

CHAPTER ONE

TOO LONG FORGOTTEN

His majesty is above earth.

PSALM 148:13

The first and second volumes of our expositions concerning common grace have been brought to a close. In the first volume the origin and existence of common grace were explained *historically*, and in the second this marvelous aspect of God's mercies was expounded *doctrinally* and connected with particular grace. We do not exaggerate when we state with gratitude that by means of these two volumes, a surprising light already has dawned for many people upon the truth and, under the discipline of that truth, upon life. We have received many appreciative comments about our treatment of common grace, indicating that, in the main, our expositions have hit their target. Yet we are not in denial of the fact that we have not yet convinced *all* those brethren whose assent we would value. In a very recent controversy about training for the ministry of the Word, our writings on common grace were attacked in a none-too-gentle manner to cast reproach on the Free University. This institution, it was claimed, became more and more a school of common grace, and saving grace was supposedly made subordinate to common grace and hence invalidated. It was even argued

that we had moved increasingly in the direction of the Groningen theologians, who dissolved orthodox Christian confession into “a nurturing of humanity by God.”¹ We will not mention the author by name, nor the publication in which this appeared. It is sufficiently sad for us to discover that there are still brethren, even in the bosom of our orthodox Reformed churches,² who, after all that we presented, remain closed in their thinking to this beautiful aspect of God’s mercies to such an extent that they even resort to bitter denunciations in order, if possible, to arrest the acceptance of this doctrine in Christian churches.

Yet we will guard against the tendency to ascribe this bitter resistance to ignoble motives. We personally know the person all too well who wrote so bitterly to do so. He and those standing with him are driven and gripped only by the fear that the line of demarcation between the sacred and the profane should fade. Meanwhile, these brethren themselves will have to admit that no organ of the press has championed the drawing of this boundary as decisively and sharply as possible as *De Heraut* has done from its inception.³ This boundary is threatened by only two things. It is threatened, first, by not positing regeneration as absolute and, second, by the doctrine that Christ has brought about personal and efficacious atonement for *all* the children of man. These are the two wedges that, since the days of our forefathers, people have been trying to drive into the wall of Zion’s temple, so to speak, and it is through these two notions that the sacred and the profane gradually have come to be intermixed. Both inside and outside our circles, it is sufficiently and abundantly known how, from its inception, *De Heraut* prominently stood specifically against these two misrepresentations of the gospel. Our first series, which focused on grace being *particular* in nature, served to strike a fatal blow to so-called universalism. And our fierce

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1. This is a formula associated with the so-called Ethical school of theologians, who emphasized practice over doctrine and whom Kuyper often criticized.
 2. Kuyper refers here to the churches of the secession (*Doleantie*) of 1886, which was also joined by part of the original secession (*Afscheiding*) of 1834. In the decade of the 1890s a rather fierce struggle took place between supporters of Kuyper’s Free University and the proponents of the theological school in Kampen, founded by the secessionists of 1834. This almost led to a schism in the ranks of the orthodox churches, which was narrowly averted in 1902.
 3. *De Heraut* was the newspaper Kuyper founded and edited with a focus on matters relating to the church, and in which the contents of these volumes on common grace first appeared as articles.

struggle for the possibility that “regeneration” potentially could already occur in the cradle had no other purpose than to cause regeneration to be honored as an absolute work of God, under which man stands absolutely passive, and to which the sinner not only contributes nothing but that, if possible, he very definitely would resist. In the case of the adult, this is not quite as striking because the adult already has a measure of knowledge; however, precisely in the cradle, the absolute character of this act of God is beyond all doubt.⁴

