

Common Grace: a Critical Assessment of the Doctrine

By Dr. John Barber

That the Reformation came to provide the *sine qua non* for Protestant Europe's engagement of culture is made clear by the facts of history. Also clear is that the significance of the Reformer's view of God's all-embracing sovereignty over his creation has over the centuries spawned numerous Protestant views of how, and by what means, the Church is to contribute to the important dialogue over culture. Nowhere was this issue of more importance than in Holland at the turn of the twentieth century, and for some years thereafter. It is here where the doctrine of common grace, and to a large extent its rival the creation mandate of Genesis, were first brought to theological maturity and were passed to succeeding generations.

The Theory of God's Common Grace

What is common grace? Abraham Kuyper defines it as "that act of God by which negatively He curbs the operations of Satan, death, and sin, and by which positively He creates an intermediate state for this cosmos, as well as for our human race, which is and continues to be deeply and radically sinful, but in which sin cannot work out its end."¹ Kuyper's definition is based on a distinction between God's common, or non-saving grace, and his special, or redemptive grace. In a nutshell, common grace is said to be that gracious operation of God, after the fall, that permits man and civilizations to develop, when according to his justice, he had every reason to end the world.

Why are men interested in asserting a common grace of God? Unlike essential orthodox doctrines, such as the Divinity of Christ that are manifestly clear from Scripture, common grace is more like the question of evil: the subject begins with a question in search of a biblical solution. In point of fact, that search really begins with a "very insistent series of questions," as John Murray has pointed out.

How is it that men who still lie under the wrath and curse of God and are heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God? How is it that men who are not savingly renewed by the Spirit of God nevertheless exhibit so many qualities, gifts, and

¹ Quoted in C. H. Spurgeon, *Free Will – a Slave* (Allentown, Penn: Sword and Trowel, 1973), pp. 17-18.

accomplishments that promote the preservation, temporal happiness, cultural progress, social and economic improvement of themselves and of others? How is it that races and peoples that have been apparently untouched by the redemptive and regenerative influences of the gospel contribute so much to what we call human civilization? To put the question most comprehensively: how is it that this sin-cursed world enjoys so much favor and kindness at the hands of its holy and ever-blessed Creator?²

Murray's questions reveal a "pea under the mattress," a gnawing awareness that although there is an unqualified moral contrast between the regenerate and the unregenerate, there nevertheless exists a common ground between all people that is seen in virtually every area of life outside saving grace. Unbelievers, cry, laugh, rejoice, love, raise their children, demonstrate courage in the face of battle, enjoy classical music, create art, and as Matthew reminds us, God "causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). Many theologians claim that this sphere shared by humankind, this dimension of connectivity, is the result of God's common grace (*gratia communis*) to all people.

Beginnings

While John Calvin cannot be credited with having first coined the phrase "common grace;" in fact he never used the term, he is the determining influence in the development of the idea.³ Calvin expresses his commitment to the idea of a work of God that restrains the unregenerate, stating

Hence, how much soever men may disguise their impurity, some are restrained only by shame, others by fear of the laws, from breaking out into many kinds of wickedness. Some aspire to an honest life, as deeming it most conducive to their interest, while others are raised above the vulgar lot, that, by the dignity of their station, they may keep inferiors to their duty. Thus God by his providence, curbs the perverseness of nature, preventing it from breaking forth into action, yet without rendering it inwardly pure.⁴

² *Collected Writings of John Murray: Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 93.

³ Calvin based Christian cultural work in the idea of Christian "calling." His thought on what Kuyper later termed "common grace" had more to do with explaining the positive cultural contribution of fallen men, while Kuyper used common grace as a platform for Christian participation in areas of culture.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institute II*, iii, 3.

Calvin goes further, expressing his commitment to the idea of a work of God that provides a reason for the positive contributions of unsaved men to society.

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.⁵

Calvin's recognition of the gifts of the unregenerate as coming from God included his great respect for some of the more prominent philosophers, including Plato.

We cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how pre-eminent they are.⁶

To understand Calvin's rationale for proposing God's universal working in the lives of all people is to invite a larger dialogue on the nature/grace schema that was central to the medieval Schoolmen and that was never fully abrogated by Luther's theology of culture. Pivotal to Roman Catholicism is the belief that fallen man has lost only the "supernatural" gifts of God while in large part retaining his natural endowments. Arminian doctrine joins Roman Catholicism in its affirmation that even in a fallen state the believer and the unbeliever can do things pleasing to God. While Luther rejected the Arminian notion that unregenerate men can do things that are pleasing to God unto salvation, he nevertheless maintained their capacity to do good things on the natural level, thus perpetuating the older Roman dualism at least at this level. Calvin, on the other hand, believed that man's total depravity not only renders him unable to do anything to profit his salvation, but also makes it impossible for even his natural gifts to produce anything good in God's eyes. So how then does Calvin account for human achievement? Calvin found the explanation for the difficulty in the concept of God's universal or common grace to man.

Abraham Kuyper

It is in the Dutch polymath, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) that the significance of common grace finds its optimum treatment, and through whom, the doctrine became a standard reference point for contemporary Protestant (especially Reformed) reflection on culture. Theologian, founder of two newspapers, politician, author, founder of the Free University of Amsterdam, and Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Kuyper's contribution to

⁵ Ibid., iii, 4.

⁶ Ibid., ii, 15.

the subject of culture extends to the role of faith in science, art, economics, and political philosophy. Kuyper may well have summarized his life's work in his unforgettable manifesto issued at the Free University's inaugural convocation, "There is not one square inch (thumb's breath) in the entire universe, of which Christ cannot say, 'This is Mine!'"⁷

Kuyper first expressed his views on common grace publicly during his visit to Princeton University in 1898 when he came to receive an honorary doctorate. His central thesis asserts

For not only did God create all men, not only is He all for all men, but His grace also extends itself, not only as a special grace, to the elect, but also as a common grace (*gratia communis*) to all mankind. To be sure, there is a concentration of religious light and life in the Church but then in the walls of this church there are wide open windows, and through these spacious windows the light of the Eternal has to radiate over the whole world... And even he who does not yet imbibe the higher light, or maybe shuts his eyes to it, is nevertheless admonished, with equal emphasis, and in all things, to give glory to the name of the Lord.⁸

Kuyper's interest in God's grace stems from the same awareness that motivated Calvin to ask how it is that the unregenerate can evidence "virtue" when morally speaking, their natures are awash in sin. The issue of general human exploitation of the creation is particularly manifest in Kuyper's deliberations over science.⁹

Also to Build Culture

Within the doctrine of common grace Kuyper makes a critical distinction between the *constant* and the *progressive* operations of common grace. This distinction draws attention to the fact that God not merely *allows* human history after the fall, but actively causes its fruition.

Yet common grace could not stop at this first and constant operation. Mere maintenance and control affords no answer to the question as to what end the world is to be preserved

⁷ *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring*, 3rd ed., (Kampen, 1930), p. 32. [need to footnote books, thesis, dissertations on Kuyper]

⁸ *The Stone Lectures*, "Calvinism and Religion" (Kuyper.org, 2004), p. 53. Op. cit. Peter Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1998), p. 183. Kuyper's famous lectures are now available at http://www.kuyper.org/main/publish/books_essays/printer_17.shtml.

