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Editor's Notes

Does God show a saving grace to His elect, based on Christ's atoning death, and a non-saving grace to every human? Do some who receive grace in this life go to hell after this life? And is the preaching of the gospel an instance of non-saving grace, as God expresses a favor to those who hear but refuse to believe?

Many theologians in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) in the early 1920s answered affirmatively. They asserted that Scripture and the Reformed confessions provided the basis for this positive answer, and that Reformed theologians from the time of Calvin to the present taught a common grace.

Not all CRC pastors agreed. This set the stage for the CRC Synod of Kalamazoo 1924. That synod met just over one hundred years ago. When it defended the affirmative answer to the above questions, several CRC churches in west Michigan formally expressed their intent to appeal its decision. This formal agreement was made at a meeting on March 6, 1925. A good argument could be made that March 6, 1925, is the birthday of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

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Centennials ought to be observed. To observe the centennial of the CRC Synod 1924 and the response of the PRCA's fathers to it, the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary gave five speeches on October 31-November 2, 2024. The speeches are reproduced here in written form. Some of the articles, in fact, retain the flavor and style of the spoken word.

The first is a historical overview of the synod and the context in which it met. The history is not new. The article presents new material in three ways. First, it puts the synod in its *cultural* context. Second, it includes newspaper reporting in its sources. Third, it provides as complete a rendition of Herman Hoeksema's speech on the floor of the synod as is possible today.

The second responds to the idea of common grace generally. Prof. Brian Huizinga shows the doctrine to be wrong confessionally, scripturally, and practically. One takeaway is this: the Psalms are

so prominent and forceful in teaching that God does not love the impenitent, unbelieving wicked. The doctrine of common grace was developed after the Reformation and was codified in 1924. It *would not have been developed* in Israel during David's day.

The third addresses the well-meant offer of the gospel (WMO). Prof. Ronald Cammenga clearly explains what the WMO is, and demonstrates that the WMO view of the preaching of the gospel was not that of Jesus or Paul and does not accord with God's revealed purposes for the declaration of the gospel. Prof. Cammenga does not base this demonstration on a few, or even ten, passages; he demonstrates that it is the pervasive teaching of Scripture.

The synod incorporated Abraham Kuyper's doctrine of common grace into its second and third points. Prof. Barry Gritters interacts with the second point, which taught that God restrains sin in the hearts of unbelievers. Today's neo-Calvinism, he argues, is driven by the teachings of that second point. In the CRC particularly, that second point has resulted in a paradigm shift.

The third point of common grace regards the ability of unregenerate humans to do civil good. Prof. Cory Griess responds with exegetical and confessional arguments and points out the doctrine's ill effects. It boils down to this: regardless of how we earthlings define "good," how does *God* define it?

Reading these articles, one cannot help but come to three conclusions. First, not the doctrine of common grace, but the opposition to it and the defense of sovereign, particular grace in Jesus Christ, is based on a fair reading of Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

Second, the doctrine of common grace as developed in 1924 was no flash in the pan. That synod was a decisive moment in the history of the CRC.

Finally, the PRCA's response a century later is motivated, not by a desire to justify our existence, nor by an intellectual interest in our history, but by our desire to teach truth. Because of this, to revisit the issue is timely.

DJK

Decisions of the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo 1924

Each of the following articles in this issue references the decisions regarding common grace made by the Christian Reformed Church in North America's Synod of Kalamazoo 1924. In order that the reader have a fuller understanding of the decisions themselves, of the scriptural and confessional support for them, and of other related decisions that synod made, they are reproduced in full below. Omitted in what follows are quotations from writings of Reformed theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to which the synod referred. -Ed.

MOTION TO APPOINT A STUDY COMMITTEE

Article 124, as taken from the CRCNA English translation of the Acts of Synod
(Article 129 records the rejection of this motion)

The discussion of the proposal in regard to the first three points under III in the report of the Pre-Advisory Committee re Common Grace is continued. A substitute proposal with the following content is submitted:

"That Synod, having considered the advice of the Pre-Advisory Committee with regard to the protests against the views of the Brothers Danhof and Hoeksema, which have been submitted to Synod, it now be decided to table the matter of Common Grace, with the earnest admonition that a thorough study be made of this matter, and that this be done in a spirit of brotherly love and mutual appreciation of contrary views.

In order that this thorough study be carried out, it be decided by Synod to appoint a committee representing all sides, in which Revs. Danhof and Hoeksema will have a voice, and that this committee will serve the next synod with clarification and enlightenment concerning this very important question.

In conclusion, that Synod declare that the protesters (whose good intentions in submitting their protests are appreciated) be satisfied with

this decision and should abide by this decision, in light of the fact that it is the judgment of Synod that the time is not yet ripe to make a precise declaration about this issue which the protesters placed before Synod."

FINAL FORMULATION OF THE THREE POINTS OF COMMON GRACE

Acts of Synod, Art. 132

Translation of Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 2nd edition (1947), 85-86

1. Regarding the first point, touching the favorable attitude of God toward mankind in general and not only toward the elect, synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confession it is established, that besides the saving grace of God shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is also a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general. This is evident from the Scripture passages that were quoted and from the Canons of Dordt, 2, 5 and 3/4, 8, 9, where the general offer of the gospel is set forth; while it also is evident from the citations made from Reformed writers belonging to the most flourishing period of Reformed theology that our fathers from of old maintained this view.

2. Regarding the second point touching the restraint of sin in the life of the individual man and of society in general, synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confession there is such a restraint of sin. This is evident from the Scripture passages that were quoted and from the Netherland Confession Art. 13 and 36, which teach that God by a general operation of His Spirit, without renewing the heart, restrains the unbridled manifestation of sin, so that life in human society remains possible; while the citations from Reformed authors of the most flourishing period of Reformed theology prove, moreover, that our fathers from of old maintained this view.

3. Regarding the third point, touching the performance of so-called civic righteousness by the unregenerate, synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confession, the unregenerate, though incapable of doing any spiritual good (Canons of Dordt, 3/4, 3) are able to perform such civic good. This is evident from the Scripture passages that were quoted and from the Canons of Dordt, 3/4, 4, and from the Netherland

Confession, Art. 36, which teach that God without renewing the heart, exercises such an influence upon man that he is enabled to do civic good; while it is, moreover, evident from the citations made from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed theology that our fathers from of old maintained this view.

SYNOD'S EVIDENCE FOR THE FIRST POINT

Acts of Synod Art. 100

Translation of Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 317-319. Scripture passages are taken from the KJV.

Evidence from Scripture and the Confessions:

A. Scripture

Psalm 145:9 - The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.

Matthew 5:44, 45 - But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

Luke 6:35, 36 - But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Acts 14: 16, 17 - Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.

1 Timothy 4:10 - For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.

Romans 2:4 - Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?

Also there are texts that point out that God comes with a well-meant offer of salvation to all men. Compare, among others, the following texts:

Ezekiel 33:11 - Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

Ezekiel 18:23 - Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?

B. The Confessions

Canons of Dordt, 2.5: Moreover the promise of the Gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel.

Canons 3.8: As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly declared in His Word, what will be acceptable to Him; namely, that they who are called should come unto Him. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to Him and believe on Him.

Canons 3.9: It is not the fault of the Gospel, nor of Christ, offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel, and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word, refuse to come.

