

Common Grace Revisited



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Common Grace Revisited



A Response to Richard J. Mouw's
He Shines in All That's Fair

David J. Engelsma



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to Aunt Win

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Preface



The book on common grace by Reformed theologian and evangelical leader, Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, does several worthwhile things. It indicates the great importance of common grace for the Christian life in the thinking of its defenders. It offers a candid explanation of the real reasons why men and churches embrace common grace. And it recognizes the opposition to common grace on the part of the Protestant Reformed Churches as a reasonable, even legitimate, position within the framework of Calvinism.

Mouw's book is a fresh study of the doctrine of common grace by an enthusiastic advocate. Particularly in a fascinating linking of common grace with an infralapsarian view of the decrees of God, the book breaks new ground.

The book fairly begs for a response from the opposition. Such is *Common Grace Revisited*. The response takes up Mouw's arguments, especially the appeal to the seeming good of the non-elect, the affirmation of God's "empathy" with the ungodly in both their joys and their sorrows, and the assertion of God's gracious work in culture.

But the response does more. It proposes a biblical, distinctively Reformed alternative to common grace for active Christian life in the world.

I am well aware that the immediate and overwhelming reaction of evangelicals and of Reformed Christians to Mouw's book is wholehearted approval. Mouw preaches (and preaches effectively) to the choir.

I am also aware, only too well aware, that a book opposing common grace will meet with widespread hostility. I am

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preaching, after a manner of speaking, to the “unconverted.” But I may ask for a hearing on the important doctrine, and for a judgment on the biblical and creedal merits of the case.

I ask for this hearing and for this judgment.

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1

A New Look at Common Grace



“HE SHINES IN ALL THAT’S FAIR” IS A LOVELY LINE IN the well-known hymn, “This Is My Father’s World.”

This is my Father’s world: the birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker’s praise.
This is my Father’s world: He shines in all that’s fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass;
He speaks to me everywhere.

Dr. Richard J. Mouw has lifted this line from the hymn and made it the title of his recent book, *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace*.¹ As Mouw rightly suggests, the book is important, not only for the entire Reformed community, but also for the wider circles of evangelicalism and even “segments of mainstream Protestantism”: “the underlying issues here are of broad contemporary Christian concern,” important for “the larger Christian theological world” (pp. 4, 3, 8).

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He Shines in All That’s Fair is a reappraisal of certain issues involved in the common grace controversy in the Christian Reformed Church in the early 1920s. The subtitle is *Culture and*

1. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001.

Common Grace. The subtitle makes plain that the interest of Dr. Mouw is that aspect of common grace that consists of a non-saving love of God for the reprobate wicked in this life. In His common grace love for the non-elect, God is thought to desire their earthly good, to bless them with temporal blessings, to pity them in their earthly woes, and to give them His Holy Spirit, keeping them from being totally depraved and enabling them to perform good works in society. Common grace accounts for the seeming good in unregenerated unbelievers, about whom the Reformed faith confesses in Question and Answer 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism that they are “so far depraved that [they] are wholly unapt to any good, and prone to all evil.”² Common grace also becomes the basis of friendship between Christian and non-Christian. Especially is common grace put forward as the basis of cooperation between believers and unbelievers in working together for a good culture.

In short, Mouw’s interest in *He Shines in All That’s Fair* is the doctrine of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, exclusive of the “well-meant offer of the gospel.”³ Basically, this was the theory of common grace that was taught by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck: a non-saving favor of God to all humans; an operation of the Holy Spirit within the reprobate which, without regenerating them, restrains sin in them so that they are only partially depraved; and the ability of unbelievers, by virtue of this grace of the Holy Spirit, to do good works, especially on behalf of a culture which is truly, though not ultimately, good.

“My special focus,” writes Mouw, early on in the book,

2. Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 8, in vol. 3 of *Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1966), 310.

3. The three points of common grace, adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 and Herman Hoeksema’s criticism of them are found in Herman Hoeksema, “A Triple Breach in the Foundation of the Reformed Truth” (Evangelism Committee of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, Grandville, Mich., repr., 2001).

will be on the relevance of teachings about common grace for our understanding of *culture* in our contemporary context. Is there a non-saving grace that is at work in the broader reaches of human cultural interaction, a grace that expedites a desire on God's part to bestow certain blessings on all human beings, elect and non-elect alike—blessings that provide the basis for Christians to cooperate with, and learn from, non-Christians? (p. 14).

