

English Churchman Book Review

CHRISTIANIZING THE WORLD – Reformed Calling or Ecclesiastical Suicide

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"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry 'Mine'." These words are some of the most stirring words ever written and I would be surprised if they did not arouse great feeling in all Christians. The words come of the Dutch Theologian and Politician, Abraham Kuyper. However this book is not a hagiography but a polemic against Kuyper's doctrine of Common Grace. I am sure no one is shocked that Professor Engelsma is taking common grace to task. However even I was shocked that a careful review of what Abraham Kuyper is teaching shows he is clearly in the neo-Calvinist camp and I would contend his teaching in this regard is neither biblically nor creedally orthodox.

Whenever I advise people that I do not endorse the doctrine of common grace I am viewed as an extremist or a heretic. However most people do not fully comprehend what the doctrine of common grace is and when they do they are horrified. Simply put this doctrine is a bridge for the world to enter the church and many of its supporters confuse providence with grace. It is a slogan but my view is there is nothing common about grace. The sad history of the Christian Reformed Church (the main proponent of common grace) shows what happens when you let the world into the church.

The occasion for this book is the common cause between Reformed scholars and the Acton Institute to translate Kuyper's three volumes on common grace from Dutch into English. The Acton Institute is an essentially Roman Catholic organization in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The practical purpose of this exercise is the Christianising of North America and then the world. It is Engelsma's contention that the theory of common grace has no parentage in the Reformed faith of scripture and the creeds and that Christianizing the world of the ungodly is not the legitimate offspring of Reformed Christianity.

It is interesting to note that when Abraham Kuyper was Prime Minister of the Netherlands he had to co-operate with Roman Catholics. If we also assess the success of Christianising the Netherlands, it is now a most wicked country with liberal laws especially with drug use and homosexuality. It is interesting that three of the most historically Reformed cities are Edinburgh, Prague and Amsterdam. These cities are now three of the most notoriously wicked cities in Europe. The theory of common grace requires a Postmillennial eschatology that Professor Engelsma has described elsewhere as Jewish dreams. This view is not supported by scripture

or history.

A definition of common grace is that God is gracious to all humans without exception; that in this grace God restrains sin in all humans; and that by virtue of this common grace of God all humans are able to perform good works in the sphere of civil society. This cultural work of God permits, indeed requires, the co-operation of Christians with the ungodly. Professor Engelsma defines common grace in page 16 as,

"a teaching that calls Christians to unite with non-Christians in making America and the world Christian. ... that consist of a favour, or grace, of God to the ungodly in everyday, natural life; of a restraint of sin in the unregenerate, so that they are not totally depraved, as otherwise they would be; and of the ability of the unbeliever, by this grace of God, to perform truly good works in the sphere of civil and cultural activities. The subject is the notion of a Christianizing of the world by a common grace of God that unites believer and unbeliever in the noble project."

The book is split into two parts and Part 1: Chapter 1 is entitled "The Kuyperian Common Grace Project" and two interesting points are raised. Firstly that a Christianised nation is a society and nation that still lies in the darkness

of idolatry, unbelief, and unrighteousness, but has become more decent, moral, and orderly. This is in essence a veneer of Christianity. It is also argued that this view of common grace is a denial of total depravity in that there appears to be only a partial depravity as some good remains in all humans due to the gift of a common grace of God. The effect of this doctrine is that natural man is not totally depraved.

Chapter 2 is entitled "The Power of Christianising the World". Common grace does not save anyone. Salvation is reserved for the particular grace that God has for the elect. Common

grace is a genuine love of God for all humans and a real power of divine blessing within and upon all humans. Common grace produces the cultural achievements of the human race. It is a world view but it is a clear breach of the antithesis. The antithesis is the separation, antipathy, and warfare between the elect church of believers and their children and the reprobate ungodly. This antithesis has been in place since Genesis 3:15. Even in Kuyper's own time, his conservative critics see common grace as a licence for world conformity.

Chapter 3 is "Creedal and Biblical Basis of the Common Grace World view". It is stated that Kuyper virtually acknowledged that there is no basis in the Reformed confessions for this common grace worldview. Engelsma shows that the only mention of common grace in Reformed confessions is a criticism of it in the Canons of Dordt. In Engelsma's view Creedal Reformed Christianity knows nothing of a common grace of God or of a Christianizing of society and nations. Critics of Kuyper coined the phrase "Neo-Calvinism" stating he was a moderniser of Calvinism, a break from traditional Calvinism and a belief that his theology is not Reformed. Kuyper also tries to use the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 as strictly a covenant of common grace. In Kuyper's view it has nothing to do with salvation.