SYNOD'S EVIDENCE FOR THE SECOND POINT

Acts of Synod Art. 100

Translation of Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 354-355

A. Scripture

Genesis 6:3 - And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man....

Psalm 81:11, 12 - But my people would not hearken to my voice;

and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels.

Acts 7:42 - Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?

Romans 1:24 - Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:

Romans 1:26 - For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:

Romans 1:28 - And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient;

2 Thessalonians 2:6,7 - And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.

B. The Confessions

Belgic Confession, Art. 13: "…in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that he so restrains the devil and all our enemies, that without his will and permission they cannot hurt us."

Belgic Confession, Art. 36: "…willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained."

SYNOD'S EVIDENCE FOR THE THIRD POINT

Acts of Synod Art. 100

Translation of Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 377-378, 400-401

A. Scripture

2 Kings 10:29, 30 - Howbeit from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, Jehu departed not from after them, to wit, the golden calves that were in Bethel, and that were in Dan. And the LORD said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in exe-

cuting that which is right in mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in mine heart, thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.

2 Kings 12:2 - And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the LORD all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him.

2 Kings 14:3 - And he [Amaziah] did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, yet not like David his father: he did according to all things as Joash his father did. Cf. 2 Chronicles 25:2 - And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, but not with a perfect heart.

Luke 6:33 - And if ye do good to them that do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same.

Romans 2:14 - For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves. Here Synod refers us to vs. 13 - For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. Also to Romans 10:5 - For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them. And to Galatians 3:12 - And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.

B. The Confessions

Canons of Dordt 3/4, 4: "There remain, however, in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment."

Belgic Confession, Art. 36: "Wherefore, we detest …all those… who confound that decency and good order which God establishes among men."

RELATED DECISIONS OF SYNOD

Acts of Synod Art. 132

Translation of Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 86, 88, 91-95

II. Synod expresses that several statements in the writings of the Reverends H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema cannot very well be har-

monized with what Scripture and the Confession teach us regarding the above mentioned three points. Synod also judges that the pastors referred to, in their writings use some strong expressions, from which it is evident that in their presentation of the truth they do not sufficiently adhere to the way in which our confessions express themselves, especially Point I of the Utrecht Conclusions.

On the other hand, synod declares that these ministers in their writings, according to their own repeated declarations, do not intend or purpose anything else than to teach and maintain our Reformed doctrine, the doctrine of Scripture and the Confessions; and it cannot be denied that they are Reformed in respect to the fundamental truths as they are formulated in the Confessions even though it be with an inclination to one-sidedness.

III. With a view to the deviating sentiments of the Reverends H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema regarding the above mentioned three points, and with a view to the controversy that arose in our Church regarding the doctrine of Common or General Grace, synod admonishes the two brethren to abide in their teaching and writing by the standpoint of our Confession regarding the three points that were discussed, and at the same time she admonishes the brethren and the Churches in general to refrain from all onesidedness in the presentation of the truth, and to express themselves carefully and with sobriety and modesty.

On the other hand, in as far as the pastors H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema in their writings warn against worldlymindedness, synod judges that there is, indeed, reason for such warning with a view to a possible misuse of the doctrine of Common Grace and, therefore, synod considers it its calling to send the following TESTIMONY to the churches.

Now Synod expressed itself on three points that were at stake in the denial of Common Grace and thereby condemned the entire disregard for this doctrine, she feels constrained at the same time to warn our Churches and especially our leaders earnestly against all onesided emphasis on and misuse of the doctrine of Common Grace. It cannot be denied that there exists a real danger in this respect. When Doctor Kuyper wrote his monumental work on this subject he revealed that he

was not unconscious of the danger that some would be seduced by it to lose themselves in the world. And even now history shows that this danger is more than imaginary. And also Doctor Bavinck reminded us of this danger in his *Dogmatics*.

When we consider the direction in which the spirit of the time develops round about us, it cannot be denied that our present danger lies more in the direction of worldly-mindedness than of false seclusion. Liberal theology of the present time really obliterates the distinction between the Church and the world. It is more and more emphasized by many that the great significance of the Church lies in her influence upon social life. The consciousness of a spiritual-ethical antithesis becomes increasingly vague in the minds of many to make room for an indefinite notion of a general brotherhood. The preaching of the Word concerns itself largely with the periphery of life and does not penetrate into its spiritual center. The doctrine of particular grace in Christ is more and more pushed to the background. There is a strong tendency to bring theology into harmony with a science that stands in the service of infidelity. Through the agency of the press and various inventions and discoveries, which as such are, undoubtedly, to be regarded as good gifts of God, the sinful world is to a great extent carried into our Christian homes.

Because of all these and similar influences, exerted upon us from every side, it is peremptorily necessary that the Church keep watch over the fundamentals; and that, though she also maintains the above mentioned three points, she vindicates the spiritual-ethical antithesis tooth and nail. May she never permit her preaching to degenerate into mere social treatises or literary productions. Let her be vigilant that Christ and He crucified and risen always remain the heart of the preaching. Constantly she must maintain the principle that the people of God are a peculiar people, living from their proper root, the root of faith. With holy zeal she must constantly send forth the call to our people, especially to our youth: "And be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that we may prove what is that good and acceptable will and perfect will of God." With the blessing of the Lord this will keep our churches from worldly-mindedness, that extinguishes the flame of spiritual ardor and deprives the Church of her power and beauty.

IV. In connection with the overtures that would urge synod to express itself on the doctrine of common grace as such, or to appoint a committee to study the matter, synod decides as follows:

a. At the present to formulate no statement relative to the standpoint of the Church regarding the doctrine of general or common grace in every detail and all its implications. Such a statement would presuppose that this doctrine had already been thoroughly considered and developed in all its details, which certainly is least of all the case. Preparatory study, necessary to this purpose, is almost entirely wanting as yet. Consequently, there is in the Reformed Churches as yet no consensus of opinion at all in this case.

b. Neither to appoint a committee to devote itself to the study of this matter, *in order to reach the formulation of a dogma concerning this matter, which eventually may be received as part of the Confession* (Overture, Muskegon). "(1) Because dogmas are not made but are born out of the conflict of opinions, and, therefore, it is desirable that the establishment of a certain dogma be preceded by a lengthy exchange of opinions. Participation in such a discussion must be as general as possible and must not be limited to a single group of churches; (2) Because a certain truth must live clearly in the consciousness of the Church in general, or in the consciousness of a particular group of churches, before the Church is able to profess such a truth in her Confession. It cannot be said that this·indispensible condition exists at the present or will exist after two or four years.

c. But to urge the leaders of our people, both ministers and professors, to make further study of the doctrine of Common Grace; that they give themselves account carefully of the problems that present themselves in connection with this matter, in sermons, lectures and publications. It is very desirable that not a single individual or a small number of persons accomplish this task, but that many take part in it. Grounds:

(1) This will be most naturally conducive to a fruitful discussion of the question of Common·Grace, and such an exchange of thoughts is the indispensible condition for the development of this truth.

(2) It will be instrumental to concentrate the attention of our people upon this doctrine, will serve to elucidate their conception of it and to cause them to feel its significance, so that they become increasingly

conscious of this part of the contents of their faith.