Significant Issues for the Entire Christian Community

It is Mouw's judgment and experience that the controversy over common grace in the Christian Reformed Church was of great importance. "The issues relating to the idea of common grace and the battles that have been waged over those issues have long fascinated me. In a sense, questions about common grace have formed the underlying issues in my own intellectual pilgrimage" (p. vii).

These issues are important not only for Mouw personally. "The underlying issues here are of broad contemporary Christian concern" (p. 3). Indeed, Mouw is convinced that "much important content in these Calvinist debates has been hidden too long from the larger Christian theological world. My efforts here, then, are an attempt to give Dutch Reformed deliberations about common grace some broader ecumenical exposure" (p. 8).

The Protestant Reformed Churches are likewise convinced of the vital importance of the issues involved in their controversy with the Christian Reformed Church, and now most of the Reformed world, over common grace. We are delighted that a man of the theological stature of Richard Mouw opens up a public discussion of these issues. Mouw is a leading figure, not only in Reformed circles but also in the wider evangelical sphere. For many years, he taught philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At present, he is president of the huge and influential Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

Dr. Mouw's revisiting the common grace controversy of the early 1920s resulting in the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches comes hard on the heels of the reexamination of that doctrinal struggle in several articles in the *Calvin Theological Journal* of April and November, 2000.⁴ The Protestant Reformed Churches welcome these fresh analyses and hope for continuing discussion of the issues by these writers and by others.

Civility in Theological Discourse

Richard Mouw is a fair and honest controversialist. He is winsome in debate, practicing the civility that he preaches. Mouw treats the position on common grace of Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches at length. In fact, the book is both occasioned by the historical controversy over common grace between the Christian Reformed Church and Herman Hoeksema and structured by Mouw's interaction with the rejection of common grace by Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches. *He Shines in All That's Fair* is Richard Mouw's defense and development of common grace on behalf of good culture against the rejection of common grace by Herman Hoeksema. It is amusing that what purported to be a review of the book in a recent issue of *Christian Renewal* managed to avoid mentioning the name of Herman Hoeksema while listing any number of others who are bit

4. John Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (April 2000): 7–36; Raymond A. Blacketer, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Reexamination of the So-called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (April 2000): 37–65; John Bolt, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: The Temptations of Calvinistic Politics (Reflections on the Third Point of the Christian Reformed Church Kalamazoo Synod, 1924)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 2 (November 2000): 205–237.

players in the book. That reviewer could review Melville's great novel without mentioning *Moby Dick*.⁵

Mouw is respectful of the position on common grace of its great adversary, Herman Hoeksema. Mouw admits that common grace is difficult to grasp and describe. Like old Foppe Ten Hoor, Mouw himself is "not very clear about what it is" (p. 13). Mouw freely acknowledges that rejection of common grace would seem to follow from the Calvinist doctrines of predestination and the antithesis. In fact, Mouw puzzles over the passion with which defenders of common grace opposed Hoeksema.

In this connection, Mouw deplores the tactic of the defenders of common grace of smearing Hoeksema with the epithet "Anabaptist," as though Hoeksema's rejection of common grace amounted to "world flight." This was an extremely effective tactic at the time of the controversy, and one that is still effectively used against the Protestant Reformed Churches by the impassioned defenders of common grace.

Mouw quotes approvingly from a letter that Prof. William Heyns of the Christian Reformed seminary sent to Rev. J. K. Van Baalen, the most energetic practitioner of the tactic, chiding Van Baalen for calling Hoeksema and his colleagues Anabaptists. This is the first time, to my knowledge, that this letter has surfaced in the literature of the controversy in the Christian Reformed Church over common grace. Heretofore, William Heyns has not received good press in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Heyns is regarded as the father of the conditional covenant in the Christian Reformed Church and, thus, indirectly, of the "well-meant offer." Because of his reprimand of Van Baalen in the heat of the battle in the letter from which Mouw quotes, Heyns rises in my estimation. Contending that it was, and is, unfair to label Hoeksema an Anabaptist for his rejection of common grace, Mouw writes:

5. "Mouw on Common Grace," *Christian Renewal* 20, no. 9 (January 28, 2002): 7, 8.