The aim and intention of the individual who made this charge and, in his written comments, put us on a par with the Groningen theologians can therefore be explained on the basis of misunderstanding. It shows that perhaps a few of our expositions, which we have published since 1878 and over the last twenty years, were read only superficially and perhaps not even read through to the end; however, such readers surely have not followed us in our writings. We dare to venture that a verdict has been rendered on our expositions concerning common grace without adequate knowledge of those expositions. But we do not blame in the least this individual who has criticized us. Nor do we claim that our writings will be read by everyone. We do think, however, that we are permitted to ask the question as to whether it is good, or reasonable, or responsible to pronounce such a contrary verdict, which is not based on a knowledge of the facts, and this in a publication that finds its way around circles where *De Heraut* is virtually unknown. Since 1892 in particular, we have had believers from other circles confess to us that in the past they had been systematically warned against *De Heraut* and consequently had harbored the most painful suspicions against our alleged “undermining” of the truth. Yet, once they personally came into contact with *De Heraut*, they confessed to what extent they had been misled by ministers and had condemned what they in fact did not know. But after they had come to understand it, our teaching appeared to be entirely in agreement with God’s Word, speaking to their heart and broadening their vision in extraordinary ways. One of these individuals even wrote to us to tell us that he was still busily removing the weeds that had sprouted from the evil seed of misjudgment that he himself formerly had sown so lavishly.

4. Kuyper is referring here to two series originating as articles in *De Heraut* and subsequently published as devotional Bible studies under the title *Uit het Woord* [From the Word] on particular grace (*Dat de genade particulier is*) in 1884, and on the doctrine of the covenant (*De leer de verbonde*) in 1885.

We believed it necessary to place this fact in the foreground at the beginning of this third, and final, series because the healthy character of our Reformed confession depends indeed on whether we deny or honor the doctrine of common grace. As evidence of this reality, the history of our Reformed churches has actually been disappointing in many respects. In Poland, in Italy, and in France our churches have succumbed all too quickly to the dominance of the hostility being directed against them. In the southern Netherlands they were practically eradicated as soon as they were separated from the northern provinces. And in Germany the Lutheran influence soon became dominant, and what was still called “Reformed” to a large extent has been mixed with Lutheran elements.

In the main, therefore, we can say that the Reformed churches held up only in our country, in part in Switzerland, and in the British Isles, specifically in Scotland. In North America nothing existed at the time but insignificant colonial settlements. Consequently, the influence of the Reformed churches has been far too limited for their development, and specifically their theological academic development was unable to expand to the degree that was initially intended. But this resistance would have been less serious if the Reformed churches in these countries could have developed freely and independently. But there lies the impediment. In Switzerland, Zwinglianism formally gained the upper hand, so that the government became the ruler in Christ’s church and its natural development was arrested. Geneva, of all places, fell into the hands of the Libertines. In the British Isles the struggle with the state church, by reason of its exaggerated ritualism, required all of its energies, with the result being that the Reformed faith either became extinct or developed along a one-sided spiritualistic path. Scotland, especially in the Highlands, remained faithful to the confession of the fathers the longest, but more in a conservative than in a progressive sense. People became set in traditional patterns of thought and closed themselves off from wider development. In our own country the sad course of events is sufficiently known to anyone who is acquainted with our church history. First, all energy was spent on the struggle with Arminianism. Then, all kinds of non-Reformed elements crept in among us through the rise of the national church. Here, too, the iron fist of the government prevented free development. And the dilution of theological orthodoxy across the spectrum by different schools of thought cut off the possibility of healthy development, and all too often one school wasted its strength in polemics with the other.

This is a chief reason why life in our Reformed churches became increasingly divorced from their theological roots. The two should have been one, and behold, each chose a different course. The living church ceased to embrace and sharpen its theological foundations, while theology became ever more impotent in terms of guiding the life of the church. Both streams ran side by side. The consequence was that, in the end, the theological stream dried up entirely, first as a result of supranaturalism⁵ and then due to rationalism, while the stream of church life split itself into a broad arm of semisecular piety and a small branch of genuine spiritual life. In the end, Reformed theology had become an unknown entity in all our schools, and in the bosom of the national church the great mass of people went along with the spirit of the age. Only the small stream that remained as the bearer of genuinely Reformed life was able to withstand the spirit of the age and continued to flourish out of love for Christ.