(3) It will, undoubtedly, in the course of a few years, lead to a consensus of opinion in this matter, and thus it will gradually prepare the way in our churches for a united confession concerning Common Grace.

The CRCNA Synod Kalamazoo 1924: "Church History That Affected the Future"

Douglas Kuiper

Anticipation filled the air, and the editor of the *Kalamazoo Gazette* caught the scent. Welcoming delegates to the 1924 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), he wrote,

> Many questions of importance, not only to the Christian Reformed church but also in a measure, to all Christian denominations in the United States, will come before the synod this year for its prayerful consideration. Church history that will affect the future of all the Reformed denominations will be made in Kalamazoo during the next two weeks.[1]

In the coming days the synod would remind its member churches of the danger of its local Sunday schools cooperating with county or state organizations that were not doctrinally sound (Art. 88),[2] sever its connection with the Federal Council of Churches because of the Council's liberal trends (Art. 95), and decline an opportunity to join the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System (Art. 143). In international relations, it would appoint a delegate to the 1926 Synod of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* in the Netherlands (Art. 47). Perhaps the editor had some of these agenda matters in his mind when he spoke of church history that would affect the future of all Reformed denominations.

Synod's work would affect church history in another way as well. Two of its ministers were denying that God's grace is common. Their denial occasioned several protests and appeals to synod. In response

1 "Welcome," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, Wednesday, June 18, 1924, 4. Newspaper articles cited in this article appear in June or July 1924; the year "1924" will not be repeated.

2 The articles to which reference is made in this paragraph are the articles of the CRC Synod of 1924 and can be found in the *Acts of Synod 1924*.

to those protests and appeals, synod formulated the "Three Points of Common Grace" (Art. 132). This formulation began a series of events that occasioned the formation of a new Reformed denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA). Reporters in the local newspaper had caught the scent of this controversy also:

> At this synod meeting...the Rev. Henry Danhof faces a possible heresy trial in company with the Rev. Herman Hoeksema of Grand Rapids. It is reported that the Rev. Danhof's teachings concerning the doctrine of common grace have led to a move for his trial. The synod will face a knotty problem in straightening out doctrinal questions which have arisen from the modernist-fundamentalist controversy raging in church circles for many months.[3]

The centennial of the CRC Synod of Kalamazoo 1924 is past, and the centennial of the formation of the PRCA in 1925 has arrived. The articles in this issue of *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* examine again the doctrine of common grace as formulated by the synod, and the PRCA's ongoing objections to this doctrine. Why does the PRCA continue to object to common grace? Neither because of any felt need to justify our existence, nor simply because this is part of our history. Rather, the PRCA continues to object to common grace because this doctrine contradicts the teachings of Scripture and of the Reformed confessions. The PRCA also continues to object to this teaching because it bears evil fruit in the church world and in the lives of church members.

Whereas the following articles are all doctrinal and exegetical in nature, this article is historical, observing the place and moment in which the doctrine of common grace was born. This article examines the cultural context in which synod was held, demonstrating that synod was conscious of this broad context. The article then traces the development of the doctrine of common grace prior to 1924, noting that synod synthesized two strands of doctrine. Third, the article observes synod's treatment of the issues before it, tracing how it proceeded to adopt the doctrine of common grace. Finally, the article notes synod's lasting significance.

3 "22 States are Represented at Synod Meeting," *Gazette*, Tuesday, June 17, 1.

Cultural and Religious Context of 1924[4]

Synod Kalamazoo 1924 was preceded by the customary prayer service, held at 7:15 on the evening of Tuesday, June 17. Although the First CRC of Kalamazoo was the host church, the prayer service and some of synod's sessions were held at the Third CRC, about 1/3 of a mile away, because "the acoustics of the First church are bad and better facilities for carrying on the work are furnished by the Third church."[5] The *Gazette* assured its readers that the prayer service would end in time for another speech in Kalamazoo at 8:15 that evening[6] given by William Jennings Bryan, who would "discuss all the points in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy."[7] Note that the *Gazette* used the same term "modernist-fundamentalist controversy" to describe both the

4 To my knowledge, only one other writer notes the broader cultural context of the 1924 synod; see John Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part 2," *Calvin Theological Journal* 58, no. 2 (November 2023): 271-80, in his section "5. O, the Irony!"; this is reprinted in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 58, no. 1 (April 2024): 9-17. Bolt's article indicates how this controversy played out in the PCUSA and formation of the OPC, which matters I do not address. Rather than noting the *cultural* context, most authors who relate the history of the 1924 synod treat the immediate *historical* context of the Janssen case of 1922, and the broader *theological* context of the development of an idea of common grace in Reformed circles. As representative instances, see Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: n.p., 1947), 14-26, 293-316, and Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 3-51.

5 "Synod Meetings Shift to Third Church Monday," *Gazette*, Friday, June 20, 1. In 1924, both church buildings were located just south of the downtown Kalamazoo area. The building of First CRC stands today, housing the First United Baptist Church at 821 South Burdick St. The Third CRC building was demolished to make room for a parking lot on the northwest corner of South Park St. and West Walnut St.

6 The *Grand Rapids Press* was more direct: the prayer service "was cut short" because of the Bryan speech. See "Colorado Man is Chosen at Synod," *Press*, Wednesday, June 18, 2.

7 "22 States Represented"; also, "W. J. Bryan To Give Lecture Here Tonight," *Gazette*, June 17, 17.

common grace controversy and the matters that Bryan would address. The editor perceptively viewed the doctrinal controversy in the CRC as a local instance of a broader national cultural and religious issue.

That broader national cultural and religious issue was the debate between modernism and fundamentalism. *Modernism*, also known as *liberalism*, refers to teachings that developed in Europe in the 1600s as part of the movement called the *Enlightenment*. These teachings reexplained Christianity in light of new developments in science and biblical scholarship. Modernists formulated a new doctrine of Scripture: The Bible was not the inspired and inerrant Word of God but an anthology of human writings that expressed a religious consciousness. It is a thoroughly *human* book. This new doctrine of Scripture required a new explanation of the history recorded in Scripture: It was a human *perspective* on history. Some events recorded in Scripture may have actually happened, but some did not. The miracles recorded in Scripture did not really happen miraculously; an earthquake may have explained the fall of Jericho's walls. All of this required a rephrasing of the doctrines taught in Scripture. Scripture does not *reveal* God; it records what men *thought about* God.

Fundamentalism refers to the opposition to this modernism: The defense of Scripture as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, of the history recorded in Scripture as being actual history, and the doctrines embedded in Scripture as statements of absolute truth.

The ideas of modernism had been developed centuries earlier, but denominations in the United States were rocked by them especially since 1900. The term *fundamentalism* was recently coined as of 1924 and the "modernist-fundamentalist controversy" referred to events that had been happening for only a little over a decade.[8] Notable instances in this controversy include the publication of *The Fundamentals*[9] between

8 See the sections regarding the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy in John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History,* Volume Two*: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day: The Rise and Growth of the Church in its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 796-98, and John D. Hannah, *Invitation to Church History: American* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019), 266-79.