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Calvin Seminary professor William Heyns made a similar point . . . in a 1922 letter to Christian Reformed minister J. K. Van Baalen, who had just written a rather inflammatory pamphlet depicting Hoeksema and his associates as Anabaptists. Heyns endorsed the general thrust of Van Baalen's critique, but he chided him for his rhetoric, instructing Van Baalen that he "would have done better to leave out that epithet 'Anabaptist,' which here can serve only as a scornful word." Surely, Heyns wrote, Van Baalen was not ignorant of the fact "that all of the same things" he found in Hoeksema's thinking could "also be said of the old theologians of Reformed scholasticism" (p. 23).

Mouw does justice to Hoeksema's spiritual, practical concern in the controversy over common grace.

At the heart of Herman Hoeksema's sustained critique of common grace theology lies a very practical concern about the life of the church. The commonality emphasis in common grace theology, Hoeksema insists, will inevitably result in the "obliteration of the distinction between the Church and the world, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, righteousness and unrighteousness." Of course, no common grace defender would simply advocate the "obliteration" of the distinctions listed by Hoeksema. But it does seem to be essential to common grace thinking that the distinction between "church and world" is not exactly the same distinction as that which holds between "light and darkness, Christ and Belial, righteousness and unrighteousness" (p. 24).

Mouw even calls attention to the judgment of the present editor of the *Standard Bearer* upon the worldview of common grace, that "the worldview of common grace has proved to be a colossal failure."⁶ Although Mouw thinks that there is another, more favorable judgment that can and should be made, he agrees that

6. David J. Engelsma, "The Reformed Worldview: 3. The Failure of Common Grace (cont.)," *Standard Bearer* 74, no. 20 (September 1, 1998): 462.

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he [the editor of the *Standard Bearer*] is right to insist that we take an honest look at the failure of common grace thought to stem the tide of wickedness so obvious in places like the Netherlands and North America. If we are to judge common grace teachings by looking for fruits of righteousness in the larger culture—surely a fair test, given the triumphalist tones in which these teachings have often been proclaimed—then we must admit to some serious shortcomings (p. 27).

Mouw points out, correctly, that occasionally Calvin refers to certain natural abilities in the unregenerated as a “peculiar grace” of God. Nevertheless, on the basis of Calvin’s overall doctrine concerning the total depravity of the ungodly, a depravity that “sullies” all their “virtues” and renders them “worthless,” Mouw concludes that opponents of common grace teachings “can legitimately claim nonetheless to be working within the general contours of Calvin’s thought” (pp. 17, 18).

A More Aggressive Practice of Common Grace

On his part, however, Dr. Mouw comes down firmly on the side of common grace. Although Mouw holds the doctrine of predestination set forth in the Canons of Dordt, he believes that God has a non-saving love for all humans. In this love, He blesses all humans with many gifts, including a gracious work of the Holy Spirit within them that restrains their depravity and produces a certain goodness in them and in their works. Richard Mouw sees much in the life of many ungodly people that is fair. All this goodness, truth, and beauty is the shining of God Himself in the lives of the ungodly in His common grace. “He shines in all that’s fair.” This shining of God in His common grace is the basis of legitimate friendship between believer and unbeliever, as it is the basis of cooperation between believer and unbeliever to work for a good culture.

In fact, Mouw faults the three points of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 for their

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passivity. Mouw calls Christians aggressively to act upon and implement common grace by promoting friendships with the ungodly and cooperative cultural endeavor.

The Christian Reformed Church's Three Points of 1924 certainly seem designed to encourage cultural passivity. They come across as instructions for Christians who are mere observers of the larger world. Of course, we cannot help being largely passive when it comes to the "natural blessings"—such as sunshine and rain—that are bestowed upon the elect and non-elect alike. But the second and third areas are different. We should not just stand back and watch for signs that God is restraining sin in the world, or hope that we might witness acts of civic righteousness popping up here and there in the lives of the unredeemed. We ought to look for ways God can use us to restrain the power of sin in the larger human community, and to perform our own works of civic good (pp. 80, 81).

Dr. Mouw's reasons for espousing common grace are characteristically candid. They are also interesting. We will look at them in the next chapter.

2

The Real Reasons for Common Grace



AS THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER POINTED OUT, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* contends that the theory of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 can be helpful to all Christians. Its usefulness is that, in a world of division and strife, it provides a basis for the friendship of Christian and non-Christian and, especially, for the cooperation of Christians with non-Christians in working for a decent, humane, and even God-glorifying culture.

