrible consequences of sin. Man lost most of his physical and psychical powers of which he retains only a few remnants.<sup>259</sup> But worse, man became *totally depraved*. That is, he completely lost the image of God which he bore. The result was that man becomes an enemy of God who hates God, goes about to destroy Him

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<sup>258</sup> I Cor. 2:14: "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

<sup>259</sup> Cf. the previous chapter for a discussion of what is meant by these "remnants," as they are referred to in our confessions.

and steal this creation from Him, and does all in his power to drive God out of His own universe. This spiritual blindness makes it almost impossible for man to read the book.

From a certain point of view it is not surprising that wicked man reads the book and discovers that the book teaches evolutionism. The book is tattered and water-blotted. And he squints and peers at this book, barely able to make out the letters. And sections are even missing. The result is that he finds it easy to make the book say something which the book does not say at all, and has never said.

But it must be remembered that this blindness is *willful disobedience*. He *does not want* to see God in the book, and, in fact, will do everything to prove that God is not there. That spiritual blindness makes him think that he sees a world, 10-12 billion years old, which came about through evolutionary processes. The book never said that, but he wants the book to say what he can use to deny God, and so he sees things in the book which are the figment of his own imagination. The interesting and silly part of it all is that he is so adamant about it that he tells people who can read the book that they are fools, and he even tries to kill these people because he is so determined to read what he wants in the book.

But that is the situation.

Nevertheless, in spite of himself, he can make out just enough from the book to realize that all his mis-readings are really wrong. It makes no difference now whether he is an “atheistic” biologist in the University of Southern California or whether he is a professing Christian in a Bible School. He can make out enough to see that the book says two things: God alone is God; and, God alone must be served. Those two things he can see. But that is exactly what he hates. And so, although he can make that much out (chiefly because God shoves his nose so deeply into the book that he can’t help but see it—“God hath showed it unto him ..,” Rom. 1:19), he “holds the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18), and claims that the world had its origin in a “big bang” and that man came from a monkey. It is all rather silly to claim to find such preposterous things in the book, but it is the silliness of unbelief for which a man goes to hell.

It must be understood that this is all that a man can see apart from salvation through grace in Jesus Christ. There is no common grace which gives him better eyesight. There is no “revelation” by which he truly experiences God’s favor and love and begins to long for God and seek

after greater truth. The picture I have drawn is all that can be said. That is the way it is, according to Scripture and the confessions.

You must see this man clearly, for it is a self-portrait. He sits bowed over this book, and he not only thinks that he is able to read it with ease, but he finds these preposterous and utterly silly notions and passes them off as what he finds in the book. He lifts his head from the book, looks as wise as an owl, assumes a know-it-all air, pontificates about his great skills in reading the book, and pronounces that the book says that the creation started with a big bang. If it were not so horribly evil, you would pat the man on the back, and suggest indulgently that he get a pair of glasses before he claims certainty of what the book says. But you have to be careful because he is fierce, and he will turn on you in fury if you suggest he is mis-reading the book—a fury which clearly demonstrates that, deep down, he knows full well that he is deliberately perverting what the book says.

It is here that Scripture enters in.

As we all know, Calvin has an astonishingly apt figure to describe what the relation between Book I and Book II really is.

There is a passage in Calvin's *Institutes* which deals with this subject. It is the well-known passage in I, vi, 1 in which Calvin talks about the need of the Scriptures to understand God's speech in creation. He too uses the figure of a book and speaks of the Scriptures as "eyeglasses" which enable us to read the elegant book of creation. The pertinent passage reads:

For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book, however fair, is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written, are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses, begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay confused in their minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly. God therefore bestows a gift of singular value, when, for the instruction of the Church, he employs not dumb teachers merely, but opens his own sacred mouth; when he not only proclaims that some God must be worshipped, but at the same time declares that

He is the God to whom worship is due; when he not only teaches his elect to have respect to God, but manifests himself as the God to whom this respect should be paid.

We ought to notice a few things about this passage.

In the first place, Calvin alters the figure somewhat. He does not only speak of Scripture as a book, but he changes the figure to refer to Scripture as a pair of *eyeglasses*.

