

Reformation
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God's grace is sufficient for us anywhere His providence places us.

Anonymous

The sanctifying grace of God is appropriated by the obedient and unrelenting activity of the regenerate man.

J. A. Motyer

In all the Word of God there is no doctrine which, if properly applied, is more conducive to godly living than is the doctrine of salvation by grace, and by grace alone.

R. B. Kuiper

God's grace cannot stand with man's merit.

William Perkins

Perfection demands perfection; that is why salvation must be by grace, and why works are not sufficient.

Donald Grey Barnhouse

Common Grace: A Not So Common Matter

John H. Armstrong

Recently, in a rather exciting and interesting Sunday school class designed to allow nonbelievers to voice their questions and opinions, I listened with attention to various views expressed with considerable passion. The view which kept coming up again and again was the idea that sometimes bad things happen to good people, and thus how can we honestly speak of a God who is both good and powerful? We plainly see in the Christian Scriptures that God allows (*ordains* is the more accurate theological term) bad things which occur in this world. Why? And if man is sinful, in fact "totally depraved" as the Reformed confessions are wont to put it, then how can we account for human kindness and human advance in a world so radically flawed and fallen?

These are not new questions. They are as old as philosophy itself, at least in a certain sense. A recent answer, offered by best-selling author Harold Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, is quite straightforward. Kushner (who lost a son to fatal illness) reasons that God is good, thus He can not be all powerful, or He would no longer be *truly* good. Kushner's view is not new. What is new is the way he packages the thesis in an anecdotal and winsome manner in *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*

The question I address is quite different from Kushner's. I ask, "Why do *good things* ever happen to *bad people*?" In stating my question this way I am not merely being clever for the sake of provocation, but rather following the thought of Jesus in Luke 13:1-5:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!

But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

It seems to me that the people who came to our Lord that day were asking exactly the questions the class participant was asking and that Harold Kushner poses in his now famous book. In the first example in our text the soldiers of King Herod had attacked some worshipers from Galilee and killed them while they were actually offering worship to God! In the second historical illustration Jesus cites an incident in which a tower had fallen upon eighteen people, apparently innocent people passing by at the time, and killed them. I don't believe it is incidental to our text that the people in question all appear to be innocent, or “good” people, to whom “bad things” happened (i.e., their death). This scene must be understood if the question posed to Jesus is to be properly appreciated. Were these people good, and God did bad by their death? Or were they “secret” sinners of the sort that God was judging them in a way not readily apparent? The answer of our text is jarring to say the least.

What Jesus does, as He often does with such questions, is tell us that these men were asking the wrong question. The real question is not, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” but rather, “Why does anything good at all ever happen to bad people?” We are all bad, yet much good comes into our lives every day. We are all deserving of immediate and final judgment, thus it is a mercy of God that we draw our next breath. The real question Jesus' hearers needed to ponder, and we hearers today as well, is this: “Why have I not been struck down as these people were by Herod?” Or, “Why hasn't a tower fallen on me, considering the nature of my own rebellion against God?”

The answer to this question, in one dramatic and important word, is—GRACE!

In theological language we refer to this grace as “com-

mon grace.” Professor John Murray, who taught for many years at Westminster Theological Seminary, defined common grace as “every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”¹ This is the grace “extended to all persons through God's general providence; for example, His provision of sunshine and rain for everyone,” adds Professor Millard J. Erickson.²

It is important to understand at the outset that Reformed theology has historically not placed discussion of this doctrine under soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation. John Wesley saw the term as describing a restoring to all fallen beings, through what was termed “prevenient grace,” an ability which made them capable of believing the gospel. All are born in sin, and all are unable to believe without grace, but in Wesley's thought, all are equally given a kind of grace which enables them to accept or refuse the gospel. Sometimes this idea is referenced to John 1:9 which says, “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” It is argued that Christ actually did something salvific for all so that they might believe if they would believe. I submit that this doctrinal notion, though not carefully thought out by most, is a popular idea held by most evangelicals without ever wondering where it came from or whether or not it is the teaching of the text itself. Louis Berkhof, in his *Systematic Theology*, adds that Reformed theology does “at the same time recognize a close connection between the operations of the Holy Spirit in the sphere of creation and in that of redemption, and therefore feels that they should not be entirely dissociated.”³