With the notable exception of its teaching of a “well-meant offer of salvation” to all who hear the gospel, which was added by the Christian Reformed Church,¹ the theory of common grace that the Christian Reformed Church adopted in 1924 is basically the doctrine that was developed by the Dutch Reformed theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. The theory holds that God has an attitude of favor in history toward all humans without exception. In this common favor, God gives to all, the reprobate ungodly as well as the elect believers, such material gifts as health and family, rain and sunshine, and wealth and long life. In this favor, He also works in all men by His Holy Spirit. To this gracious operation of the Spirit in the unregenerated are due

1. For a thorough treatment of that aspect of common grace that consists of the “well-meant offer of the gospel,” see David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*. Revised 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1994).

both his natural gifts, for example, the musical ability of a Mozart and the putting prowess of a Tiger Woods, and, more importantly, the restraint of sin in him so that he is only partially depraved.

By virtue of the good that is in him by the gracious, though non-saving, operation of the Spirit, the unregenerated can perform works that are truly good. This goodness of the non-Christian is the ground of the Christian's friendship with him, of the Christian's appreciation of much of the culture of the ungodly world, and of the Christian's cooperation with unbelievers to develop a culture that is even better.

Dr. Mouw urges a more active use of common grace by those Calvinists who confess it. He is critical of the passivity of many, who seem to be content merely to recognize common grace in the falling of the rain on the wicked and in the good deeds of unbelievers. Calvinists who confess common grace must proclaim it as a basis of the shared life of all humanity and as a foundation of united cultural endeavor. These Calvinists must also aggressively practice common grace in "common grace ministries," for example, teaching in the public schools, counseling non-Christians with psychological and marital problems, helping the poor, and addressing national policies and problems in the "public square."

Mouw himself emphasizes the "empathy" of God that is implied by common grace. In His favor to all, God shares the feelings of unbelieving men and women. God rejoices with the non-Christian husband and wife who are reconciled after the husband's adultery. He sympathizes with the Muslim mother whose child is brutally murdered before her eyes by her oppressors.

Even though he is an advocate of common grace, Richard Mouw takes seriously the opposition to the theory of common grace by Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches. The arguments of Dr. Mouw in defense of common grace, against the objections of Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches, are the concern of this chapter.

Absence of Scripture

Scripture plays almost no role whatever in Mouw's apology for common grace. There is a reference to Revelation 21:24–26 as the passage that Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck explained as teaching that “the glory and honor of pagan cultures” will enter into the holy city in the Day of Christ. But this passage says nothing about a grace of God toward pagans. Verse 27 warns that nothing will enter the holy Jerusalem “that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie.”

The notion of Kuyper and Bavinck is absurd. Will the angels carry into heaven a copy of Plato's *Symposium*? Michelangelo's *David*? Leonardo's *The Last Supper*? The score of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*? Mouw himself is rightly dubious of the enthusiastic endorsement of heathen culture by the two Dutch theologians: “Those of us who endorse the idea of common grace would do well to recognize the ways in which its teachings frequently have fostered a triumphalist spirit that has encouraged false hopes for a premature transformation of sinful culture” (p. 50).

Mouw's appeal to 1 Peter 2:11–17, the related exhortation in 1 Peter 3:15, 16, and a corresponding passage in the Old Testament, Jeremiah 29, is not intended to prove a grace of God at work among the heathen and ungodly, but a certain calling of the people of God toward the heathen and ungodly (pp. 76–78).

Only in the last chapter, late in the development of his defense of common grace, does Dr. Mouw bring up Luke 6:35, a text that is important in the controversy over common grace. Even then, Mouw's use of the text is cautious and limited. He appeals to it against Hoeksema's assertion that God “hates His enemies and purposes to destroy them, except them He chose in Christ Jesus.” Hoeksema's assertion, says Mouw, “does not seem to comport well, however, with Christ's command to ‘love your enemies, and do good, expecting nothing in return’ even as the Father ‘is kind to the ungrate-

ful and the wicked' (Luke 6:35).” Then, overlooking that Hoeksema had denied that *God* loves *His* reprobate enemies, not that *we* should love *our* unbelieving enemies, Mouw adds, “When the Savior refers here to people who curse us and abuse us, is he thinking exclusively of our *Christian* enemies? It seems unlikely” (p. 83).