⁹ See Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's lectures on Calvinism*, p. 176, 179.

and why it has passed throughout a history of ages. If things remain the same what should life be continues at all...Accordingly there is added to this first constant operation of common grace...another, wholly different, operation...calculated to make human life and the life of the whole world pass through a process and develop itself more fully and richly...¹⁰

To this point we see that Kuyper wants to explain human accomplishment in the light of sinful man's total depravity, and additionally to provide a theocentric basis for the advancement of civilizations. But even more than this, common grace is also his way to *disallow human autonomy*. Hence, he does not merely wish to "explain" human triumph but to explain it as a part of a larger worldview that sees all things in service to the Lord of heaven. Common grace is Kuyper's way of doing this.¹¹

All of this leads Kuyper to a positive assessment of the Christian's function in the social order, including science, industry, and art. He argues that God's common grace creates a foundation for the Christian's "shared humanity with the rest of the world" and thus provides believers a point of entrance into the important issue of culture, whereby they can participate with non-believers in the employment and development of the world's resources.

Due to his commitment to the doctrine of total depravity, Kuyper was careful to balance his views on common grace by placing equal stress on the *antithesis* of consciousness that exists between Christians and non-Christians. Kuyper thus rejected the notion that there can be a ground of neutrality between Christian and non-Christian science. In his lecture titled "Calvinism and Science", he says

...we, of course, have to acknowledge two kinds of human consciousness: that of the regenerate and the unregenerate; and these two cannot be identical...If, therefore, it be true that man's own consciousness is his *primumverum*, and hence must be also the starting-point for every scientist, then the logical conclusion is that it is an impossibility that both should agree, and that every endeavor to make them agree must be doomed to failure."¹²

Throughout his life, Kuyper was concerned that his views would not lead to a lessening of the significance of special grace and to an elevating of the merits of common grace. Thus, he deliberately gave common grace a name distinct from that of particular

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ See Abraham Kuyper, *The Stone Lectures*, "Calvinism and Religion", p. 53.

¹² *The Stone Lectures*, "Calvinism and Science", p. 138.

grace. Special grace he called *genade*, whereas common grace he called *gratie* or *gratia communis*, “by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator.”¹³

With these observations before us, the following material seeks to diagnose the main problems with the theory of common grace as a basis for Christian cultural commitment.

A Closer Look at Kuyper

First, Kuyper’s idea that the Christian’s “shared humanity with the rest of the world” is the ground for the church’s active participation in culture is contra the Bible. Scripture reveals that God gave Adam a cultural mandate (Gen. 1:26-28) and it is on this basis, not common grace, that we are to subdue the creation. The Genesis narrative indicates that man’s dominion over the natural world is patterned after the prototypical model set by God in his creation of the Universe. God brings order out of disorder (Gen. 1:2) Likewise, God gives the first couple a directive to bring order out of the disorder of the Garden of Eden (1:26-28). Problematically, man fell into transgression and disorder increased in the world leading to murder (4:8), forbidden types of intermarriage (6:2), wickedness (6:5) and the seeking of equality with God (11:4). Paul explains that the rapid deterioration of the post-fall world is due to creation’s linkage to the fall of the pinnacle of creation – man (Rom. 8:19-22). God, however, intervenes and immediately brings order out of the disorder concurred by sin’s downward spiral, not with common grace, but with a common curse (Gen. 3). But God is gracious. For although man, through his sin, abrogated his place as ruler over the creation, God mercifully re-commissions the couple in their dominion mandate to bring order out of the disorder of the ground (3:23).

We could follow the disorder/order pattern of culture to the end of the New Testament. However the fundamental point from these few sections of the Bible is that redeemed man’s cultural activity is not first and foremost vis-à-vis his natural association with fallen men. God *commands* man to go into the world to bring order out of the disorder of unregenerate culture by establishing godly culture. Genesis 1 and 2 are clear that man’s role in culture was established *before* the fall and that its cultivation is a precondition of

¹³ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 30.

man faithfully executing his covenant responsibilities. Common grace theologians, however, see culture as a residual of the fall, permitted by God, in which Christians consider it their “privilege” to participate with the unregenerate in the cultural task. According to the theory of common grace, culture is not first and foremost a Christian calling. It is an activity that originates from within the circles of unregenerate men. To borrow an analogy from Klass Schilder (1890-1952), another great Dutch scholar, and his critique of common grace “...there is no higher task for the Christian than timidly to eat under the table ‘the crumbs which fall from the table’ of unbelieving ‘culture builders.’”¹⁴