In the second place, the book of creation is really impossible to read without these eyeglasses. They are indispensable for reading the book. This fact is important because it is denied by those who try to make a case for theistic evolution. They speak of two books which God wrote: the book of creation and the book of Scripture. They then set these two books side by side and talk as if both are equally clear, both are equally easy to read, both are necessary to learn the whole truth. And so both have to be harmonized.

Yet, I am not stating the case exactly correctly. They really teach that the book of creation is *easier* to read than the book of Scripture. Or, to use Calvin's figure: the book of Scripture can scarcely be read, but the book of *creation* is the pair of eyeglasses which enable us to read Scripture.

They do this because they teach that while Scripture seems to teach creation, the universe itself teaches evolutionism. And so, accepting evolutionism, we must reinterpret Scripture in the light of creation.

But let us not forget that they are turning the whole truth upside down because they do not want to admit that they are blind and in need of eyeglasses. They—and this is their sin—insist that their vision is clear and unclouded without the aid of Scripture. They can see the book of which Calvin says that they can scarcely make out two consecutive words. Their sin is that they will not confess their sin. Their great blindness is that they will not admit they are blind. And this sin is committed to protect their own sense of worth and value apart from grace, their own tremendous powers of mind to uncover all the secrets locked away in creation, and to set themselves over against God with their human wisdom.

The atheist does it without apology. The theistic evolutionist does it under the guise of Christianity.

In the second place, Calvin is saying here that the gift of the spectacles of scripture is given only to *God's people*. He makes a point of that: "God

therefore bestows a gift of singular value, when, *for the instruction of the Church ...* When he not only teaches his *elect* to have respect to God ...”

What Calvin means, as he goes on later to explain, is this: To be able to put on the spectacles is possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Or, if I may put it a bit differently, the Holy Spirit gives us the spectacles, and the Holy Spirit enables us to put them on. This is true because only one in whom the Holy Spirit works by His grace can *want* the Scriptures; can *believe* that they are the eyeglasses he needs; can truly *desire* to know God, who is his Savior and Redeemer.

Thus the only way in which to read the book of creation (and providence) is in the light of Scripture. Everything which we discover in creation must be interpreted by Scripture. If something in creation seems to contradict Scripture, then we do not rush to Scripture to see if we can twist and distort Scripture to make it agree with the findings of science; but we recognize the fact that the book of creation is almost impossible to read. We recognize that we are reading a book that is tattered and torn, blotted and faded, and thus we are obviously reading it wrong. We admit that we are nearly blind. It is quite necessary to put on our glasses and look at creation again through these marvellous glasses.

But let it be remembered that these marvellous glasses will make it clear to us that the book of creation also speaks of Christ and redemption through Him. The glasses enable us to see that creation was in six days of 24 hours because it was the “stage” formed by God on which to enact the drama of sin and redemption through Christ. With the glasses we will be able to see that the lion is a picture of “the Lion of Judah’s tribe”; that the sun tells us of Him who is the “Sun of righteousness who arises with healing in His wings”; that the morning star, announcing so gloriously the dawn, points to the “light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in our hearts.” Indeed, with these glasses we can see not only our own resurrection in the seed of corn put in the earth, but a creation which “groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now,” for the creation also “shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

Then the book of creation really does become an “elegant book” which leads us to contemplate the invisible things of God. For His works in creation are the same as His works in salvation. All shall be saved in Jesus Christ, so that Christ may be Lord of all.

And that saved creation is planned by God, from the very beginning of His work in forming the worlds, to be, in its glorified state, the inheritance of the elect.

The believer claims also Book I as his own.







## **Useful Websites:**

[www.cprc.co.uk](http://www.cprc.co.uk)

[www.limerickreformed.com](http://www.limerickreformed.com)

[www.prca.org](http://www.prca.org)

[standardbearer.rfpa.org/](http://standardbearer.rfpa.org/)

[www.prca.org/prtj/](http://www.prca.org/prtj/)

[www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org)

<http://cerc.org.sg/>

<http://www.britishreformed.org/>