This is the extent of the reference to, and use of, Scripture. One text bearing on the issue of common grace is quoted in part and is then very briefly and hesitantly explained as favoring a grace of God to the reprobate ungodly.

This is not intended as a criticism of Dr. Mouw. There can be no doubt whatever that he knows all the passages that the defenders of common grace have adduced in support of the doctrine. We may be sure that he is thoroughly conversant as well with the interpretation of these texts by the defenders of common grace. But Richard Mouw is a candid man. The real reason why he embraces and promotes common grace is not the clear, compelling testimony of Holy Scripture. He says as much when he admits that, after forty years of studying the issue, he is still not clear as to what common grace is.

Real Reasons for Common Grace

In *He Shines in All That's Fair*, Richard Mouw sets forth the real reasons for his acceptance and advocacy of a common grace of God. Mouw, a Christian and a Reformed man, sees in unregenerated men and women in southern California and elsewhere a goodness that does not harmonize with the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. He sees non-Christians who are decent, moral, friendly, loving, kind, and compassionate. He sees men and women who are avowed unbelievers performing works that are good: reconciling in marriage, caring for their children, helping the poor, giving their life in selfless devotion to their country or their fellowmen.

The reason for Mouw's advocacy of common grace is that he finds in himself an empathy with ungodly people that

seems to conflict with the Reformed faith's teaching that God hates the reprobate wicked. Mouw takes delight in the putting ability of a Sabbath-desecrating professional golfer. Much more important to the Fuller Seminary theologian is his pity for the Muslim mother, worshiper of Allah, whose infant child is killed before her eyes by the men who have just raped her.

And the reason for his embrace of common grace is that Dr. Richard Mouw, learned, influential Christian scholar and teacher, thinks that he and other Christians should be able to cooperate with unbelievers on behalf of a culture of justice, mercy, and peace. But he is well aware of the Reformed doctrine of the antithesis between the church and the world, believer and unbeliever, godly and ungodly. *He Shines in All That's Fair* has a lengthy section on the antithesis (pp. 14–29). Mouw is not of a mind to repudiate the antithesis. On the contrary, he takes issue with his mentor, Henry Stob, who was inclined to limit the antithesis to opposing principles of goodness and evil in the world. Mouw recognizes that the biblical antithesis comes between persons.

A theory that accounts for what Mouw sees, feels, and thinks is common grace. Does he see goodness in the world of fallen men and women? A common grace of God must be at work in this world. Does he feel pity for the tormented Muslim woman? This pity must be a reflection of a common grace compassion that God Himself has for the woman, idolater though she is. Does he desire to work together with non-Christians to hold together the fragmenting culture of North America and even to make it a good culture? This desire must be grounded ultimately in a purpose of God Himself to create good, "godly" cultures in history by the common grace efforts of decent unbelievers and especially by the united efforts of believers and unbelievers.

Common grace solves the problem of the discrepancy between what Mouw sees, feels, and thinks, and what the Reformed confession maintains. Mouw sees goodness in the world of fallen, natural men and women, whereas the Re-

formed confession teaches total depravity. The solution is a common grace of God that gives some deliverance from the condition of total depravity without affirming the natural goodness of fallen man.

Mouw's pity for an idolater suggests a compassion of God for the reprobate wicked, whereas the Reformed confession teaches that God is compassionate toward the elect only and that His wrath is revealed from heaven against the pagans who hold the truth under in unrighteousness. The solution is a common grace favor of God toward the wicked, distinct from His special, saving grace to the elect.

Mouw thinks that he should form friendships with non-Christians and that he should work with them to create a good culture, whereas the Reformed confession teaches separation and hostility between the believer and the unbeliever. The solution is a common grace of God that believer and unbeliever share and practice in the sphere of everyday, earthly life, while remaining separated in worship and salvation.

Common grace is the distinctly (not *distinctively*) Reformed way of accommodating the Bible's severe judgment upon the world of the ungodly and the Bible's equally stringent call to believers to spiritual separation from this world to the seemingly contrary facts of our experience. Reformed people are not the only ones to have noticed the apparent good of the ungodly, or to have felt that God ought to have some sympathy for His reprobate enemies, or to have thought it proper for Christians to enjoy friendship with non-Christians and to cooperate with non-Christians in building a good society.