The Origins of the Doctrine

It is important that we understand the thinking behind the historical development of this doctrine of common grace. I will let Berkhof answer the question of origin for us

by quoting him rather extensively at this point. He writes:

The origin of the doctrine of common grace was occasioned by the fact that there is in this world, alongside of the course of the Christian life with all its blessings, a natural course of life, which is not redemptive and yet exhibits many traces of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The question arose, How can we explain the comparatively orderly life in the world, seeing that the whole world lies under the curse of sin? How is it that the earth yields precious fruit in rich abundance and does not simply bring forth thorns and thistles? How can we account for it that sinful man still “retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and shows some regard for virtue and for good outward behavior”? What explanation can be given of the special gifts and talents with which the natural man is endowed, and of the development of science and art by those who are entirely devoid of the new life that is in Christ Jesus? How can we explain the religious aspirations of men everywhere, even those who did not come in touch with the Christian religion? How can the unregenerate still speak the truth, do good to others, and lead outwardly virtuous lives? These are some of the questions to which the doctrine of common grace seeks to supply the answer.⁴

In biblical language we are asking why does God cause “His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and send rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45)? As James Montgomery Boice puts it, we are asking “why common grace is so very common. We are asking God’s purpose in allowing so many good things to happen to bad people.”⁵

The Doctrine of Common Grace

Doctrine is teaching. Serious Christians seek to state the teaching that they see revealed in Scripture in a manner which considers how that truth has been confessed in the church historically. This is certainly true with regard to the doctrine of common grace.

This subject calls for explanation because of questions that flow from both Scripture and human observation. How, for example, can men who are clearly under the wrath of God and rebels from birth enjoy so much good from the hand of the self-same God? How can men unrenewed by God’s grace display qualities, gifts, and talents, all given by a beneficent, all-powerful, sovereign giver? These same gifts are often used for the preservation of human life, happiness and pleasure. Cultural progress, social advancement and economic improvement all result from gifts given by God, and most of these gifts are plainly not given to the redeemed.

Even heathen people exhibit such noble virtues as courage, fidelity, justice, heroism and kindness. This “rich stream of human life,” as it has been called, causes thinking Christians to pose the kinds of issues which bring us to a doctrine of common grace.

No theologian of the Reformation more clearly understood the biblical teaching of human depravity than John Calvin. He addressed this question, not as profoundly as we might have wished, but he did face it. He wrote:

The most certain and easy solution of this question, however, is that those virtues are not the common properties of nature, but the peculiar graces of God, which he dispenses in great variety, and in a certain degree to men that are otherwise profane.⁶

If the descriptions of human nature revealed to us in Scripture, taught so powerfully in the theology of the Protestant Reformers, and being recovered by many in our own time, are taken seriously one can not help but ask, “Why is this world not a hell on earth?” Every person born into this world is a self-centered, God-hating, unloving rebel, who exploits both nature and others. The notion of a human nature which is basically good has been destroyed as

Utopian nonsense and harmful idiocy. A more realistic view of man is called for, and any reformation in our time will recover such from the Scriptures.

The simple fact is this—we meet people who are kind, generous, faithful, good citizens and loving parents. These people are unredeemed, thus God haters, and yet they are not nearly as bad as we would expect them to be. Indeed, they seem to produce much which we can call “good” in a certain sense. Why? Is it due to something good in their nature, something in themselves that can be “praiseworthy” before a thrice holy God? The answer of the late Anthony Hoekema is helpful:

We must, therefore, attribute these good things to the grace of God—a grace that restrains sin in fallen humankind even though it does not take away man’s sinfulness. This type of grace Calvin [and many others in the same tradition] distinguished from the particular or saving grace whereby man’s nature is renewed and whereby he is enabled to turn to God in faith, repentance and grateful obedience. Though Calvin used various terms to describe the general grace of God that restrains sin without renewing human beings, later theologians in the Reformed tradition were to call this *common grace*.⁷

The Biblical Basis

All doctrine must find its foundation and direction in the revealed will of God—Holy Scripture. We are required to ask, at this point, is this doctrine of common grace one plainly taught in the Bible? With a large company of theologians I assert that it is. Let me develop my case.