Living culturally is not merely permitted. God commands it. Based on the disorder/order schema of scripture it is in fact questionable to call the world of fallen men “culture.” It more approximates disorder, non-culture. It is the moral equivalent to the earth before it was given shape, when it was “formless and void” and darkness was over its surface. The scriptural terminology is not culture but “the world” or the “world-system” in which believers are not to have a share (John 14:30, 1 John 2:15-17), but to which we are called to minister (John 17:18-19). In this light I do not like the language of Christian “participation” in culture. Rather, something in the line of Christian “engagement” of culture, or better yet, Christian “stewardship” of culture is preferable.

Now when I say that the culture of fallen men “approximates” the disorder of the earth before God gave it shape, I mean to leave room for this consideration. There is a sense in which we must not make too hard a correlation between the fallen world and culture. In the Johannine sense “world” is mankind under the devil’s rule. “Culture”, at least in as far as the word has been traditionally used, is a mixed bag. There are satanic influences on it, to be sure, but also Christian influences. But even here the language of “participation” in culture is problematic. It is unseemly for Christians to beg for a “place at the table.” The table is ours, and one day there will be only Christians present there.

Downplays “re-creation”

Second, common grace encourages a position of cooperation between Christians and non-Christians in the work of culture that circumvents the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. This point is continuous of the last one, yet is different in terms of emphasis. The Bible teaches that man is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). But man sinned and the

¹⁴ Klass Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, G. van Rongen and W. Helder, trans., 1977, p.7. The book can now be read in its entirety at http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/cc/christ_and_culture.html.

image was “defaced.” One might think that upon conversion men would be remade in the image of the triune God in whose likeness they were formed. However, according to Paul, all the fullness of the Trinity dwells in Jesus in bodily form. Thus to be conformed to Christ, is to be made complete. Paul writes, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority” (Colossians 2:9-10). Notice in verse 10 that Paul says “. . .and He is the head over all rule and authority.” What significance does the above passage hold for the believer’s role in culture?

Returning to Genesis 1:28 we know that Adam was created in the image of God and that he was to rule over the earth as God’s appointed representative. Included in Paul’s point is that to be completed in Christ is to be returned to one’s rightful role of having worldwide dominion over the creation. Thus being remade in the image of God includes the fact that believers are to rule with Christ in the world. But from a negative standpoint it also means that unless a person has experienced that life-transforming renewal, they are still in their sins and thus cannot partake in the work of subduing the earth to God’s glory. This does not infer that non-Christians cannot produce beneficial culture, but that in a fallen state they lack the attributes of holiness, righteousness, and truth that are essential in order for God to deem their work as fully acceptable in his sight.

Unregenerate men cannot circumvent the fact that their cultural production comes from a spiritual shortfall. Despite the ability of non-Christian artists to produce prominent and enduring works of art, the spiritual deficit from which they work radically hinders their ability to produce the best possible art. Does this mean that only Christians are capable of great art? For example, Pablo Picasso was not a believer, yet he is considered one of the greatest painters of all time. Undoubtedly, Picasso, and other gifted unbelievers like him, demonstrated technical brilliance and aesthetic vision in their compositions. But what is important to remember is that these artists worked from a spiritual *deficit*. While from a human perspective, their life-production may be considered ‘great,’ sin had reduced them to mere vestiges of the image of God, meaning that their work never reached its *full* potential. In a *spiritual* sense, their work was *not* sound.” Klass Schilder commented upon the spiritual “deficit” in unbelieving artists.