Theological liberals explain these things in terms of the natural goodness and brotherhood of all mankind. Roman Catholics fall back on natural theology. These doctrines have been objectionable to Reformed theologians, although Rome's natural theology is now finding some favor. But common grace provides the very same conclusions and warrants the very same practices as liberalism and Roman Catholicism: the goodness of unregenerated man; a love of God for all; the friendship (brotherhood?) of believer and unbeliever; and

the union of church and world in building a good culture or, shall we say, a kingdom of man. And the theory of common grace has the advantage of a Reformed reputation.

In basing the theory of common grace upon his own seeing, feeling, and thinking, rather than upon the Word of God, Dr. Mouw is not unique. What sets him apart from many other defenders of common grace is his candor in acknowledging what the real basis of common grace is. Common grace as developed by Kuyper and Bavinck, adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, and now widely advertised in the Reformed community as one of the hallmarks of Calvinism is simply not the doctrinal fruit of careful, thorough study of the Word of God. Scripture does not teach the partial depravity of the unregenerated. Scripture does not teach that the works of those who are dead in trespasses and sin are good—*good in God's judgment as the product of His grace*. Scripture does not share the enthusiasm of the defenders of common grace for the possibilities of a good culture as the result of the united efforts of the church and the world. It is extremely difficult to find Scripture permitting, much less commanding, the friendship of the seed of the woman with the seed of the serpent.

The theory of common grace that is now a shibboleth in Reformed churches does not derive from John Calvin. Calvin on the rare occasion speaks unadvisedly of a “peculiar grace” in the ungodly, usually in connection with Calvin’s recognition of outstanding natural gifts possessed by them. But one will search Calvin in vain for a grace that renders the unbeliever only partially depraved, that produces a positively good culture from the efforts of those who hate God, that is a basis of the friendship of Christian and non-Christian, and that expresses the purpose of God to create good cultures in history apart from His crucified and risen Son. The father of culture-building common grace in the Reformed tradition is not John Calvin, but Abraham Kuyper. Common grace is certainly not a main theme in the theology of John Calvin. It is not even a theme. It is barely mentioned.

Doing Theology at Monroe and Division

Common grace is based on what men see, feel, and think as they observe their neighbors and the world. This explains its popularity and its endurance, in spite of the contrary testimony of the Reformed confessions and in spite of its lack of support in the Bible. The thinking of the defenders of common grace is, “Let the critics of common grace say what they will, we see good in the ungodly; we feel pity for them in their woe, and God should feel pity also; we cannot help but think that we ought to pitch in with the decent non-Christians to make our society, and man’s life in it, good—a society reflecting, not Christ, but ‘Judeo-Christian principles.’”

If the issue is to be decided on the basis of what men see, feel, and think, the theory of common grace wins hands down. For we critics of common grace also see fine, decent, moral, friendly, likable unbelievers. We too see good in the ungodly—much good. Sympathizing with the suffering neighbor who worships another god, or no god at all, we too wonder why God does not feel pity for him. We also groan over the division, folly, injustice, and misery of human life in society, in our nation, and in the world and are tempted to suppose that the Christian is permitted, indeed called, to join with non-Christians in what would then seem the noblest of all causes: creating a society, a nation, a world, of justice, peace, beauty, and goodness.

Without the gospel and Spirit of Jesus Christ!

We see such things, feel such things, and think such things when we see, feel, and think apart from the Word of God.

This was what Herman Hoeksema was warning against, I now realize, when more than once during my seminary days he said, “Do not do your theology on the corner of Monroe and Division” (in those days, the heart of the life of the city of Grand Rapids).

Neither may Richard Mouw do his theology on the streets of southern California. Regardless of the seemingly contrary evidence of our experience of the world, we must resolutely

The Real Reasons for Common Grace

form our theology from Holy Scripture, guided by the Reformed confessions.

Then it will be true that “He shines in all that’s fair,” but the “fair” must be truly “fair.” And it will also be true, and our theology will state, that He curses all that’s foul.

3

One Text



EVEN THOUGH THE REASONS FOR DR. MOUW'S embrace of common grace are his perception of good in the world of the ungodly, his feelings of delight and pity regarding the abilities and the woes of the wicked, and his conviction that believers must cooperate with unbelievers in the building of a good culture, he does appeal to one biblical text in support of his belief. He also refers to two significant passages in the Reformed confessions. Before we consider his arguments from the apparent good of the ungodly, from the Christian's pity for the distressed idolater, and from the involvement of believers in culture, we must look at Mouw's biblical and confessional proof for common grace.