9 *The Fundamentals* is a set of essays published individually between 1910 and 1915, defending the historic and orthodox view of Scripture, Scripture's history, and Scripture's teachings. They were collected and republished in

1910-1915 and of J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923. Another notable instance was the famous Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925, in which John Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution at a school in Tennessee, violating Tennessee's Butler Law. Leading the prosecution in this trial had been none other than William Jennings Bryan! That the delegates to the synod would want to bear Bryan is understandable. Noteworthy, somewhat concerning, and probably unprecedented is the fact that the synodical prayer service would be shortened to make this happen.

This cultural and religious context bears directly on the 1924 synod in two ways. First, synod was conscious of the liberalism of its day and resolved to stand against it. Second, synod desired to avoid an extreme reaction to this liberalism.

Desiring to stand strongly against liberalism, synod warned its churches that local Sunday Schools should not join with broader Sunday School organizations that were not doctrinally sound. The same motivation led synod to sever the denomination's ties with the Federal Council of Churches. In addition, synod expressed a conscious desire to stand against modernism by its treatment of the Janssen case and by its warning to the churches about a possible misuse of common grace.

On synod's agenda were matters pertaining to Dr. Ralph Janssen (1874-1942). Janssen had taught biblical studies at Calvin Theological Seminary from 1902-1906 (Old and New Testament) and 1914-1922 (New Testament only). Synod 1906 did not reappoint him because of suspicion that he was teaching modernism, but the strong leg on which synod could stand was that Janssen was not ordained. After furthering his education and becoming ordained, Janssen was reappointed in 1914. Soon after his reappointment students began alleging that he taught that Scripture contained errors, that miracles could be explained by natural causes, and that the Bible in the form in which we have it today is the product of higher criticism. In other words, Janssen was swayed by modernism. The Curatorium of Calvin Theological Seminary investigated him and removed him as professor in 1922, with synod's approval. The Curatorium's investigatory team consisted of

a two-volume set in 1917; see R. A. Torry, A. D. Dixon, and others, ed, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Los Angeles, CA: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917; reprint Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

seven men, two of whom were Rev. Henry Danhof (1879-1952) and Rev. Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965).[10]

Sixteen protests of this decision of the 1922 synod appeared on the agenda of the 1924 synod: twelve against synod's judicial handling of the Janssen case (church political), and four against synod's conclusions regarding Janssen's teachings (doctrinal). On the afternoon of July 8, at its 28th session, synod did not sustain the protests regarding its judicial handling of the case. On the evening of July 8, in its 29th and concluding session, synod treated the protests regarding the issues at stake. Denying these protests, synod viewed itself as standing strong against modernism.

That synod viewed itself as consciously standing against modernism is evident from three considerations.[11] First is the report of synod in the *Banner*. Editor Henry Beets wrote that "two extreme doctrinal views" were reviewed, one "in the direction...of liberalism."[12] Second, this is evident from the decisions of synod itself. One representative quote from Article 150 must suffice: Synod condemned the idea that "unbelievers, by virtue of Common Grace, can be gained for the standpoint of faith by *reason*."[13] In defense, it quoted 1 Corinthians

10 For a fuller presentation of the issues and history of the Janssen case, see *Reports and Decisions in the Case of Dr. R. Janssen*, ed. H. Beets and H. J. Kuiper (Orange City, IA: Christian Reformed Church Synod of Orange City, IA 1922); Herman C. Hanko, "A Study of the Relation Between the Views of Prof. R. Janssen and Common Grace" (ThM thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988); and David E. Holwerda, "Hermeneutical Issues Then and Now: the Janssen Case Revisited," *Calvin Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 7-34.

11 Apart from the context of the common grace issue, the synodical agenda contains another reference to the modernistfundamentalist controversy. In his report to synod, the secretary of the Paterson Hebrew Mission said: "Yet another will call the Mission workers in the shop and ask them about the controversy between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists. But on the whole the Jews are quite friendly to the Mission workers"; *Acts of Synod 1924*, 286.

12 Henry Beets, "Editorials: The Synod of 1924," in *Banner,* Friday, July 25, 468.

13 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 202. The English translation is that of Henry De Mots.

2:14, and appealed to statements of Dr. Valentin Hepp (1879-1950)[14] regarding apologetics. Synod was not denying common grace but was denying that human reason is able to perceive truth apart from God's saving work.

Synod said much more. Its 150th article takes up thirty-nine pages in the *Acts*. Parts of the protests and synod's response to them address specific Bible books or passages. The conclusion of one protest alleged that synod, by condemning Janssen, had committed itself to "unreformed views and doctrines" and "that the cause of Reformed theology has received serious damage."[15] Synod's response to the protests included the contention that the protestants misunderstood Synod 1922 or were applying principles differently than Janssen had. But clearly synod wanted to come down strongly against modernism, and it defended its condemnation of Janssen in light of Reformed principles.

A third evidence that synod consciously stood against modernism is found in its testimony to the churches, near the end of its treatment of the common grace issue. That the testimony was never sent is a curiosity,[16] but its adoption nevertheless underscores that synod consciously meant to stand against modernism. In its testimony synod said, in part:

> As we survey the spiritual currents of our present day, it certainly cannot be denied that the danger of becoming conformed to this present world is much greater than fleeing from the world. The liberal theology of our day virtually erases the boundaries between the Church and the

14 Valentin Hepp was a leading theologian in the *Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland* (GKN) that had formed in 1892 when the *Afscheiding* branch of churches and the Kuyperian branch, both of which had separated from the Dutch Reformed state church, united. Hepp was the professor of systematic theology at the Free University in Amsterdam; he had succeeded Herman Bavinck in this position in 1922, and Bavinck had succeeded Abraham Kuyper. The appendix to this article will also refer to Hepp. More context can be gleaned by reading George Harinck, "Valentijn Hepp in America: Attempts at International Exchange in the 1920s," in *Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch-North American Exchange, 1846-1995*, edited by George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1996): 115-134.

15 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 241.

16 Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 93.

> world. For many the major importance of the Church is increasingly sought in social issues. The awareness of a spiritual-moral antithesis is weakened increasingly in the conscience of many, replaced by a vague feeling of a universal brotherhood. Preaching mainly deals with the periphery of life and does not probe its spiritual core. The doctrine of special grace in Christ is crowded more and more to the background. There is a strong desire to bring theology in harmony with science which stands in the service of unbelief.[17]

Synod continued to warn against world-conformity and to urge sound gospel preaching.

Not only did synod consciously stand against modernism, but it also determined not to fall into the trap of *extreme* fundamentalism that manifested in isolationist world-flight. Synod wanted to be viewed as defending orthodoxy and fundamentalism but not being radical in its defense of the latter. Evidence for this is not found in synod's formal decisions but in three other considerations.

First, within the denomination were some who were afraid of extreme fundamentalism.[18] The report of the committee appointed in 1920 to evaluate graded Sunday School lessons for use in the CRC betrays this fear. Synod took a different direction than the committee recommended, but the committee was emphatic that a distinct benefit of continuing to use the Sunday School curriculum that it was using was that its churches would maintain contact with other American churches. The committee said:

> To thus far [we] have had *one point of contact through the International Series with the American churches*. This may be considered as merely sentimental, but let us not forget that our American children, even though it be subconsciously, feel this tie that binds them to the

17 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 148.

18 James Bratt's big-picture contextual view of the CRC, and more broadly of Dutch Calvinism, is worth reading here. Bratt identifies four strands of thought in Dutch Calvinism in the early 1900s, three of which were prominent in the CRC. The desire to avoid an extreme fundamentalism was fueled by the supposition that Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof represented an extreme viewpoint. See James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 43-54, 93-119.