Our conclusion then is that culture is never more than a mere attempt and that, since it is restricted to remnants only, it is a matter of tragedy. God has indeed left something behind in fallen man. But these are only ‘small remnants’ of his original gifts...they can never produce any work that is sound.¹⁵

The ramification of Schilder’s position is that unless man receives back those elements of the image of God that he lost due to sin he cannot reach his full potential as a cultural agent and thus bring glory to God. However, intrinsic to the notion of common grace is that man, even in a fallen state, is sufficiently able to perform his cultural responsibilities without need of regeneration. Now here is where the matter becomes a bit tricky. Kuyper would *not* say that fallen men carry out their cultural tasks to the glory of God. Despite this fact, he still wants to say that God is somehow pleased with their work. In point of fact, both Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck used Revelation 21:24-26, which says “The nations will walk by its light...and the kings will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it,” to say that God is so pleased with the excellencies of unregenerate culture that he will gladly receive such products into heaven. This position, however, is not exegetically sound. Verse 27, which presents a continuation of the thought started in verse 24, is clear that the nations and the kings that bring the glory of their cultures through the gates of the city are those that know the Lamb of God in salvation. “[A]nd nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but *only* those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (italics added).

The sheer fact that the Holy Spirit must perform surgery on the heart of man in order for him to rightly fulfill his cultural commission is proof enough that without that vital change man remains little more than a cultural pigmy. Culture is not a “neutral” activity born out the post-fall world of humanity. It is a product of man’s faith in God.

Now there is little doubt that unregenerate men continue to produce culture in a *general* sense. And certainly as anyone can observe from nation to nation, the impetus to marry, work, procreate, build cities, create art, and invent machines, no matter how primitive, are cultural activities that are innate to all men. I would even venture to say that because the cultural labor of unregenerate men is vitally important to the forward progress of the world, and to God’s long-range redemptive scheme, and because that labor stems from gifts that God has given, the product of unregenerate culture is pleasing to God.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

However, these observations do not lessen the “antithesis” Kuyper spoke of – the fact that there is, and always shall be, a fundamental difference between the Christian and the non-Christian cultural agent by virtue of the Cross.

In light of the antithesis, common grace theologians, Richard Mouw and Henry Stob, believe they have answered the severe critics of common grace, such as those found within the Protestant Reformed Church that go as far as to argue that Christians should have nothing to do with the contiguous culture because culture, by its very nature, is evil. They do so by paving sort of a “middle road.” They hold that the antithesis holds in the ethical sphere, not in the concrete realm. In other words, they want to see the antithesis as an ethical distinction between sin and righteousness, rather than between groups of people, the regenerate and unregenerate.¹⁶ According to them, this nuance permits Christians to cooperate with non-Christians in the work of culture. I take this to mean that as long as the Christian’s involvement with non-believers does not call upon him or her to sin then the Christian is free to participate. Clearly the latter point is well taken. Where the reader should find disagreement with these writers is with their presupposition that the antithetical relationship does not extend to actual classes of people. It does.

It is not possible to relegate the antithesis to the ethical sphere. From Genesis to Revelations, sin and righteousness are not treated as so much ether but as realities that are played out in private and public life. Certainly Christians share many things and interests with the unregenerate, for we are all people. But unless we remember the great lesson Paul teaches that everything, every person, and every act that person commits is somehow a reflection of their attitude to the Creator-creature distinction, we are on the verge of neutrality with the world (See Romans 1).

To this point, the reader might assume that I am in league with the detractors of common grace. Actually, my personal position differs from both the classic Kuyperian

¹⁶ Every careful writer on the topic of common grace has had to grapple with the problem of the antithesis. Mouw seeks to address this concern by pointing to Henry Stob’s clarification. “As Stob explains the notion of the antithesis, for example, he rejects the idea that the antithetical relationship holds between specific classes of people as such: elect and reprobate, regenerate and unregenerate, believer and unbeliever. ‘The fact is,’ says Stob, ‘that the antithesis, at bottom, is between sin and grace.’” Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2001), p. 24. See also Henry Stob, “Observations on the Concept of the Antithesis”, in Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder, eds., *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies on Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 252-53.

model of common grace, and from its detractors found among the Protestant Reformed Church. Permit me to explain.

