

***Christianizing the World: Reformed Calling or Ecclesiastical Suicide?* David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016. Hardcover. 192 pages. \$19.95. Reviewed by Robert Burford**

In light of the RFPA publishing Engelsma's new book it would be easy to imagine the modern proponents of the theory of common grace exclaiming, "Another book opposing common grace. Here go the PRC again!" Such a response would be tacit acknowledgement of Engelsma's repeated claim in this book that the Protestant Reformed Churches are the denomination best equipped by God to oppose this theory. Perhaps there may even be a few souls existing under the broad doctrinal umbrella of the PRC, familiar with its history and with the body of literature already in print, that momentarily questioned the need for a new work on the theory of common grace. After recently enjoying a re-reading of Engelsma's book *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's He Shines in All That's Fair*, and hearing of this new publication, I confess to having had such a brief thought. Why was a new book necessary?

It took only a reading of the first paragraph in Engelsma's preface to his new work to answer that question. The theory of common grace is finding new life and is spreading throughout the world.

We were previously warned of this danger by Engelsma. Towards the end of his abovementioned 2003 response to Mouw's book he told us that "Common grace is bound and determined to develop, to expand, to dominate" (p. 93). Apparently it has. With the impending publication (in English for the first time) of Abraham Kuyper's three volumes on his theory of common grace by the Roman Catholic influenced Acton Institute acting as a catalyst, Engelsma has again sensed danger and taken up the pen of opposition. His new book is spawned by a 2014 lecture he gave in Grand Rapids, Michigan under Protestant Reformed auspices. As well as the substance of Engelsma's lecture the book also contains a very useful (and lengthy: 27 Questions) section devoted to giving answers to questions submitted by the audience at the lecture.

Let me unashamedly state my conclusion first. This book is an utterly uncompromising attack on the theory of common grace and the worldview it has spawned. Perhaps the most uncompromising ever penned. This is a book that the RFPA should promote worldwide with all its resources. It will surely polarize views one way or the other. One cannot read this book and sit on the fence.

After a first reading of this book an impression of a new and serious sense of urgency was detected in Engelsma's writing. He goes so far as to provoke and challenge his opponents in the Reformed community to respond to his charges against them (p. 152). The tone of his language is regularly forthright but characteristic of Engelsma's jealousy to defend the special, particular, saving grace of God and to uproot those errors that compromise it. The substance of much of his polemic against common grace is not just a repetition of the arguments given in his criticism of Mouw, nor is it a simple restatement of those previously advanced by authors such as Hoeksema, Danhof and Hanko, but, as we shall see, intensive, insightful development.

No punches are pulled in the attack on what he calls the "muck" of common grace as Engelsma charges "Kuyper's ardent disciples" with "a lack of insight and honesty" (p. 78) and describes Kuyper himself as "desperate for a biblical basis for his common grace theory" (p. 80) and guilty of "absurdity, if not blasphemy" (p. 131) in relation to the latter's assertion that common grace produces the antichrist. These are not unsubstantiated allegations. They come at the conclusion of characteristic, sustained, logical arguments that draw attention to what is a lack of both a biblical and credal basis for the theory. Engelsma seeks to expose the theory's failure to provide a unified worldview and destruction of the true biblical antithesis between sin and grace. The author's

analysis of the deleterious effects of the doctrine in (both Holland and American) history also cuts a wide and deep swathe through common grace's claim to produce Christian culture.

There are some interesting links made which grabbed my attention. I briefly mention but two.

Firstly, In the second part of the book, which seeks to answer audience questions submitted at the end of the lecture which spawned this book, Engelsma briefly examines (p. 188-191) how a faulty doctrine of the covenant opens the door of acceptance to the theory of common grace. He uses the example of the decisions of the CRC synod of 1924 as evidence and draws attention to related, modern heresies, against which he has also recently written, such as those held by the leading men of the federal vision. Holding to God's unconditional covenant grounded in his electing love is a mighty bulwark against the encroachment of common grace.

Secondly, there is also a brief but extremely interesting historical analysis (provided in Chapter 5) of the broader (liberal), theological milieu which existed in the time of Kuyper and Bavinck. Engelsma's contention is that Kuyper's theory of common grace was the result of "caving in to the modernist theological thinking of his day" and a result of "mediation between gospel and culture" (p. 77). Such a mediation always results in a compromised gospel and a denial of the antithetical biblical Christian worldview.

Having provided some general impressions, let me approach the rest of this review in a different way by briefly discussing two themes that I believe are genuine developments in the debate and extremely interesting to me on this side of the world. They are worldview and education. My perspective on these is perhaps that of an "outsider".

By "outsider" I mean one who is in Australia and many thousands of miles from the nearest PRC congregation and who has never had the opportunity to physically attend worship with the PRC. I do not mean "outsider" in the sense of doctrinally different. That such a person has a strong desire to offer a review of this book is, I hope, not presumptuous. Rather it is meant to be a testimony of the importance of Engelsma's work, not only for readers in the PRC but for the wider church.

Engelsma's emphasis throughout the book is that the common grace debate must be concerned with worldviews. He is correct. This element has been mentioned before in PRC literature on this topic but now it is much more prominent. It is a major theme in Chapters 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7, indeed of the whole book. In particular, Engelsma regularly calls attention to the effect of the dualistic common grace worldview on the task of Christian education. As this "outsider" has spent many years labouring to promote Christian education based on a Reformed worldview, the book received my immediate and undivided attention.

"The soundly Reformed Christian, believes, confesses and practices a worldview" (p. 111).