Chapter 4 is "Reformed Critique of Kuyper's

Common Grace World view: The Confessions" which interacts with The Three Forms of Unity. This chapter also discusses the confusion between providence and grace especially in the light of Psalm 73. Kuyper contends that common grace accounts for the governing of history but this is clearly an issue of providence.

Chapter 5 is "Reformed Critique of Kuyper's Common Grace World view: Scripture (1)" and returns to Kuyper's treatment of the covenant with Noah. There is a discussion of Calvin on the covenant with Noah where Calvin views it as dealing with salvation and stated that the ark was an image of the Church. Kuyper accepts that Calvin and the Calvinists focused too exclusively on the covenant of saving grace while paying too little attention to the covenant of common grace. Other theologians accept that common grace is not one of the essential or fundamental doctrines of Calvinism and does not occupy a prominent position in Calvin's theology. Engelsma is clear at the end of this chapter that there are not two covenants, one of saving grace in Jesus Christ and the other of common grace apart from Jesus Christ. He states at page 86

"There is one covenant with one salvation: the covenant of God of redeeming, saving, glorifying grace in Jesus Christ, extending not only to (elect) humans out of all nations, but also to the creation itself, as the dwellingplace of God with his human family"

Chapter 6 is "Reformed Critique of Kuyper's Common Grace World view: Scripture (2)" which deals with Colossians 1: 13-20 which Kuyper tries to cite in support of common grace. Engelsma makes the application that common grace's Christianizing of the world ignores and leaves out Christ, it is Christianizing without the Christ. Kuyper bizarrely accepts that common grace produces the Antichrist. Engelsma comments at page 103,

"That the supposedly divine work of common grace climaxes in antichrist exposes the theory as utterly false and reprehensible, if not blasphemous. The grace of God produces .. antichrist! Antichrist-outstanding product in history of the (common) grace of God".

Engelsma goes on to state at the end of this chapter at page 107,

"The Kuyperian theory of common grace with the practice that accompanies it is ecclesiastical suicide! The proof is in the pudding".

I will review the final chapter of Part 1 shortly but there is Part 2 which deals with 27 questions and answers dealt with immediately after the initial lecture, which the first part of the book was based on. Space does not permit me to review that section but it is most helpful.

My minister when I was a student stated that it was easier to destroy a doctrine than defend it. In my view in the first six chapters Engelsma demolishes Kuyper's theory of common grace. However Part 1 Chapter 8 is entitled "The Cultural Calling of the Christian". I would describe it as a manifesto for the Reformed Christian Life. The soundly Reformed Christian believes, confesses, and practises a world view. The Reformed, Christian, entire, earthly life is a sacred calling. The Reformed Christian is permitted, indeed required, to live this godly life in physical contact and even earthly co-operation with the ungodly, for example, at work, in the neighbourhood, and in the life of the nation. Nothing is off-limits to the Reformed Christian.

However co-operation with the ungodly in unlawful human activities is forbidden to the Reformed believer. Friendships with unbelievers is forbidden. Contact in everyday life is one thing. Friendship, which is communion of life is another thing. The friend of God hates God's enemies. The Christian is to serve and glorify God in the world, not by fleeing the world; but by behaving rightly in the ordinances of creation. The separation or antithesis between the Reformed Christian and the world of ungodly men and women and their way of life is spiritual, not physical.

Engelsma states that we should be Christianizing by Christ Alone. Jesus Christ will make the society of all redeemed, renewed humanity Christian when He comes again on this world's last day. Those who put Kuyper's famous dictum "no square inch" into practice must not expect the world's approval but expect ridicule, hatred and persecution. The totally depraved world hates Christ and crucified Him. Against the theory

of common grace stands the very heart of the Christian religion: the cross of Jesus. To live for Christ we need special grace through Christ.

Engelsma concludes by stating that the great threat to the Reformed Church and Christians is not world flight but world conformity. He concludes this chapter and the substantive part of this book by stating at page 123,

"The way of common grace is a way of friendship with the world of the ungodly and therefore of enmity with God.

The way of special grace is the way of friendship with God and enmity with his enemies."

I accept the style of this book is more of the pugilist than the pastor but Professor Engelsma deconstructs and demolishes the Kuyperian theory of common grace biblically and creedally. This is an important work as Kuyper and Common Grace is such an influence on the wider Reformed scene. If we accept common grace we are raising a white flag and letting the world saturate the church.

William Gibson

