

***Christianizing the World: Reformed Calling or Ecclesiastical Suicide?* David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Publishing Association. 2016, Hardcover. 192 pages. \$19.95. Reviewed by Rev. Arie den Hartog, pastor of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church.**

This book is the transcript of an outstanding lecture by Prof. David Engelsma recently given at an event sponsored by the evangelism committee of the Southwest Protestant Reformed Church of Grandville, Michigan. After giving the lecture Engelsma greatly expanded on content of the lecture. The second part of the book consists of carefully worded answers to questions from the audience present at the lecture and those listening online. These answers were also revised and expanded on.

Reading the title of the book may make one wonder about the subject. Many would have the opinion that the church does indeed have the calling to 'Christianize the world' in which we are living, and would be shocked that anyone would question this.

The idea of such Christianizing the world has been expressed using other terms such as 'cultural renewal' or 'the redeeming of society'. Perhaps you have heard such terminology used.

The concept of 'Christianizing the world' which the speaker gives a bold and sharp critique of, is based on a very commonly held and popular doctrine promoted especially in Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. This is the doctrine of 'common grace.' Those who espouse this doctrine believe that God has two kinds of grace. God has a grace which is sovereign and particular which He bestows on His elect people whom He loves. This grace is an effectual saving grace. This grace operates through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The preaching declares that the gospel is the only power of God unto salvation to those who believe. It is the grace that flows from the cross of Jesus Christ. It is the grace which finally causes His people to become the glorious heirs of His everlasting kingdom in the new heavens and new earth. We believe that this is the only grace

of God. This grace is absolutely sovereign and particular to God's people.

God also has, according to some, a 'common grace' which is His general favor to all men even the wicked ungodly reprobate. This grace does not save those who are its objects. According to those who teach this doctrine, this grace restrains sin in the heart of the natural man so that he is not as totally depraved as he otherwise would be. This grace enables the natural man to do a certain civic good, good which though it is not saving, is nevertheless commendable and is praise worthy in the sight of God. It gains for the natural man an earthly reward and enables the unregenerated man to realize a glorious culture on earth.

The project of 'Christianizing' the world which is critiqued by the speech, envisions that the church and the world must join together to accomplish great things in this world. This project envisions only improvement of this present world. The church and the world can and with great and glorious results accomplish worldwide change, cultural renewal and accomplish great humanitarian good, by relieving the world of poverty, promoting justice and equality among men, tolerance of almost everyone no matter their confession or life style. It looks for the day of brotherhood and peace among all men.

The common grace basis for promoting such a seemingly glorious endeavor was first proposed by the famous Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper. His theory was used as a basis for the seeking political common ground between Reformed people and Roman Catholics in the Netherlands in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The theory of common grace later became the philosophical basis of the Free University in Amsterdam.

The philosophy of common grace greatly influenced especially the beliefs and practices of the Christian Reformed Churches in America and Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids. It is

promoted today in a number of Reformed and Presbyterian schools in our land.

Recently the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, Michigan—which has many Roman Catholic members, and is encouraged and supported by well-known leaders in Reformed Churches—has embarked on translating Abraham Kuyper’s major three-volume work on common grace. This work will now appear for the first time ever into the English language. This project has stirred up new excitement among many for the philosophy of common grace as the hope for Christianizing our society and hopefully even the world. Little has ever been done to present a carefully worked out biblical and confessional defense of the doctrine of common grace, though weak attempts have been made.

In his lecture Engelsma presents a bold critique of common grace philosophy. He demonstrates that this concept is flawed in its proposed biblical basis. The theory is not consistent with the historic Reformed confessions. It departs from Calvin’s system of biblical doctrine even though those who promote common grace present it as being a contemporary development of foundational principles set forth by the great Reformer John Calvin. Engelsma maintains that common grace philosophy is a major departure from important doctrines of true Calvinism.

Engelsma demonstrates in his lecture the seriousness of the errors which follow from the false teaching of common grace. This teaching clearly denies the biblical truth of the total depravity of the natural man. It is a serious compromise of the biblical calling we have as Christians to live antithetically in the world. It foolishly imagines that there can be friendship and common cause between the Christian and the world. In truth, God’s word repeatedly states that this fallen world is at enmity against God. The teachers of common grace imagine that the unregenerated natural man will accept the ideals and philosophy and morality which Christians teach. According to the word of

God the world considers Christianity foolishness.

Prof. Engelsma emphatically maintains that the Christianizing of the world project is in fact an impossible task because the world hates God and His Christ. No mere human philosophy will change this.