> children of other denominations. Isolation may be a necessity with an eye to our distinctive interpretation of the Truth, but it is not so when we think of the children of the country gathered around the Bible studying the same portion of the infallible Word of God.[19]

Second, some construed the common grace controversy in this light. Jan Karel Van Baalen wrote a short book entitled *The Denial of Common Grace: Reformed or Anabaptist?*[20] Danhof and Hoeksema responded with *Not Anabaptist but Reformed*,[21] concluding with these words to Van Baalen: "Write another pamphlet, brother. There is definitely need for a more grounded and convincing work."[22] Van Baalen then produced his *Novelty and Error: The Denial of Common Grace: Weighed Again and Found Too Light*,[23] and later protested the teachings of Danhof and Hoeksema.[24] His protest may not have said so in as many words, but his concern was that the two ministers were pushing the denomination in the direction of world-flight.

Third, and conclusively, the editorial comments of Henry Beets in the *Banner* expressed his conviction that synod took a middle road. The third "feature" of the synod to which he drew his readers' attention was "that apparently two extreme doctrinal views would be reviewed by our supreme judicatory," that of Janssen and his supporter, Quirinus Breen "in the direction, as feared by some, of liberalism," and "on the other hand various protests claimed that two of our pastors

19 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 333; italics are the committee's.

20 Jan Karel Van Baalen, *De Lochening der Gemeene Gratie: Gereformeerd of Doopersch?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma, 1922).

21 Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Niet Doopersch Maar Gereformeerd: Voorloopig Bescheid aan Ds. Jan Karel Van Baalen Betreffende De Loochening der Gemeene Gratie*. Daniel Holstege has translated the work; it appears in English as "Not Anabaptist But Reformed: Provisional Response to Rev. J. K. Van Baalen Concerning the Denial of Common Grace," in *The Rock Whence We are Hewn*, ed. David Engelsma (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015): 88-155.

22 Danhof and Hoeksema, "Not Anabaptist But Reformed," 155.

23 Jan Karel Van Baalen, *Nieuwigheid en Dwaling: De Loochening der Gemeene Gratie: Nogmaals Gewogen en te Licht Bevonden* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma, 1923).

24 Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 87-88.

were erring in the very opposite direction."[25] That is stated clearly. The editor might have plausibly stated that two weighty matters were on synod's agenda, without trying to relate them in any way. But he related them: "two extreme doctrinal views," one view at the extreme of liberalism, and the other view at the opposite end of a spectrum. Beets did not suggest a categorical term to define the view at the other end of the spectrum. Certainly, it was not modernism. Certainly, it was not fundamentalism. It was an "extreme."

Against both extremes—liberalism and an extreme teaching that was feared would lead to isolationism—synod held fast. By adopting the three points of common grace, synod viewed itself as holding strong against modernism but avoiding the opposite extreme. In this light, it assessed Danhof and Hoeksema as being "Reformed, even though it be with an inclination to onesidedness"[26]—a onesidedness that it desired to avoid.

The Development of the Idea of Common Grace

On the warm evening of July 1, at its eighteenth session, synod took up the weightiest matter on its agenda. The two previously mentioned ministers who were on the committee to investigate Dr. Janssen, Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, had become convinced that Janssen's teachings were wrong. On this point the majority of the investigatory

25 Henry Beets, "The Synod of 1924," *Banner,* July 25, 468.

26 Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 186. The English translation of the *Acts of Synod 1924*, translated by Henry De Mots, presents the matter slightly differently: "albeit with a tendency to be one-sided"; see *Acts of Synod 1924*, 147. The *Acts* suggests that the men were one-sided on one matter, in respect to one issue; Hoeksema's translation presents synod as suggesting that Danhof's and Hoeksema's theological position inevitably and consistently drove them to onesidedness. I used Hoeksema's quote in the body of the article, rather than that of the *Acts*, because the Dutch original ("al is het ook met een neiging tot eenzijdigheid") indicates that Hoeksema's translation is more accurate: the "-heid" ending of the last word is usually translated "-ness" in English. I note that John Bolt himself, recognizing that De Mot's official translation of the *Acts of Synod 1924* uses the term "one-sided," proceeds to use the term "one-sidedness" when he speaks of it; see Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part I" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (2022): 280.

committee agreed, as had the Curatorium and Synod 1922. These two ministers were further convinced that Janssen's underlying assumption on which he developed his teachings was wrong. That underlying assumption was common grace. Here the two stood almost alone, among ministers in the CRC.

Time and space restrict us to the briefest survey of the history of the development of the idea of common grace in Dutch Reformed churches.[27] Arminius and his followers (the Remonstrants) had used the term "common grace" to refer to the light of nature that fallen humans retain.[28] They had also developed the idea that God wills and desires the salvation of everyone who hears the gospel. The gospel presents Christ as having died to make salvation possible for everyone, and it calls everyone who hears it to believe and repent. Those who believe and repent receive the promised salvation; those who do not believe and repent forfeit the salvation that God desired them to have. This view of the preaching of the gospel the Synod of Dordt condemned in its Canons.[29] While the Remonstrants apparently did not apply the term "common grace" to their view of the preaching of the gospel, they did teach that God shows favor to all, both in revealing Himself in creation and in the preaching.

Although the Synod of Dordt condemned the Remonstrant error regarding the preaching of the gospel, the idea was resurrected in Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the 1700s. The newly framed teaching had a twist to it. The Reformed in the Netherlands held to the position of the Synod of Dordt that Christ had not died

27 A slightly fuller history of the development of this idea can be found in the forthcoming centennial anniversary book of the PRCA, in the chapter that treats the doctrines and history of 1924. An even more definitive explanation of the relation of common grace to Janssen's teachings can be found in Hanko, "A Study of the Relation Between the Views of Prof. R. Janssen and Common Grace," 80-156.

28 Canons of Dordt 3/4 RE 5, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 171.

29 The Canons of Dordrecht present a doctrine of the preaching of the gospel that accords with sovereign grace and oppose one that does not, in 1.3 and 14, and RE 9; 2.5-6; 3/4.6-10, 17, and RE 7; and 5.14; *Confessions and Church Order,* 155, 158, 162, 163, 167-68, 170, 172, 176.

for everyone; only some benefit. Rather, they taught that Christ died for the salvation of His covenant people, which covenant people are not only elect, godly believers, but every outward member of the church. In the preaching of the gospel, God expresses His desire that each of these be saved; He calls each of them to faith and repentance and promises them the blessings of salvation. This became known as the well-meant offer. It was increasingly the view of the Secessionist churches in the 1800s.[30]

Later that century, Abraham Kuyper developed the idea that God has a particular, saving grace for His elect, as well as a common, non-saving grace for everyone. In *particular* grace God saves His church; in *common grace* (not merely *providence*) He directs the development of the world and its kingdoms so that they serve His cause. Kuyper went further. This common grace included the work of Christ and His Spirit in unbelievers, restraining them so that the depravity of their nature did not manifest itself as fully and violently as it might otherwise. The unregenerate can do a kind of good that pleases God—not the keeping of the moral law from the heart, but an outward good and conformity to the law, especially a love for the neighbor and a contribution to culture, that pleases God.