Does the Bible teach that God restrains sin in unbelievers? That He gives blessings, short of eternal life, to those who never come to Christ in faith? That He bestows good gifts upon the nonelect that are used for their good and the good of our world?

In Genesis 3:22-23 God banishes the fallen couple from the Garden so that they will not partake of the tree of life and live forever in their lapsed state. Surely this is grace for humanity, but not saving grace for all the sons of Adam. And in Genesis 4:15 God provides a mark of protection which will spare Cain from murder at the hands of another mortal. In both cases a restraint is placed, by God, upon sin itself.

In Genesis 20 we read of Abraham’s brief visit among the Philistines. Because of his own cowardice Abraham lied to King Abimelech regarding his wife, and Abimelech took Sarah to be a part of his harem. God warned Abimelech in a dream not to touch Sarah, on peril of death if he did, since she was married. When Abimelech voiced protest to God’s revelation, God answered, “Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against Me. That is why I did not let you touch her” (Gen. 20:6). Abimelech was a pagan ruler, but God graciously *restrained* him from sin.

Paul describes what happens to those who do not know God and refuse to glorify Him as God. He writes:

Therefore God gave them over (Greek: *paredoken*—abandoned them) in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. . . . Because of this God gave them over to shameful lusts. . . . Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done (Rom. 1:24, 26,28).

Three times we read that God abandoned them. The tense suggest that these were specific times in which this “giving over” took place. This plainly suggests that there were times previous to this time of “giving over” when God restrained their sin. Charles Hodge, commenting on this text, adds, “He (God) withdraws from the wicked the re-

straints of His providence and grace, and gives them over to the dominion of sin.”⁸

There are several ways in which God restrains sin in unbelievers. One is civil government and its use of the sword (cf. Rom. 13:3-4). If the civil ruler, who is quite likely to be an unbeliever, is “God’s servant” as the Scriptures say, then we must ask, “How so?” The answer is to be found in common grace—he is an agent God uses to restrain sin in society. Peter addresses the same matter when he urges believers to submit to governmental leaders “for the Lord’s sake” (1 Peter 2:13-14). This infers that the civil magistrate is put there in God’s providence so that through his rule God might restrain sin. It is for this reason that bad governments are usually much better than no government at all, or anarchy, for they still act as a restraining influence upon sin.

It has sometimes been argued, even by certain Christian theologians, that sin is restrained through human reason and will. Scholastic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, and Roman Catholic thinkers since, have often argued along these lines of thought—man’s reason is able to control his sinful desires. Anthony Hoekema suggested two reasons for deficiency in this approach when he wrote:

First, it is too individualistic—sin is restrained more through social pressure than through the reasoning of an individual. Second . . . we often use our reason simply to justify the wrong thing we want to do, a process psychologists call rationalization. Reason, therefore, may as often be used to defend an evil deed as to prevent it. A smart crook is, in fact, more dangerous than a stupid one.⁹

We should note, then, that God uses general revelation to restrain sin in mankind. Through general revelation He restrains the conscience of man. I believe that this is one point plainly made by Paul in when he writes:

Indeed, when Gentiles who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them (Rom. 2:14-15).

Here we read, “Gentiles (who are without the Mosaic law) . . . do by nature things required by the law. . . .” This is not a statement concerning their motivation. They have no desire to glorify God in keeping part of His law, but their outward actions are affected by that law at work in them. Paul does not say they “keep” the law, but rather that they “do by nature things required by the law,” an altogether different thing.

This text refers to what has been sometimes called natural law. This law is the effect and impact of general revelation upon the consciences of unsaved men and women. As the text says, “they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.” I think Paul is saying something like this: Certain types of outward behavior are bad and certain types of outward behavior are good. Man knows this in his innermost being. A difference, i.e., between right and wrong, is known by men, and this has a restraining influence upon their depraved hearts. The famous Canons of Dort (where the tenets of Arminius were refuted by the Dutch Church) referred to this as “the light of nature.” These canons speak of “(fallen men) retaining certain ideas about God, about natural things, about the distinction between what is honorable and what is shameful, and shows some zeal for virtue and outward discipline.” This knowledge does not enable mankind to arrive at a saving knowledge of God, but it does render man without excuse in the day of judgment, and it is a means used by God in common grace to restrain sin in the present realm of things.¹⁰