Prof. Engelsma demonstrates in his penetrating analysis of common grace philosophy the wrongness of maintaining that God has a good temporal purpose for world improvement and cultural development that is accomplished in history alongside of God's sovereign gracious saving purpose for His Church.

Even Abraham Kuyper failed to show the connection between the cross of Jesus Christ and this supposed purpose of common grace in the world. The cross is according to scripture all about the salvation of God's people. It is not about improving this ungodly world.

Professor Engelsma gives a good summary of the correct exegesis of Colossians 1 and other biblical passages which have played a major role in the controversy over whether God indeed has a common grace purpose for this ungodly world. The speaker explains what Colossians 1 means when it speaks of the reconciliation of the world by Christ. The right understanding of the reconciliation of the world is not what the teachers of common grace maintain.

The seriousness of the 'Christianizing of culture' by the movement being judged by the speech is that it ends up leading the church to commit 'ecclesiastical suicide'. This happens because the church does not succeed in changing the world as it imagines it can but rather the world causes the church to become completely worldly. The movement imagines that the church can bring to bear the teaching of Christ in cultural and world renewal but in fact ends up finally promoting a non-saving Christless worldly culture and even ends in an antichristian world view. Engelsma's

speech cites an interesting quotation from Abraham Kuyper himself in this regard that those interested in this subject must read.

Engelsma is bold to ask whether those who so enthusiastically have promoted a common grace culture have succeeded over years in accomplishing their noble purposes. Do the present day cultures in the places where the philosophy of common grace has been promoted most zealously demonstrate that its noble purposes have in any measure actually been realized? The Netherlands and Grand Rapids which once were bastions of Reformed religion have become centers where Reformed churches have gone in the way of grievous apostasy. Many Reformed Churches in these places are departing from many foundational Biblical doctrines. Theories of higher criticism destroyed adherence to the truth of the infallibility of scripture and have thrown out the truth of biblical creationism. In some places the historicity of the miracles revealed in the Bible, including in some cases the wonder of the resurrection of Christ are openly denied. Leaders of Reformed Churches in these places are today promoting the most abominable worldly life styles that tolerate the greatest evils of the world such as immorality, the corruption of marriage and the total and open acceptance of the homosexual agenda.

I strongly encourage everyone to read this book. Most Reformed and Presbyterian colleges in America are enthusiastically promoting the ideas and hope of Christianizing the world on the basis of common grace. Our young people are being trained in these colleges. The publications of these institutions constantly boast of their graduates being 'agents of cultural renewal' in the world.

Those who are critical of the philosophy of common grace renewal or Christianizing of the world are commonly branded with the odious judgment of being Anabaptist. The Anabaptists

taught world flight, and an isolationist's perspective of Christianity. The Anabaptist perspective is condemned for lacking in genuine concern for the world, which true Christians must have.

Engelsma demonstrates in his lecture that the opposite of common grace Christianizing the world is not Anabaptist. The speaker gives a defense of the biblical world and life perspective that ought to characterize every Christian and which is in no way Anabaptist. The promoters of 'common grace Christianizing' the world often leave the impression that if you are not on board with this endeavor of cultural renewal and world improvement you are 'a do nothing Christian.' One does not really become faithful to the principles of the kingdom of Christ unless one is an agent of cultural renewal as espoused by the promoters of this philosophy. Very often the promotion of this endeavor eclipses the calling which God gives to His church to preach the gospel of the cross of Christ, the only power whereby God saves His people from this wicked ungodly world and brings them to everlasting glory.

Engelsma ended his lecture by exhorting Christians to earnestly live in holiness, according to the moral ethics of the law of God. By doing this they reveal themselves to be the true citizens of the kingdom of Christ and show forth the glory of His name.

When the Christian lives faithfully in this ungodly world he cannot be the friend of the world. He must expect that the world will hate and persecute him. This is clearly the teaching of the word of God everywhere.

The Christian must be zealously engaged in his calling while still on earth and as a member of the church. Every inch of his life (Kuyper's language) must be consecrated to the service of Christ. The calling of the Christian is to be a faithful member of the true church of Jesus Christ and heartily support her in her commission to preach the gospel and stand courageously for the truth of

this gospel even unto death. When the Christian is faithful to his true calling in world and trusts in the sovereign grace of God for his salvation he will inherit an eternal and glorious and heavenly reward. This reward far transcends any earthly glory hoped for by the advocates of the common grace Christianizing of this present world. Obtain and read this excellent book!