Kuyper developed these teachings at a time when liberalism was rampant in Europe; what was earlier referred to as "modernism" had been around a while. Kuyper himself was orthodox in many doctrines and practices; perhaps, it was thought, his ideas would help stem modernism. They certainly explained, in theory, how the church could interact with the world and be a renewing influence in the world, when the world appeared to be developing in wickedness.

In summary, various men had used the term "common grace" to refer to different doctrinal ideas. The Remonstrants used it to refer to the capacity of fallen people to use their reason to come to the saving knowledge of God. Secession theologians used it to denote God's favor for all as expressed in the call of the gospel that all men believe and repent. And Kuyper used it to refer to Christ's work restraining sin

30 For a history of the development of the well-meant offer, see Herman Hanko and Mark H. Hoeksema, *Corrupting the Word of God: The History of the Well-Meant Offer* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016).

and enabling the unregenerate to do some form of good. The last two uses of the word were found in Dutch Reformed circles.

These ideas all came together in the CRC. The CRC was born in 1857, comprised primarily of Dutch immigrants to America who had been oppressed in the Netherlands for their Secessionist views.[31] Secession theology *was* the theology of the CRC from its origins. The Kuyperian view of common grace came into the CRC because CRC ministers were reading Kuyper and had been educated by Kuyper at his Free University, and because the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), the CRC's sister church, had become strongly Kuyperian.

To be clear, within the CRC was a great divide. Some were ready to speak of common grace in the Secession sense but not the Kuyperian, and others were of an opposite mind. The older faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary were Secessionists; the newer faculty were Kuyperians. But the older were on their way out; the 1924 synod granted emeritation to Foppe Ten Hoor (1855-1934), professor of dogmatics since 1900, whose Secession sympathies were no secret,[32] and replaced him with Clarence Bouma, who had returned the previous year from the Free University of Amsterdam that Kuyper had founded.[33]

At the extreme of the great divide in the CRC were the views of Ralph Janssen, using common grace to defend modernism, and those of Danhof and Hoeksema, denying common grace. When the latter denied common grace, they denied a teaching that had never been spelled out in detail, but was asserted by many and entrenched in the CRC.

31 Several histories of the CRC have been written. Two older ones that include its history until 1924 include Henry Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church in North America: Its History, Schools, Missions, Creed and Liturgy, Distinctive Principles and Practices and Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eastern Avenue Book Store, 1923), and D. H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943).

32 See Cornelius Pronk, "F. M. Ten Hoor: Defender of Secession Principles Against Abraham Kuyper's Doleantie View" (ThM thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987).

33 *Acts of Synod 1924*, Arts. 38, 40, 69, 89, 97.

Synod's Treatment of the Common Grace Issue [34]

Some, in defense of common grace, had protested the teachings of Herman Hoeksema to his consistory (Eastern Ave. CRC) and appealed the matter to Classis Grand Rapids East. Others (in some instances the same men) had also protested the teachings of Henry Danhof to his consistory (First Kalamazoo) and appealed to Classis Grand Rapids West. As a result, Synod 1924 received eight appeals and protests regarding the matter, as well as six instructions (requests) from the Classes Grand Rapids East and West. A total of twenty-seven documents made up the package of material that the "Pre-Advisory Committee in re Common Grace" was to evaluate.

This preadvice committee consisted of five ministers, three elders, and one professor advisor. The ministers were Ymen P. De Jong,[35] Clarence Bouma,[36] Emo Van Halsema,[37] Tiede Vander Ark,[38]

34 Understandably, the *Acts of Synod 1924* is the primary source for this section. Other sources include Herman Hoeksema's summary in his book *Protestant Reformed Churches* (62-98) and John Bolt's summaries in his articles "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924)" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 no. 1 (2000): 22-29, and "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part I" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (2022): 273-88.

35 Ymen Peter De Jong (1876-1958) represented Classis Grand Rapids West. He was ordained in 1905 and received further training from Abraham Kuyper's Free University in Amsterdam, obtaining a doctorate from there in 1913. In 1924 he was serving his last and longest pastorate in Grandville Ave. CRC (1917-1945). The biographical information pertaining to the members of the preadvice committee, found in this and the following footnotes, is taken from relevant entries in Richard H. Harms, ed., *Historical Directory of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Historical Committee of the CRCNA), 2004.

36 Clarence Bouma (1891-1962) represented Classis Hudson. He had been ordained the year before, in 1923, after obtaining a doctorate from Kuyper's Free University, and was serving the Hope Avenue CRC in Passaic, NJ. Synod 1924 would call him to be professor of dogmatics, which call he would accept. In 1926 his field of instruction was narrowed to ethics and apologetics.

37 Emo Folkert Johan Van Halsema (1890-1964) had been ordained in 1921 and was serving his first charge at East Paris CRC. He represented Classis Grand Rapids East.

38 Tiede Vander Ark (1868-1937) was the oldest minister on the committee.

and Abraham Bliek[39]; the advisor was Prof. Louis Berkhof.[40] As the biographical footnotes indicate, two of these ministers were recent graduates of Kuyper's Free University, and two had been ordained within the last three years. Another fact is striking: The committee consisted of one minister from Grandville Ave. CRC, a current minister from Edgerton, MN, and a recent minister from Edgerton, MN area. A PRC was formed in the area of Grandville Ave. in 1926 and in Edgerton in 1938. An intriguing question is whether these two pastors taught their congregations the issues involved in the controversy, and whether any of the members vocally disagreed.[41]

On the evening of July 1, the committee read its report. After summarizing all of the documents, it recommended narrowing the scope in two ways. The first was that synod declare some of the material not legally before it for church political reasons. Doing so, synod reduced by four the number of protests it would treat.[42] The protests that had given rise to the issue, protests by individuals against the preaching and teaching of Danhof and Hoeksema, were legally before it.

The second way that synod narrowed the issue was by adopting the committee's advice that synod treat only three of eleven points

Ordained in 1897, he was currently serving the church in Edgerton, MN. He represented Classis Orange City.

39 Abraham Bliek (1877-1957) was ordained in 1909. Having left the church in Edgerton, MN three years earlier, he was the pastor of the church in Allendale, MI, and represented Classis Zeeland.

40 Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) had graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1904. He served as professor of theology at Calvin Theological Seminary from 1906-1944. From 1906-1914, he taught all of exegetical theology (Old and New Testaments); from 1914-1926 he taught only New Testament; and from 1926-1944 he taught Dogmatics. That Berkhof officiated at Hoeksema's wedding testifies of Hoeksema's former respect for him. In 1925 Berkhof would pen a defense of the three points, *De Drie Punten in Alle Deelen Gereformeerd* (*The Three Points in All Parts Reformed*) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1925).

41 Many people who formed the Roosevelt Park PRC in 1926 had been members of First PRC, Grand Rapids, before then. Some members had only recently joined First PRC from Grandville Ave. CRC. Who had joined First PRC from Grandville Ave. CRC, and whether they were the same as became members of Roosevelt Park PRC, must be more carefully investigated.