A third means of restraining sin through what we are calling common grace is what G. C. Berkouwer called, literally, “fellow-humanbeingness.” Hoekema offers the closest English expression we have for this and calls it “social relationships.” Since man exists in relationships, and not in isolation, then these relationships exercise, through God’s providence, a restraining influence upon his evil heart. An example would be how a man will seek to do right outwardly because he cares about his wife and children and feels the weight of that relationship upon his mind. Because we have family, neighbors, friends, etc., we are hindered from evil in many ways. Our conduct has effect upon others.¹¹

Think about what has been said above. The ability to know right from wrong is a gift of God’s common grace. Restraint from the full effects of our depravity is a mercy of God. If we continue to rebel against God, especially in certain hideous and profane ways, we have reason to believe that He begins to withdraw some of this restraint as part of the judgment which precedes final judgment to come (Rom. 1:18-32). As Louis Berkhof wrote, “If it [public opinion] is not controlled by conscience, acting in harmony with the light of nature, or by the Word of God, it becomes a mighty influence for evil.”¹²

Common grace is sometimes considered only in the aforementioned negative ways, i.e., as restraining evil in fallen man. But it also has a positive side which is seen in God’s gracious giving of much that is good. Wrote Professor John Murray, in his excellent article, “Common Grace,” published first in 1942:

God not only restrains the destructive effects of sin in nature but he also causes nature to teem with the gifts of his goodness. He not only restrains evil in men but he also endows men with gifts, talents, and aptitudes; he stimulates them with interest and purpose to the practice of virtues, the pursuance of worthy tasks, and the cultivation of arts

and sciences that occupy the time, activity and energy of men and that make for the benefit and civilization of the human race. He ordains institutions for the protection and promotion of right, the preservation of liberty, the advance of knowledge and the improvement of physical and moral conditions. We may regard these interests, pursuits and institutions as exercising both an expulsive and impulsive influence. Occupying the energy, activity and time of men they prevent the indulgence of less noble and ignoble pursuits and they exercise an ameliorating, moralizing, stabilizing and civilizing influence upon the social organism.¹³

Professor Murray’s article, now included in volume two of his *Collected Writings* (Banner of Truth, 1977), develops the above statement, showing how Scripture supports his conclusion about this positive aspect of common grace. I will not develop every theme he pursues but give only a few sample texts to display the biblical basis for this positive aspect.

Creation itself is the recipient of divine blessing. The psalmist praises God for His bounteous grace when he says, “Come and see what God has done, how awesome His works in man’s behalf! . . . His eyes watch the nations” (66:5, 7). In Psalm 104 we read: “He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field” (vv. 10-11). “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth; wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart” (vv.14-15).

And in Psalm 145:16-17 we read, “You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all His ways and loving toward all He has made.”

The New Testament record displays plainly that God has given such gifts to unregenerate men, and in fact these should cause them to seek after God and worship Him, which they will not do. The apostle Paul, in preaching to the

pagans of Lystra, said:

In the past, He let all nations go their own way. Yet He has not left Himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; He provides you with plenty of food and fills your heart with joy (Acts 14:16-17).

Our Lord establishes this same truth in Matthew 5 when He says:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (vv. 43-45).

Attempts to separate the "good gifts" of God from His kind and merciful heart toward all men, create a kind of hermeneutical ditch which such commentators fall into with no hope of getting out exegetically.

Indeed, as Professor Murray again wisely says:

... it is just because they are good gifts and manifestations of the kindness and mercy of God that the abuse of them brings greater condemnation and demonstrates the greater inexcusability of impenitence. Ultimate condemnation, so far from making void the reality of grace bestowed in time, rather in this case rests upon the reality of grace bestowed and enjoyed. It will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrhah in the day of judgment than for Capernaum. But the reason is that Capernaum was privileged to witness the mighty works of Christ as supreme exhibitions of the love, goodness and power of God.¹⁴

Beyond even these observations we should note that a kind of "good" is attributed to unregenerate men in the Scriptures. Reformed theologians have historically main-

tained that unsaved men can perform natural good, civil good, and *outwardly* religious good. Listen to one such text exhibiting this idea, in the words of our Lord:

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matt. 5:46-47).