This curious position brought a danger for this small remnant, one that must not be underestimated. Still hidden in the wider, largely unbelieving national church, this remnant was entirely without ecclesiastical organization and ecclesiastical leadership as demanded by Reformed principles. “Fellowship” took the place of the church, and the “lay preacher” took the place of the minister of the Word. In the great social upheaval that characterized the end of the eighteenth century, people floated down the stream without a theological compass. Older, more practical literature was the nourishment of most people, especially literature translated from English, and the difference in perspective that gradually emerged among believers as a result of the lack of leadership remained long unnoticed only because people had almost no contact with one another and lived scattered throughout the country. Who in Zeeland knew what went on in Friesland, and who in Holland knew the spiritual movement of life on the Veluwe? Thus, it was understandable that, gradually and imperceptibly, all unity was lost, so that in the various provinces people’s temperament, aptitude, and character began to exercise a diverging influence on the development of basic beliefs. The result was that, in the various regions of our country, certain types settled whose belief system was unsound and whose connection to the whole was lacking. Evidence of this can still be found almost everywhere; after all,

5. Kuyper refers here to a theological approach that sharply divides creation and special grace, often associated with Roman Catholic theology but also with some streams of post-Reformation Protestant piety.

sooner or later some forceful personality would arise in various circles who would put his stamp on his surroundings without any academic training.

This continued until, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, both the pietist literature from Germany and the methodistic writings of the *Réveil* found acceptance, and the appearance of men like Bilderdijk, da Costa, and Groen van Prinsterer had a unifying influence on life.⁶ The natural consequence was that either the one or the other kind of literature appealed more to the groups that had been formed in the meantime. It did not take long, therefore, until these trends became more clearly delineated. Some were more mystical, on the one hand, while others tended to be more methodistic. Between these two a third movement arose with ever-clearer self-awareness, nourishing itself with our old Reformed stalwarts and urging the restoration of church life, albeit initially with much too great an emphasis on a return to a pristine past.

The seriousness of the division this caused among believers cannot be overstated, simply because initially there was no theological guidance. Thus, no attempt materialized such that theological differences could be overcome by penetrating more deeply into the truth or by returning to the fundamentals of our forefathers. Neither Bilderdijk, nor da Costa, nor Groen van Prinsterer were theologians in the strictest sense, and although each labored and strove in the name of the Lord, this occurred without achieving the higher unity that could be provided only by confessing the theological fundamentals. Bilderdijk lived more in the Middle Ages than in the glory of the Reformation, da Costa injected the chiliastic element into the battle, Groen van Prinsterer recoiled from the Canons of Dort, and across the land each lay preacher followed his own path without there being any hope of a theological remedy.

The same happened in the realm of the church. Here, too, there were three parallel streams. On the one hand were the men of the *Réveil*, who had given up all hope for the life of the church. Then there were those who clung to a reformation of the national church. And between those two were

6. The *Réveil* ("revival") was an evangelical reform movement in the Netherlands with similarities and connections to the evangelical revival in England. Willem Bilderdijk (1756–1831) was a poet and founder of the *Réveil*. Isaác da Costa (1798–1860) was a poet and friend of Bilderdijk and is generally recognized as Bilderdijk's successor among Dutch poets. Groen van Prinsterer (1801–76) was a leader of the antirevolutionary movement and a mentor to Kuyper. For Kuyper and Methodism, see CG 1.43.3.

others who, in differing degrees, despaired of healing the national church and were intent on restoring the church through their own initiative. But however much these three diverged, they all had one thing in common: theological guidance was almost entirely absent. Given their very deficient knowledge of our forefathers, they could proceed and find support only in the life of the congregation as, by the grace of God, it still persisted, albeit in a very weakened condition.

This explains why believers throughout the nineteenth century have stood dualistically over against the world and have developed a much too one-sided spirituality. No thought was given to recapturing the higher spheres of academia, of societal life, and of political involvement. In their timidity they did not dare to aim higher than salvaging the spiritual life for their own group. Therefore, they isolated themselves within their own circle. What lay outside that circle was left to its own devices. The governing emphasis was especially on practical activity. And once tranquility and legal recognition finally arrived after the violent acts of 1834 and subsequent years,⁷ they were not clear on what else could be accomplished. At any rate, any sort of national influence in the wider sense was lost, and the highest goal seemed to have been achieved when in one's own limited circle there was freedom to serve God in one's own home and in one's own church, according to the dictates of one's own heart. In the end, several theological schools were established, but only with the practical aim of providing teachers for the newly emerging churches. There was not the vaguest notion or the faintest concept of a call to allow sacred theology to take the lead in setting the tone in terms of foundational scholarship or the entire life of the people.