42 *Acts of Synod 1924*, Art. 104.

raised in the protests. The eleven points were these:

(1) The favorable disposition of God toward the reprobates.
(2) The restraint of sin or the restraint of the sinner.
(3) The doing of civil good by the unregenerate.
(4) The double working of God's will in election and reprobation.
(5) The placing of election and reprobation on one line.
(6) The responsibility of man.
(7) The providence of God and His sovereignty over all things.
(8) Rev. H. Hoeksema's view of God.
(9) The emphasis which is placed on the eternal decree and in general on the divine factor.
(10) The insufficient Gospel-preaching of the above-mentioned pastor.
(11) The making powerless the second table of the law.

Also the complaint is voiced in these documents that rash accusations are made against officebearers.[43]

When synod agreed to eliminate eight points,[44] it considerably narrowed its focus. It was left with three matters to discuss. The preadvice committee spelled out in more detail which matters these were, and why synod should address them. The committee wrote:

> III. There are however three points on which, in the judgment of the committee, Synod should declare itself specifically, namely:
> (1) The favorable disposition of God toward all men, and not alone toward the elect. Your committee judges that this point is of central importance in this question which at present has caused so much unrest in the church. The two following points are intimately interwoven with the first point and are more or less comprehended in it.
> (2) The restraint of sin in the individual person and in society.
> (3) The doing of so-called righteousness by the unregenerate.
>
> Your committee judges that it is necessary for Synod to declare itself

43 *Acts of Synod* 1924, Art. 100.

44 *Acts of Synod* 1924, Art. 108. As I read the minutes, article 108 records the recommendation of the committee of pre-advice that this "be accepted by Synod." No express indication that the recommendation did in fact carry is found in the minutes. However, it is understood that it passed.

on these points.

a) Because we are dealing here with points in which the Brothers Danhof and Hoeksema have chosen to take positions with thesis for which they have taken responsibility and which they have defended.

b) Because the confessions make clear declarations concerning these points.

c) Because it is imperatively necessary that for the rest in the churches Synod take a firm standpoint.[45]

The committee proceeded to demonstrate, taking each point one at a time, that Danhof and Hoeksema made specific statements denying the three propositions that synod should address; providing "evidence"[46] from Scripture and the confessions in favor of these three propositions; and referring to writings of John Calvin, Peter Van Mastricht, and Zacharias Ursinus, alleging that these men were of the same mind on the matter as synod ought to be.[47] The committee report ended with a recommended warning to the churches about abusing the doctrine of common grace by driving it to an extreme, and that in the way of denying the antithesis. With that, the eighteenth session finished; darkness had fallen on July 1, 1924.

The next day, synod discussed the report at its morning and afternoon sessions. It designated its evening session as an opportunity for

45 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 124.

46 I enclose the word in quotation marks for two reasons. First, the committee used the word. Second, the committee of preadvice *alleged* that this was compelling evidence. Whether in fact it was compelling—whether synod's exegesis of the passages was correct, whether the confessional statements were really to the point, and whether the Reformed writers were truly speaking to the same issue—should have been key points of synod's discussion. In his book *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, Herman Hoeksema quotes all of this "evidence" and refutes it; see 317-410. Joining Hoeksema in refuting this "evidence," especially regarding the first point of common grace, and more particularly the well-meant offer of the gospel, are two Christian Reformed scholars: Raymond A. Blacketer, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Reexamination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (2000): 37-65, and John Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924, Part I," in section 3, "Where's the Proof?" 288-311.

47 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 124-134.

Hoeksema to defend his position. Article 109 reads, "Rev. H. Hoeksema requests that he be given the floor in order to shed light on his position. It is decided to give him every opportunity to do so in the evening session, which is to begin at seven-thirty."[48] And Article 113 includes this note: "Rev. Herman Hoeksema addresses Synod for an hour and thirty minutes in which he seeks to make his position clear."

For a second full day, at all three sessions on Thursday, July 3, synod discussed the report. In the afternoon it discussed a proposed revised first point.[49] In the evening, it entertained a motion "to table the matter of Common Grace, with the earnest admonition that a thorough study be made of this matter, and that this be done in a spirit of brotherly love and mutual appreciation of contrary views." This would be accomplished by appointing a committee consisting both of men known to support common grace as well as those known to oppose it, which committee would report to the next synod in 1926.

'Twas the night before Independence Day. Synod recessed until Monday afternoon. On Monday afternoon it seated three alternate delegates who had not taken part in the discussion to that point. It then rejected the proposal for a committee that would meet for two years. On Monday evening it entered into its record the final version of the three points and adopted them.[50] The doctrine of common grace was codified.

A few loose ends needed addressing. Synod judged that some of Danhof's and Hoeksema's expressions did not harmonize with the teachings of Scripture and the confessions regarding the three points, nor with the position of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in 1905 regarding infralapsarianism. Yet synod recognized that the brothers had no intent to stray from Scripture and the Reformed confessions, and were "Reformed, albeit with a tendency to be one-sided."[51] Synod then asked the two ministers to abide by synod's decision, admonished the churches to guard against "one-sided representation of the truth,"

48 *Acts of Synod 1924*, Art. 139, 141.

49 *Acts of Synod 1924*, Art. 124.

50 *Acts of Synod 1924*, Art. 132. The *Gazette* also quoted the three points in full, and a fair summary of the other related decisions, in its report of the synod's work that day. See *Gazette*, Tuesday, July 3, 1-2.

51 See footnote 25.

and granted that Danhof and Hoeksema were warranted to warn against world conformity because that was "a possible misrepresentation of Common Grace."[52]

Next synod granted that there was no "common opinion among the Reformed churches" regarding the doctrine of common grace in all its implications; again insisted that it would not appoint a committee for further study, because the matter must be discussed more and "live clearly in the consciousness of the Church," and urged the denomination's leaders "to make a further study of the doctrine of Common Grace, and to carefully think through the issues which have been brought to the fore in their sermons, lectures, and writings."[53] These decisions are included in full after this article.

At the close of Monday evening, July 7, synod had devoted nine sessions to the matter of common grace and finished its treatment of them. During the afternoon and evening of the next day it answered the protests regarding the Janssen case of 1922. The record of the treatment of these protests fills seventy-four pages in the *Acts,*[54] compared to thirty-seven for the common grace issue.

The minutes of the last session record seven delegates' written protests of synod's decisions regarding common grace. Five protested the decision as being hasty and ill-timed; to summarize the objections, the churches needed to consider the matter further before making a definitive pronouncement.[55] The Rev. Albert Wassink, pastor of the

52 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 147-149.

53 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 149-150.

54 *Acts of Synod 1924* pages 161-191 and 199-242 are devoted to the Janssen case, while pages 113-139, 141-150 are devoted to the common grace issue. Perhaps nothing can be made of this. Two factors, however, are relevant: first, the preadvice committee for common grace identified all the material it was to treat, but did not duplicate it in the *Acts*; by contrast, Rev. Q. Breen's protest regarding the Janssen case appears to be greatly, if not fully, duplicated. Second—the real point of the comparison–the synod viewed the Janssen case as cut and dried and was more ready to respond to Rev. Breen's protest with speed. The common grace issue required much more discussion and debate.