There is, in this observation, what Murray says "may be called the paradox of common grace." Scripture plainly says in Romans 3:10-12 that "there is no one righteous . . . there is no one that does good, not even one." The mind of the unsaved is "hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7-8). What might appear to be a paradox is only a perceived one since the good that unregenerate men do is only relative good, not good in the sense of being motivated by the love and glory of God, which meets the demands of God's holiness. This motivation is worked into the heart of the believer by the special grace of God in salvation. The unregenerate person knows nothing of this motivation, and cannot, since he is "without the Spirit."

The Westminster Confession of Faith shows us this truth when it says:

Works done by unregenerate men, although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing unto God.¹⁵

John Murray aptly sums up this point by adding, "The ploughing of the wicked is sin, but it is more sinful for the

wicked not to plough.”¹⁶ The good works of unregenerate men are said by some to be “material good” but not “formal good.” The simple point is this—some distinction between good is warranted by the plain sense of Scripture.

The Purpose of Common Grace

It is a difficult proposition to speculate as to the purpose of God’s display of common grace in this age, but one point stands out with obvious clarity. Erroll Hulse has written: “The common grace of God enables us to interpret world history.” I believe that this is so, and particularly so regarding God’s principal purpose in world history, the calling out of an elect people for His glory, particularly in the age to come. This is not to say that God’s only purpose in human history is to be seen in the salvation of His elect, but it must be granted that this is the central purpose revealed to us in Scripture.

In human history we see God’s patience and kindness. In common grace, we might say, He is establishing a historical context in which He calls out a people for His eternal kingdom. Says Murray, “Without common grace special grace would not be possible because special grace would have no material out of which to erect its structure.”¹⁷

Much of what happens in the lives of the redeemed occurs in the realm of common grace. Paul, as an example, studied at the feet of Gamaliel, and Moses learned in Pharaoh’s household the language and culture of Egypt. Both used these gifts in service of God, as redeemed men. What Christian can not look back over his or her life and see the hand of God in common grace preparing him or her for what now is a part of the plan of God for their lives as redeemed servants of Christ?

Further, even in coming to Christ in faith and repentance, there were human experience, knowledge of truth, the testimony of people and changed lives, the witness of the

body of Christ—all blessings of what we might term common grace given to redeemed and unredeemed alike. Into this very context the Holy Spirit works, bringing saving (special) grace and its operations. There is plainly a hearing of the Word of God which precedes regeneration. This hearing, in itself, is not saving, as men never converted hear the Word of God. Murray is, as so often, helpful again when he refers to this as “the vestibule of faith,” a point of contact the Spirit uses in bringing saving grace to the elect.

If there are other ends in God’s purposes in common grace we can not be so sure of them. We can believe that if they exist, they exist for the glory of God who displays His goodness, wisdom, kindness and mercy through the operations of what we have called common grace.

The Practical Value of This Doctrine Observed

It needs to be said that the history of the doctrinal discussion of common grace is not without lessons to be learned and dangers to be avoided. Every doctrine has its practical value as well as abuse to be avoided.

In 1924 a dispute over the teaching and place of common grace erupted in the Christian Reformed Church. This dispute might not interest most readers but it is important to us all in several ways.

The debate, which centered around the views of three opponents of the position of the Christian Reformed Church’s written position, culminated in a decision reached at the Synod of Kalamazoo (Michigan). These three ministers left the denomination and formed the Protestant Reformed Church, a much smaller group still in existence today.

This debate focused on the so-called “three points,” as outlined by the Christian Reformed Church, and rejected by the well-known Herman Hoeksema and his two fellow ministers. The first point rejected by the three opponents was, in essence, that God (in their view) did not give good gifts

to all men because of any love or favor towards them as sinners outside of the covenant of grace. In the second place, the Synod actually wrote, "apart from the saving grace of God shown only to those that are elect unto eternal life, there is also a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general." The Protestant Reformed men further rejected the Synod's teaching that God shows favor to sinners through a gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in unbelievers which displays a kind of grace toward them. Finally, they objected to the Synod's teaching that unbelievers can do anything which pleases God. In this they were responding to the Synod's conclusion that "according to the Scripture and the Confessions, the unregenerate, though incapable of doing saving good, can do civil good."¹⁸