It was only the battle for equal state funding for education based on religious principles, engaged in and led in such a masterful way by Groen van Prinsterer, that brought about a change in this situation. Undeniably, Christian schools for many years were viewed by many people as exclusively a source of religious indoctrination, as a means to "let the little ones come to Jesus." Nevertheless, Christian schools helped raise a social and civic element that made itself felt ever more strongly in terms of pedagogy. In this way, and without noticing it, people were moving spontaneously beyond

7. The government of the Netherlands forcefully opposed the secession (*Afscheiding*) of 1834, including calling in the military at times. The "instigator," Rev. De Cock, was even imprisoned for a while. This opposition lasted until 1841.

their closed circles and taking steps *outside* the life of the church. And when issues of funding also drew attention to questions of health, nursing care, psychiatry, and a variety of social issues that touched Christian circles as well, interest and involvement in a wider sphere of social concern *outside* the church blossomed automatically, which made the former tendency toward ecclesial isolation increasingly untenable.

This caused a turnabout that necessarily had to lead—and in fact did lead—to making us understand, based on the fruits of scholarship and a return to first principles, that we could not progress forward by adopting the dominant assumptions governing the non-Christian world. Such assumptions simply did not square with our confession of faith; it would have been like attempting to join iron and clay.⁸ Thus, we came to stand at a fork in the road. Either we had to go back to the accepted church-centered way of thinking and relinquish all involvement with matters of culture such as science and art, land and nation, or we were forced to construct once again our own foundation that was in harmony with our Reformed confession. Up to this point, no one had objected to making do with our universities based on their commitment to nonbelief, as long as our children remained faithful to the church. But now people realized that this dualism needed to be eliminated and that we needed to cultivate our own scholarship, based on our own theological convictions, at our own university.

But then the real difficulties began. The scholarly works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were no longer sufficient, for we were no longer faced with the Arminianism of old but with a worldview that was constructed altogether differently, a view of the world that sought its strength in Modernism, ethical pluralism, pantheism, and evolution. At the same time, we could not make a *tabula rasa* in order to build anew from scratch. We were a historical denomination. We did not want to be anything other than Reformed. And thus the urge and desire sprang forth to return to the original sources of Reformed life in its golden age, to ask how the lines of demarcation had been drawn back then, according to which a solution could be found for the battle in our day as well. Once that direction had been found, we could courageously and through serious study establish the stakes that would demarcate the way for our future development.

8. For Kuyper's writings related to the school struggle, including an address with the title "Iron and Clay," see Abraham Kuyper, *On Education*, ed. Wendy Naylor and Harry Van Dyke (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary that the traditional Christian doctrine of common grace, stripped of the dust that had accumulated through the centuries, be seriously and accurately placed before us in a clear light. For those who are inclined to isolate themselves within their narrow ecclesial circles, the study of particular grace is enough. But those whose faith calls them to participate in the realms of science, civic matters, and education, for example, must orient themselves in terms of life outside the institution of the church. And it is precisely this wider sphere of cultural engagement that remains beyond the horizon of our faith *unless* we are serious about this wondrous doctrine of common grace that explains to us God's rule over life *outside* the church. This realization led us to set ourselves to the task of clarifying the doctrine of common grace with a measure of completeness, and we hope to explore this realm in its practical applications in this final series. Now, if there are fellow believers who think that they know a better way, let them be served notice: they cannot get away with firing an incidental volley here or there in our direction. Rather, the very serious moral obligation rests on them to show from their perspective a better way and to plead their case as thoroughly as we have done before the court of Scripture and truly Reformed principles. Then they, too, must set forth a theological framework that connects life within and life beyond the institutional church. Moreover, they must do this in such a way that their theory is manifestly deduced from Reformed principles and fits within the totality of our Reformed confession.