Worldviews begin with (some would say "are") a basic faith position. These basic beliefs take time to fully develop their cultural implications as they work their way into the status of collective confession and progress to (cultural) practice as people learn to interpret the world in certain ways consistent with those beliefs. Engelsma correctly identifies that in its developed form a worldview is all of these at once: belief, confession and practice. To this I might add the word influence. For a worldview to survive and succeed it must gain new converts and influence them to believe, confess and practice along similar lines.

The author identifies two competing worldviews in this debate that claim the title "Christian". The worldview of common grace is identified as dualistic. It consists of salvation in Christ combined with a separate, common grace-driven, cultural task to Christianize the world. In competition with this is

the true Christian worldview driven by the one, special, particular saving grace of God in Jesus Christ (p. 121). The former seeks to adapt itself to the “world”, the latter is hated by the “world”. That the hatred of the world towards those holding the latter worldview drives them to physically separate from the ‘world’ is denied. The familiar charge of Anabaptism, often levelled at the PRC, is again refuted in Chapter 7 and the spiritual nature of the antithesis explained.

The cultural effects of a worldview are only as consistent and strong as the basic beliefs that underlie that worldview (biblical and theological beliefs in the case of a biblical Christian worldview). Successfully attack the foundational beliefs and the structure that is built on it is weakened. Engelsma knows that the theory of common grace has a very weak foundation. His focused attack on the biblical basis of the theory of common grace will be familiar to many PRC readers. He shows that the biblical and creedal basis of the common grace worldview is an emperor without any clothes. By way of example we see Engelsma defending the correct understanding of God’s covenant with Noah against the Kuyperian common grace covenant and also setting forward, in opposition to Kuyper’s dualistic exegesis, the more Christ-centered understanding of passages such as Colossians 1:13-20 (p. 96, 97)

If “*Post-Ecclesiastical Suicide*” is a term that describes the after-effects of a dualistic common grace worldview run riot in the churches, then the term adequately explains much of my experience of Reformed Christianity in Australia. We have it in the doctrinal position of the vast majority of the so-called Reformed churches where it has spawned (inevitably according to Engelsma) its progeny; the well-meant offer of the gospel.

In relation to this, readers may be interested to note that my first experience of the doctrine of common grace in this country was not through the teaching of Kuyper but rather via the agency of Presbyterian theologians Charles Hodge and John Murray. It was the latter, influenced by Hodge, who went so far as to ground God’s saving grace in a so-called common grace of God with statements such as “without common grace special grace would not be possible” and “special (saving) grace has its precondition and sphere of operation in common grace”¹. If one believes these statements it is only a short step to believing the well-meant gospel offer that tells us God has a desire for the salvation of all men, which Murray championed, which the PRC oppose and which is standard teaching in many Presbyterian and Reformed churches in this country. Engelsma is right to warn his readers, several times in the book, of the close relationship between common grace and the well-meant offer. The effects of one or both are the same. Worldliness in the churches, the door opened to Arminianism and the antithesis lost in cultural compromise.

Nowhere are the effects of common grace more obvious than in Christian education. Engelsma continually draws attention to the plight of education, in particular drawing attention to Christian college education in America, from a Reformed perspective under the teachings of common grace. He mentions the demise of the truly Reformed perspective of institutions such as Calvin College (in which he himself studied with a degree of thankfulness) and others, often injecting a note of personal concern for the future of the college education of believer’s children. He laments the concessions, using Calvin College as an example, made to homosexuality and the theory of evolution. The Protestant Reformed young person is warned to be on guard against a “loving Christianity” where the term is a euphemism for “the craven, compromising, compromised, and corrupted Christianity of our day” (p. 175). This “outsider” is very much aware of the Christian

¹ Both quotes are from *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2: Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh, G.B. Banner of Truth Trust, 1984) p. 113.

schools associated with the PRC that stand as a bulwark against the encroaching spread of the common grace worldview. Long may they do so. In this country it is a vastly different story.

In parent-controlled Christian education in my country (much of which began with Christian Reformed Church associated, parent-controlled schools) we have seen in microcosm an example of the effects of the church's adoption of common grace. The doctrinal position of the Reformed school is usually one or more of the Reformed Creeds² which, as Engelsma shows convincingly, do not support common grace and in fact oppose it. He states that to the advocates of common grace "Reformed confessions are a hindrance to their cultural mission" (p. 20). They are thus forced to ignore the Reformed creeds and the role they should play in forming the life of the school. They are hidden, soon forgotten and ignored. Being hidden, their influence on educational philosophy and practice in the school wanes and eventually becomes negligible. Enrollment policies are changed, children of the world are enrolled along with some of the teachers, curriculum, programs and practices of the ungodly government schools. And yes, we are told that this cooperation and fertilization is good because of our common cultural pursuit! Protestant Reformed schools and parents be warned!

From the strong words "*Ecclesiastical Suicide*"³ in the title and the photograph of a run-down church building on the cover, through to the end of the book, Reformed readers all over the world may find this work speaks uncannily to their own situation as it did to mine. Like me they may find themselves almost quietly cheering an allies' brave polemic, in places where allies are difficult to find, against the encroachment of the common grace worldview.

The main section of the book concludes with a warning to maintain the antithesis (p. 122-123 which is world-view and not world-flight!). This should be mandatory reading for every Protestant Reformed young person who will carry the burden of the denomination's stand and warnings against common grace, by God's particular grace, into the future.

Engelsma asks rhetorically "where are such warnings today"? One need not look very far if this book holds its deservedly prominent position in the library of the Christian home.

Respectfully submitted,

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² Engelsma states, "the Reformed creeds are the foundation of all the life of reformed Christians, including their educational life and labor." (p. 143)

³ Engelsma attributes the term "*Ecclesiastical Suicide*" to Herman Hoeksema and even applies it to him in regard to his post-1924 relationship with, the CRC as a denomination.