As I read this debate, and it does not reflect my own confessional background historically, I sense several concerns in the protestations of the Protestant Reformed men. There is deep concern that the doctrine of human depravity be lost. If this happens the necessity of a supernatural work of regeneration will be lost to a certain extent. Further, there has always been a genuine tension between the church and the world. How is the church to relate in a proper, antithetical manner to the world, which is under God's judgment? Will not a Christian "world-in-life" view be radically different from a non-Christian one, and are we not in danger of losing our distinctive Christian view if we see too much of God and His gifts in the world? How can we meaningfully speak of the favor of God (in whatever way) toward a world which hates Him and is under His judgment already?

I believe these dangers are real, and in fact the history of the Reformed traditions in both the Netherlands and North America reflect some of the dangers foreseen by the Protestant Reformed men in 1924. I do not believe that this danger cancels the doctrine itself, though it might make us more

careful in stating it, with the benefit of some historical perspective upon this debate. There are some important benefits, or values, the church would gain in our generation if she understood and confessed the doctrine of common grace more clearly. I believe the new reformation needed at the end of this century calls for reconsideration of the doctrine of common grace. Let me list several practical benefits of recovering this doctrine in the life of the church today.

1) We need to appreciate, in our recovery of emphasis upon the creation-fall motif in Genesis, the grace of God shown in the curse itself. With strong emphasis upon various elements of the curse being debated today ("work" and its place in the created order, "male-female relationships," childbirth and medical technologies, etc.) we need to see grace inherent in the curse itself. This may sound strange at first glance, but consider Genesis 3 again. Does not God delay His execution of the curse with regard to the promise of death? Who can not remember first reading this and wondering, "Why didn't God strike them down there and then?" It is due to common grace, a not-so-common thing we can see, that God delayed the execution. Even now God prolongs and delays judgment in a thousand ways every day, affording men opportunity to seek after God and to repent, which they do not do unless God's effectual grace changes their wicked hearts. Because God's special grace must change men in order that they will come to Christ does not negate the blessing of His delays and the repeated opportunities which men are given to repent even though they will not!

2) This doctrine, as we have seen, teaches that though God does not save all men, He shows grace to all men, giving gifts to all. If God did not exercise this grace, human society would be so much poorer for the loss. Further, God endows men with skill and gifts which make life for all, regenerate

and unregenerate, more bearable, indeed, lovely and blessed. James 1:17 says: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." As Anthony Hoekema noted, the doctrine of common grace "recognizes *the gifts we see in unregenerate human beings as gifts from God.*"¹⁹

When it rains on the unregenerate they give thanks, but ultimately to no one but themselves. They are thankful for human industry, talent and technology. We, as the redeemed of God, need to give thanks, but not to man. We give thanks to our Father who has liberally sprinkled His good gifts everywhere, and blessed us in every way accordingly. There is an old adage about a frustrated atheist who had no one to thank for the many blessings in his life. Well, we Christians know whom to thank, but if we ignore the doctrine of common grace, our thanksgiving will be distorted and lacking in the depth this doctrine gives to it.

The distortion of this doctrine has caused Christians at times to develop a kind of strange thinking and speaking about talented or creative people. I have overheard believers say, "Well, he must be a Christian, since he does so much good for mankind!" I recall seeing the movie *Gandhi* several years ago, before I made my first visit to India. So many evangelicals were saying something like this, "Look how much good he did for his people. And how much more like Christ he was than most Christians I know." The assumption seemed to be that Gandhi had to be one of us, even if he didn't have the right doctrine, because he was such a holy man who did the works of a Christian. One evangelical magazine actually referred to him at the time as "India's holy man." Holiness was being measured by human achievement, a dangerous idea that has often plagued the church over the ages. All of this fits into what Ken Myers calls "the uncritical effort to somehow *identify* Gandhi with us and our cause."