A Prominent Text in the Common Grace Controversy

The one Scripture text that Mouw adduces in support of common grace is Luke 6:35. This is a text that has played a prominent role in the controversy over common grace in Reformed circles. Defenders of common grace have always appealed to it as one of the clearest, most powerful proofs of a favor of God to the reprobate wicked. The text reads: "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

to the evil.” The text is part of the passage beginning with verse 27 in which Jesus calls His disciples to love their enemies.

Dr. Mouw interprets the text as teaching that “God has a positive, albeit non-salvific, regard for those who are not elect, a regard that he asks us to cultivate in our own souls” (p. 82). Mouw thinks that the “unthankful and . . . evil” to whom God is kind are all humans without exception, particularly those men and women whom God has eternally reprobated (p. 83).

Dr. Mouw is certainly right when he insists that the text requires believers to love their unbelieving enemies. For all we know, they may be reprobates. They hate us, curse us, and persecute us. They are our enemies on account of our confession of Christ. They need our prayers, that they be converted and saved.

I hope that Dr. Mouw does not suppose that as part of their opposition to common grace Protestant Reformed people deny that they are to love their unbelieving neighbors. He leaves the impression of this misunderstanding. Having quoted Herman Hoeksema to the effect that *God* hates *His* reprobate enemies, Mouw appeals to Luke 6:35 as teaching that *we* must love *our* unbelieving enemies (p. 83). That we must love our neighbor, whether Christian or non-Christian, is not the issue. The question is: Does God love His reprobate enemies? Specifically, the question is: Are the unthankful and evil who are the objects of God’s kindness in Luke 6:35 *reprobate* persons?

Defenders of common grace assume that the unthankful and evil who are the objects of God’s kindness in Luke 6:35 are all men without exception, thus including those whom He reprobated. Assuming this, they do not bother carefully to explain the last part of Luke 6:35 in the light of its context. It is enough that they cite it. But this begs the question. All agree that God is kind to unthankful and evil people. What needs to be proved is that God is kind to *all* humans who are unthankful and evil. More specifically, what needs to be proved is that God is kind to unthankful and evil *reprobates*.

What Manner of Kindness?

Plainly, Luke 6:35 cannot bear the interpretation given it by the defenders of common grace. This interpretation is that God is kind to reprobate unthankful and evil men with a non-saving, common grace kindness. As Dr. Mouw puts it, God's kindness in Luke 6:35 is a "positive, albeit non-salvific, regard for those who are not elect" (p. 82). But the text teaches the *saving* grace, or kindness, of God toward unthankful and evil people. The word that is translated "kind" is the Greek word *chreestos*. This word is used of God elsewhere in the New Testament in 1 Peter 2:3 and in Romans 2:4. In 1 Peter 2:3, where the King James Version translates the word as "gracious," the word refers to God's kindness in saving His elect. "As newborn babes," regenerated believers are to desire the sincere milk of the Word, "if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is *gracious*" (*chreestos*). In Romans 2:4, the King James Version translates *chreestos* as "goodness": "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the *goodness* of God leadeth thee to repentance?" Inasmuch as this goodness, or kindness, of God leads one to repentance, it is a *saving* kindness, not a common grace kindness.

The use of the same word to describe the attitude of the saints likewise shows kindness to be a saving perfection. Ephesians 4:32 exhorts church members to be "*kind* one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." The expression of kindness is forgiveness of sins.

If the unthankful and evil in Luke 6:35 are reprobate men and women, the text teaches that God is kind to them with a *saving* kindness, or grace. He saves these unthankful and evil people, leading them to repentance and forgiving their sins.

That the kindness of verse 35 is saving grace, not a common grace kindness, is established by verse 36: "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful." In the love and kindness that we must show to our enemies, we are to be merciful. Our mercy reflects the mercy of our Father. Although the objects of our Father's mercy are not explicitly stated in verse 36,

there can be no doubt that they are the same unthankful and evil persons who are mentioned in verse 35. God is merciful to the same persons to whom He is kind, and His mercy is the supreme manifestation of His kindness. But the divine mercy is a pity of God toward sinners that yearns to deliver them from their sins and from the misery of their sins. Mercy is not a mere desire to give a wretched sinner some rain on his corn field, or a pork chop on his plate, or even a happy marriage.