Christians are to live fully in the world and this will require us to work and play side-by-side with unbelievers. This, however, does not discount the fact that there is a spiritual antithesis between Christian and non-Christian peoples, as expressed in the Bible. How do we bridge these two truths? Historically, rather than bridge these twin truths, people have adopted one extreme over the other. The common grace thinker lands too heavily in favor of his shared cooperation with non-believers in the culture while others stress the antithesis to such a degree as to reject all engagement in culture. This polarity is created when we start with common grace as the foundation for Christian cultural commitment. What I wish to propose is a different starting point for Christianity and culture, which is *the cultural, or dominion, mandate of the Bible*. With this new starting point we affirm *both* the necessity of the Christian obligation to the world *and* the existence of an antithesis between the people of God and the world.

Here is an illustration to explain. A Christian violinist that is called to the musical arts is offered a position in a professional orchestra made up of non-Christians. Kuyper and Bavinck would argue that the Christian violinist, due to the familiar experience he or she shares with the non-Christian in God's graciousness, should take advantage of such an opportunity. They are correct that the violinist should welcome the invitation but not for the reason of common grace.

Jesus indicated that such an activity should be motivated by the Christian desire to be a "city set on a hill" (Matt. 5:14), which is another way to express the cultural mandate of Genesis. As such, we are not called to be segregated from literate society, but to be "salt" and "light" (vss. 13-14), more metaphors that captures the dominion mandate of scripture. Israel was to be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah. 49:6) because she was invested with God's presence. Likewise, the Church is called to "disciple the nations" because the Lord dwells in the Church (Matthew 28:18-20). As salt, the city of God is called to be a flavoring and preserving presence in culture. As light, our consecrated lives are to radiate the glory of God and we are to proclaim his gospel so that the world is illumined and drawn to Christ (v. 16).¹⁷ The evangelistic elements of our cultural involvement assume, and seek

¹⁷ Jesus' analogy of light harkens back to the lamps stationed in the tabernacle of God that were tended by priests (Ex. 25:31-40).

to address, the antithesis!¹⁸ Hence, predicating Christian involvement with non-Christians in the enrichment of culture on the basis of the dominion mandate, rather than on common grace, protects *both* the biblical mandate for believers to attend to the needs and the enjoyment of culture, and the moral antithesis between the Church and the world.

Multiple Divine purposes?

Third, the doctrine of common grace can lead to a dualistic view of the Universe. In Cornelius Van Til's little book, *Common Grace*, the author introduces his subject by way of a detailed discussion on the Christian philosophy of history. "...our discussion on the philosophy of history ought to make us realize that a question such as that of common grace admits of no easy and simple solution."¹⁹ Van Til's reason for assuming common grace under the heading of the Christian philosophy of history is explained by the previous point that common grace grew out of the need to make sense of the gifts of unregenerate men. Yet the subject common grace addresses is larger in scope than the narrow question of how totally depraved men can perform civic good. Integrally tied to this issue is the still larger question, "On what basis did God permit history to continue after the fall so that unregenerate men could show their gifts." Once again, the believer in common grace responds that to recognize millenniums of gifted unregenerate men presupposes that it also pleased the Creator to allow for the unimpeded progress of history after the fall. Hence, common grace. That Van Til sees the Christian view of history as the contextual basis for common grace should not surprise us. Calvinists have historically been committed to the teleological notion that all the phenomena of creation are properly understood in relationship to God's ultimate purpose for the Universe.

Richard Mouw, however, is a Calvinist with an added perspective. He believes in God's providential development of the creation toward a divine goal, but also is of the mind that Reformed theologians need to find ways to appreciate the creation *in itself*, apart from the framework of God's redemptive timetable. Critiquing Herman Hoeksema's supralapsarian emphasis that even "the eagle's flight and the ocean's waves are ordained by

¹⁸ The reader may think that I am blending the Great Commission of Matthew 28 with the cultural mandate of Genesis in order to make my point. But in my view the Great Commission and the cultural mandate are not two distinct directives but two "bookends" of a single doctrine of dominion, established in Genesis and finding maturity in Christ's call to "disciple the nations."