What has this got to do with the doctrine of common grace? I answer, much. We do not need to claim Gandhi, or a great artist, musician, or political spokesman for our cause. We should praise God for the gifts He has given to unbelievers, and celebrate those gifts with gratitude, not to man but to God who dispenses liberally His mercies in our culture. Myers adds:

I believe that if our understanding of common grace were healthier, we wouldn't feel compelled to search for signs of salvation when there are none. Instead of seeing human greatness as an effect of human submission to God, we could see it as a sign of divine goodness to man. Instead of praising men for coming close to the kingdom, we should be praising God for his forbearance and grace, despite men's rejection of his rule.²⁰

God establishes a culture that is fit for all to participate in joyously. It is a human culture, not a "church-culture," or an "evangelical subculture," as we were prone to call it a decade or two ago. (I am not sure we have such a subculture anymore, if we ever had one back then!)

To listen to American believers in the last three decades talk about political affairs and leaders one would think that only Christians can govern effectively since they hold the right view and support the right causes. How disappointed were many conservative believers when they felt the "born again" president, Jimmy Carter, was not one of them after all. And then the "born again" Ronald Reagan came into office. We followed with interest the articles and books about the personal life of our president, always assuring ourselves he would govern wisely because he was a Christian like us. Then we heard about a wife who sought counsel from astrologers, a home life that was anything but biblically healthy, and his unflinching absence from church on the Lord's Day, and we tried to cover up our embarrassment.

Now we have evangelicals who are sure President Clinton is “against God” and his personal religion is phony. I am suggesting that all of this is ludicrous and silly in a very real sense. Why? Because we do not need to decide for or against a president, a culture, or a direction, on the basis of whether the leader or spokesperson is “one of us.” Martin Luther’s profound assertion that he would rather be ruled by a wise Turk than a stupid Christian still makes sense. I would rather have a president, if you please, who was a careful statesman, a seasoned thinker, and a sensible fellow, than a “born again” preacher of righteousness who can use the media to draw votes and interest for his cause, be it right or left wing in orientation. Can only Christians govern properly? Such an assertion, *de facto* or *de jure*, is a blanket denial of common grace. If God gave Balaam’s ass the ability to speak clearly and properly, surely He can providentially lead a nation through an unbelieving person.

I would add, in making this observation, that our culture in America has become increasingly secularized to such an extent that Christian influence (as we knew it prior to 1960) is all but gone in the arena of common culture. Several recent books, quite important in their own right, have demonstrated this plainly. If evangelical Christians persist in treating American culture as a “political battleground” instead of a “pagan mission field,” we will do more harm for the true growth of the church than we can imagine. I wonder when we will wake up to this? Perhaps not until, like Europe before us, we wake up to find the influence of the church reduced to the margins of culture entirely, a relic of another era.

3) Contrary to popular misuses of this doctrine, common grace does not fail to recognize the destructive power of sin. It does not deny that there is a real antithesis between the church and the world, but rather asks, “How do we who live in this world understand what we do see in the world we live

in?” How can we explain the relative good we sometimes see in bad and morally corrupt men and in a fallen and sin-cursed world? Properly taught, this doctrine does not seek a “neutrality” with the common culture of the world, where art, music, science and literature are produced with no concern for Christian distinctiveness. Indeed, our salting influence in all of life will affect culture and what it produces. But we do not stand “against culture” as if unsaved man could never produce anything of value to us. We affirm what we see as truth, even if the person asserting or expressing it is without God and eternal life.

Particularly in this century we have seen a kind of conservative Christianity which increasingly grew hostile to the culture of the world around it. This has created in the public arena a kind of us-and-them mentality which has brought great harm upon the cause of Christ in the world. Further, Christian young people growing up in such anti-culture churches often pursue higher education, and then turn against their backgrounds precisely because they see them as “hating life and learning” and the spirit of liberal arts education itself. Natural revelation, common grace and related matters must be returned to an important place in the thought and life of the church, which is itself always reforming (*semper reformanda*).

Calvin gave us much insight on how to look at culture properly; it is important that we keep in mind that he developed this doctrine of common grace out of a recognition of the doctrine of total depravity. Perhaps evangelicalism’s departure from this doctrine has had more serious implications than we realize.

4) We should work and pray for a better world because of common grace. Many of us who grew up under evangelical influence in the late twentieth century feel as if all we heard was “how rotten this world was and would become, because Christ was coming back soon anyway.” The old

“why polish the brass on a sinking ship” idea was drilled into our heads. We looked for the coming of the Lord to be before we finished college, so why should we be wasting so much time studying, much less being involved in politics, art, music, and literature? After all, we reasoned, the world is the devil’s domain; God has given it over to him for this season of time. The world is getting worse, and believers will be snatched away before it goes totally bad, so the thinking goes.