If the unthankful and evil of Luke 6:35 are all humans without exception, including especially the reprobate, the text teaches far too much for the defenders of common grace. It does not teach a meager “positive, albeit non-salvific, regard for those who are not elect.” It teaches a robust kindness that wills to save them. It teaches a pity toward them that yearns to redeem them.

This understanding of the kindness of God in Luke 6:35 is demanded by the preceding context, verses 27 and following. There is a relation between our love for our neighbors and God’s love for the unthankful and evil. Our love reflects His love: “Be ye therefore merciful, *as* your Father also is merciful” (v. 36). Like Father, like children: “But love ye your enemies . . . *and ye shall be the children of the Highest*” (v. 35). In our love for our enemies, we are to pray for them, that is, pray for their salvation: “Pray for them which despitefully use you” (v. 28). This implies a sincere desire on our part for their repentance and salvation. If now the kindness of God that we reflect is a kindness toward all without exception, including reprobate men and women, God too must sincerely desire the repentance and salvation of all without exception. But such a kindness, or grace, is not common grace, a “non-salvific regard for those who are not elect.” It is saving grace.

Who Are the Unthankful and Evil?

Scripture denies that God is kind and merciful to unthankful and evil reprobates, having compassion on them in their mis-

ery, willing their salvation, leading them to repentance, and forgiving their sins: “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion . . . Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Rom. 9:15, 18). Scripture teaches that the Christ of God, carrying out the will of God who sent Him, refused to pray for all men without exception. Thus, He showed that He did not sincerely desire the salvation of all without exception. He prayed only for those whom the Father had given Him out of the world. “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine” (John 17:9).

The meaning of Luke 6:35 is that we Christians are to love our neighbors, including our enemies. These enemies are unbelievers, non-Christians, who are hostile toward us because of our confession and discipleship of Christ. They may well be reprobate enemies, although we hope that our prayers and kind behavior may be useful to win them to Christ.

In loving our enemies, we reflect the character of our Father. Like Father, like children. For God is kind to unthankful and evil people. He is not kind to *all* unthankful and evil people. Nor does Luke 6:35 say this. But He is kind to people who are unthankful and evil. These are the elect in Christ, “the children of the Highest,” who now are called and privileged to show the marvelous goodness of their heavenly Father in their own attitude and behavior toward their enemies.

We were the unthankful and evil when in kindness He set His love upon us in the eternal decree of election.

We were the unthankful and evil when in kindness He gave up His own Son for us in the redeeming death of the cross.

We were the unthankful and evil when in kindness He translated us by the regenerating Spirit into the kingdom of His dear Son.

And still we are the unthankful and evil when daily, in kindness, He brings us to repentance, forgives our sins, preserves us in the faith, and shows us a fatherly face in Jesus Christ. For,

although by His grace we are also thankful and holy, we have only a very small beginning of this thankfulness and holiness. How unthankful we are for the love of God to us in Jesus Christ! And this is evil! This is a great evil!

He Shines in All That's Fair appeals to one text in support of common grace: Luke 6:35. But this text does not teach a common grace of God. It teaches a saving kindness of God. If the unthankful and evil in the text are all humans without exception, the text teaches that the saving grace of God is universal, a doctrine that the rest of Scripture denies, a doctrine that the Reformed confessions condemn, and a doctrine that Dr. Mouw repudiates.

Since this is a text that all defenders of common grace thoughtlessly appeal to, it may be hoped that others as well will now reconsider their use of it in defense of common grace and, perhaps, their defense of common grace itself.

A Particular “Common Grace”

I idly wonder whether the defenders of common grace ever recognize that their interpretation of Luke 6:35 fails even on the assumptions of the theory of common grace. Suppose that the kindness of the text is a common grace kindness of God. In this imaginary case, God's kindness is His loving desire to give everybody a comfortable physical life, nice material things, and earthly happiness, as well as His actual bestowal of all this upon everybody.

But God is not kind in this way to all unthankful and evil people. What about the millions of children born into poverty, famine, sickness, and abuse? What about the hundreds of thousands born with dreadful handicaps of body and mind? What about the millions wracked with pain, crushed with burdens, broken with disappointments, desolate with despair, terrified by fears, and destroyed by war?

Is God kind with a common grace kindness to all un-

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thankful and evil people? Is He thus kind even to most unthankful and evil people?

I do not see it.

His supposed common grace proves to be as particular as His (real) saving grace.