¹⁹ Van Til, *Common Grace*, p. 12.

God simply as means to the goal of bringing them to their foreordained destinies,” Mouw counters, “Let me be concrete: I think God takes delight in Benjamin Franklin’s wit and in Tiger Woods putts...and I am convinced that God’s delight in these phenomena does not come because they bring the elect to glory and the non-elect to eternal separation from the divine presence. I think God enjoys these things for their own sakes.”²⁰

I find great merit in Mouw’s position and agree with him in a definite sense. Reformed thinkers tend to view the things of this world as products moving on the great conveyor belt of history rather than as gifts to be enjoyed. Nonetheless, as Mouw says, that God enjoys the things he has created “for their own sakes” (and by way of inference so should we) is, of course, ambiguous. Does Mouw suggest we can enjoy God’s creation outside of any context at all? Surely he would not deny that God’s plan provides the broadest context. Given that context, we do, of course, give greater or less attention to various particulars on the way, and that is as it should be. “Own sake” misleadingly suggests that our taking pleasure in the elements of creation is something other than a matter of degree, but is a matter of relative focus. Indeed, biblically speaking there is simply no way to separate the phenomena of life from God’s overarching plan. Paul exclaims, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). So perhaps I can enjoy culture for its own sake, as Mouw suggests, but not completely divorced from God’s purposeful work through time.

So perhaps it is the further implication Mouw draws from his infralapsarian view of history that makes me more skittish about accepting culture as independent from God’s divine goal. According to Mouw, the fact that God permitted the development of civilizations after the fall means that he has “multiple divine purposes” – one established for the church before the fall, the other founded for the creation after the fall. “To state it plainly: I am insisting that as God unfolds his plan for his creation, he is interested in more than one thing. Alongside of God’s clear concern about the eternal destiny of individuals are his designs for the larger creation.”²¹ Mouw then goes further. He suggests that God’s multiple divine purposes also act as a guide for the church’s activity in the world. “If God cannot operate with more than one ‘ruling passion,’ then it would indeed be folly for

²⁰ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, p.36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Christians to attempt to do so; but if God is committed both to the election of individuals to eternal life and to a distinguishable program of providential dealings with the broader creation, then it is quite fitting for us to feature a similar multiplicity in our own theologies.”²²

Mouw’s desire to see the Church operate on two tracks, one focused on the salvation of individuals, the other focused on the broader concerns of culture, is favorable in that it reflects a thoughtful theology of culture. However, by presenting God’s providential dealing with the creation and his election of individuals as two distinct purposes, I fear he gives currency to a type of “Reformed dualism” that, in one important respect, is correlative to the sacred/secular distinction of High Scholasticism. The primary difference between Thomistic dualism and the Protestant doctrine of common grace is that according to common grace culture is not on a lower, less important level than that of grace, just a different one. But this is an equally dangerous view. To sever culture from God’s purposes in redemption is to sever it from the revelation of scripture. Without scripture as its basis, culture immediately tends toward humanism and the entertaining of convention, customs, habit, mores, and society for their own sake and norms. It is then that culture is made a social product, regardless of how hard we may try to keep it sanctified in Christian jargon. The metaphors of salvation give way to a new set of metaphors shaped by experience – namely commonness, humanness, and mutual sharing. Ironically, common grace, although it purports to articulate a God-centered view of culture, struggles to distance itself from a man-centered cultural ethic in the end. And despite the fact that Kuyper spoke of “God’s honor in all sphere of life,” his added insistence that every sphere of life had its own “sovereign” only confused the issue.