Such a view does not reflect the proper biblical balance and teaching seen in common grace. The earth still belongs to the Lord, as the psalmist repeatedly proclaims. He created it, He still owns it, and He still provides good gifts to it in common grace. He maintains what He created and governs it wisely in providence. He restrains sin, frustrates evil empires (witness the collapse of Communistic governments in Europe in recent years), and sums up all things in His Son, Jesus Christ. The devil has power, but Christ has authority over all things, including the devil. His power is limited, temporal, lacking in beauty and focus, and ultimately defeated through the cross of Christ and to be finally put down in the final day. He will not destroy earth, own it or have any say over it, even though he is allowed certain freedoms now in order to accomplish God’s purpose in this present age.

This means that we should concern ourselves still with this present world—its politics, art, music, economics, literature, science and general advancement. We do not expect to “Christianize the world or its culture.” We know better, as we are realists. But as much as we are realists we are not pessimists either. We will stand against evil in this world, both personally and corporately. We will strive to redress wrongs and to establish justice. We will seek to attack poverty, both privately and corporately, because it enslaves and destroys. But we will do all this, realizing that the church’s mission is to “preach Jesus Christ and Him

crucified,” not to establish a Christian government or political party. We will teach our children how to view all of life Christianly.

All of this relates to the “last things” the Bible treats in the doctrine of eschatology. Our future includes a new earth in which the righteous will live and work (Isa. 65:17-25; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1-4). The new earth will be purged, renewed, cleansed and glorified (Rom. 8:19-21).

I believe, with Anthony Hoekema (see his two thrilling and immensely useful volumes, *The Bible and the Future*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979; and *Created in God’s Image*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) that this present world has a certain continuity with the world to come. The world to come will be the old creation completely liberated from sin and its effects seen in bondage and decay, as Paul suggests in Romans 8. And in Revelation 21:24 and 26 we read that “the glory and honor of the nations” will be brought to the Holy City found on the new earth. Writes Hoekema:

These intriguing words suggest that the unique contributions of every nation to the life of the present earth will in some way enrich life on the new earth. How this will be, we do not know. But this statement and the words of Revelation 14:13 that the works or deeds (*erga*) of the dead who die in the Lord will follow them, suggest some sort of continuity between what is done and accomplished on this earth and the life to come. Some day the restraint of sin will be complete. To that day we look forward in faith and hope.²¹

Until that day let us realize the importance of a grace which is not too common at all, a grace which reflects the heart of a God who is a gracious and kind giver, a grace which we call, theologically, common grace.

Author

John H. Armstrong is full-time Director of Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc., and editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He was a pastor for twenty years and now gives himself to writing, ministering to fellow ministers, and preaching internationally in churches and conferences. He is editor of the forthcoming Moody Press book, *Roman Catholicism Today* (1994).

End Notes

- 1 John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume Two: Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 96.
- 2 Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 69.
- 3 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 432. Berkhof is one of the few systematic theologians who offers considerable treatment of this subject. The reader might also consult other standard theologies and consult the indices, but this will not prove too fruitful in most cases.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 432.
- 5 James Montgomery Boice, *Amazing Grace* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 19.
- 6 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), Ford Lewis Battles (Trans.), Book II, chapter 3, section 4.
- 7 Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 189.
- 8 Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964 reprint [1886]), 40.
- 9 *Ibid.*, Hoekema, 196.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 198.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 199.
- 12 *Ibid.*, Berkhof, 441.
- 13 *Ibid.*, Murray, 102.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 15 *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 17, section 7.
- 16 *Ibid.*, Murray, 107.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 18 Barry Gritters, *Grace Uncommon* (Byron Center, Michigan: Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church, n.d.), 6-8, 28-20.
- 19 *Ibid.* Hoekema, 200.
- 20 Ken Myers, "Amazing Grace" in *Eternity*, December, 1986, 37-39. An excellent article which helped me in my own considerations of this subject. Also see Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1989).
- 21 *Ibid.*, Hoekema, 202.