The Bible’s view of culture differs from all dualistic prescriptions of the same in its insistence of an intermutual relationship between the broader creation and *special* grace (the relationship between the creation and culture should be clear: the creation, or nature, is the raw material of culture). This relationship is clearly evident in Romans where Paul treats his theme, which as Murray notes, is “the power of God operative unto salvation through faith.”²³ In speaking of the role of creation as it relates to the power of God in salvation, Paul writes, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all

²² Ibid., p. 68.

²³ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), p. 28.

ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:18-20). This passage is part of a longer train of thought. Extending back from verse 28 to verse 15 where Paul states his eagerness to “preach the gospel” at Rome, we note a continuous and progressive unfolding of reason that is linked by the conjunction, *gar*, meaning “for” or “because.”

As any first year seminary student knows, *gar* links what comes after it with what goes before it. Thus, verses 15-28 present a single line of thought regressing backward. Why is Paul eager to preach the gospel at Rome? (v.15). “Because (*gar*) [he is] not ashamed of the gospel” (v.16). Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel? “Because (*gar*) in it the righteousness of God is revealed,” whereby “the righteous man shall live by faith” (v.17). Why should the righteous man live by faith? “Because (*gar*) the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (v.18). Can men escape the message of God’s revealed wrath? No. “Because (*dioti* is secondary conjunction meaning “for” or “because”) that which is known about God is evident within them” (v.19). Is this true? Yes. “Because (*gar*) since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

What is clear from the above train of thought is that *both* the ministry of the gospel *and* creation’s ability to convict men of sin operates conjointly. Biblically there is no playing off of the creation against redemption, no idea that the economy of the gospel is God’s “Plan A,” while the creation represents God’s “Plan B.” Rather creation and redemption work toward the same effect – the redemption of God’s elect. Creation and redemption are the complementation to the Divine goal.

The same unanimity of relationship and of purpose shared by redemption and the creation is also seen in Romans 8:20. Here Paul records that the creation was “subjected to futility...because of Him [God] who subjected it...” (Rom. 8:20). What is interesting is that the Genesis account appears to give us another reason for why the creation has been subjected to futility. There it is “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and

have eaten from the tree...Cursed is he ground..." (Gen. 3:17). Clearly Paul's teaching is not at variance with Moses, but rather Paul bypasses the proximate cause of creation's fall (man eating of the forbidden fruit) and goes directly to the ultimate cause, which is God's judgment of man's rebellion.

The proximate reason for creation's plight is not lost, however. The creation is irreparably tied to man because he is the pinnacle of creation. When he fell, the creation fell with him. Now the curse frustrates both man and nature in their ability to yield their life and reach their proper end unimpeded. As well, Creation's hope is not separate from the redemptive environment in which man moves, but its "anxious longing" (v.19) is integrally tied to man's full salvation. "...that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:22). Thus, just as the creation "groans and suffers the pain of childbirth" so also we "groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons..." (vss. 22-23). Again I conclude that the creation is not on an ancillary track to that of redemption, but that both are on one and the same track of God's Divine favor.

Reflection

Frankly, I am uncomfortable with the term "common grace" preferring instead some sort of reference to God's common patience or forbearance with sinful man. John Frame notes "Scripture never uses *chen* or *charis* to refer to his blessings on creation generally or on non-elect humanity. So it would perhaps be better to speak of God's common goodness or common love, rather than his common grace."²⁴ Also, I do not wish to deny the *essence* of common grace. Rather than refute the doctrine outright, I propose that in addition to using biblical language, we view God's persistence with man as an *ingredient* of culture rather than as the *basis* for culture. Viewed as the basis for culture, common grace creates the type of problems addressed in this paper. Treated as an ingredient of culture, God's patience with sinful man motivates us to acknowledge the antithesis between the Church and the world, labor side by side with non-Christians in the forward progress of world civilizations, and maintain our cultural activity in the commands of scripture.

²⁴ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: a Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002), pp. 429-30.