55 These protests were submitted by A. Peters, J. L. Heeres, A. Rosbach, John H. Mokma, and D. Zwier. The latter pointed out that the matter of common grace does "not belong to the fundamental truths which are formu-

CRC in Worthington, MN, especially took issue with the idea of a restraint of sin "through the general working of the Holy Spirit."[56] Not surprisingly, Rev. Henry Danhof's protest was both the most comprehensive and the one that centered most on the doctrine. He first pointed to synod's haste in making its decision, then addressed the doctrinal misstatements of the synod, showed that it misunderstood Danhof and Hoeksema, and finally demonstrated that synod misused the confessions.[57]

Entering these protests into its record was a courtesy to the delegates, and a way by which they could register their negative vote. Synod was not required to respond to the protests; they had not been on the agenda. Synod 1926 would receive protests from several consistories and from forty-three individuals, not to mention the protest from an unspecified number of "members" of the church in Kalamazoo, regarding its formulation of the doctrine of common grace. Many of these names would resurface when PRC congregations were established in their localities: Rev. D. Jonker, pastor of the CRC in Rusk, MI; Douma from Randolph, WI; two Kooikers from Boyden, IA; P. Aukema from Byron Center, MI; T. Hoekstra, S. Kooima, Tim Kooima, B. Lems, and Gerrit Lems from Rock Valley, IA; and D. Kort and R. Regnerus from Oak Lawn, IL. One consistory, other than those directly involved, also protested: that of the church in Middleburg, IA, pastored at the time by Rev. Hendrick John Heynen.

An hour after midnight on Wednesday, July 9, the twenty-fifth

lated in our confessions," so that the adoption of them before further study was "hasty"; see *Acts of Synod 1924*, 192-194. Interestingly, A. Peters and A. Rosbach were elder delegates from Classis Holland, and D. Zwier and J. L. Heeres were minister delegates from the same Classis. Daniel Zwier was serving the Maple Ave. Christian Reformed Church, and Jacob L. Heeres the church in Graafschaap, the first congregation in what became the CRC. Was Classis Holland merely a more conservative classis? Or were these men somehow influenced by Hoeksema's time in Holland? The matter merits further study. John Henry Mokma was pastor of Second Fremont CRC, in Classis Muskegon. The alarm about haste was sounded not by men remote from Grand Rapids, not so directly affected by the unrest, but rather close to it.

56 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 192.

57 *Acts of Synod 1924*, 194-99.

synod in the history of the CRC adjourned.[58] It had lasted three weeks, almost a full week longer than anticipated,[59] making church history in the Christian Reformed church for its length. If delegates were not finished in time to meet the Wednesday morning trains leaving Kalamazoo, they would have to stay an extra day—yet some had been away from their churches for seven weeks already![60]

The Synod's Lasting Significance

Indeed, the synod made church history that affected the future. In that light, while more can be said about the significance of Synod 1924 than time and space permit, these points follow.

First, the synod was significant from the viewpoint of development of doctrine. In Dutch Reformed circles, this was the first synod to adopt an official, comprehensive statement that spoke positively of common grace. Until the synod met, writings and speeches of theologians and ministers treated the doctrine; now the doctrine had synodical sanction, authority, and weight. Supposedly adding to this authority and weight was synod's attempt to ground the doctrine in Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

The PRCA view the synodical statement about the three points of common grace negatively, that is, as a misconstruing of Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Yet the Holy Spirit, who guides the church into all truth (John 16:13), often uses error as the goad for the church to see and develop truth more clearly. The three points of common grace did not represent truth, but their adoption was the impetus for a renewed emphasis on sovereign, particular grace.

Second, the synod was significant from the viewpoint of CRC church history, and this in several ways. For one, several times after

58 *Gazette*, Wednesday, July 9, 1.

59 The *Gazette* had predicted that the synod would conclude Thursday, July 3; see Sunday, June 29, 1924, 2.

60 *Gazette*, Wednesday, July 9, 1. Perhaps "seven" weeks allowed some time for vacation in the West Michigan area, but that cannot be confirmed. Synod lasted three weeks, beginning on a Tuesday. Train travel from the west coast of the United States would have taken several days. If the delegates wished to be in West Michigan by the Saturday previous to synod, that would require them to have left the previous Wednesday, perhaps, meaning essentially a full week for travel.

1924 the CRC had to face the question whether to reconsider its decision. Many protests against both the doctrinal position and the church political treatment of the question came to Synod 1926, and as late as 1934 one finds a protest against the doctrinal position embodied in the three points.[61] But having adopted its position on common grace, and showing no signs at Synod 1926 of any intention to reconsider,[62] the CRC was now committed to integrating the doctrine into all its theology and practice.

Synod 1924 also affected CRC church history in that, while synod viewed itself as standing strong against modernism, its formulation of the doctrine of common grace, particularly in the first point, "opened itself up to that very danger."[63] Its defense of the well-meant offer begged the question, exactly *whom* does God love? The CRC was forced to face this exact question again in the 1960s in connection with Harold Dekker's positing of a universal love of God for sinners.[64] As Bolt demonstrates, in responding to Dekker's idea, the CRC Synod 1967 essentially "vindicated Hoeksema's and Danhof's position *on*

61 *Acts of Synod 1934*, 131-32. The protestant was a Jacob H. Hoekstra. There was a Jacob H. Hoekstra who was born in the Netherlands in 1865, came to the United States in 1885, lived in the Chicago area, and died in South Holland, IL, in 1949 (www.ancestry.com, December 6, 2024). That this was the same Jacob Hoekstra as the one who protested to Synod 1934 needs explicit confirmation; at the moment it is only an assumption. Intriguingly, this Jacob Hoekstra's funeral service was officiated by Rev. Gerrit Hoeksema, who had also been on the Curatorium's committee to investigate Janssen, but signed the minority report, and who was the silent writer of a protest of three other members of Eastern Ave. CRC, against Herman Hoeksema's doctrine. See Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches*, 20, 29.

Intending to investigate who Jacob Hoekstra was, I went to Heritage Hall, the archival division of Calvin University's Hekman Library, on December 6, 2024. On duty there was the curator, William Katerberg, but despite his assistance I quickly ran into several dead ends and left. Later that afternoon Will sent me an email containing all of the information found in this footnote, and more. Had Will returned to his other duties after I left, we still would know nothing about Jacob H. Hoekstra. Thanks for your help, Will!

62 *Acts of Synod 1926,* Arts. 88, 93, 96.

63 Bolt, "Unfinished Business, Part II": 279.

64 Bolt, "Unfinished Business, Part II": 280-92.

the one point of using the well-meant offer of the gospel as a ground for common grace."[65] In other words, within the CRC some were ready to work out the doctrine of common grace to its logical ends, while others recognized that these logical ends did not conform to the Reformed confessions. So a third way in which the synod's decision affected church history was that the Christian Reformed Church would continue to wrestle with the implications of the decisions of 1924.

These three ways in which synod's decision affected CRC church history lend credence to John Bolt's simple statement: "The 1924 synod of the Christian Reformed Church...was one of the defining moments in the denomination's history."[66] The editor of the *Gazette* anticipated this before the fact; Bolt confirmed it seventy-five years later.

In this connection, note that the decision of Synod 1924 was hasty. This point has been made by others;[67] here I simply note it. Explaining the haste was, perhaps, a felt urgency to speak authoritatively in light of the modernist-fundamentalist debate, as well as the desire "to silence the anti-common grace voice in the CRC."[68] The appendix will return to the matter of synod's haste.

Third, the synod was significant and made church history inasmuch as it was the occasion for the eventual formation of the PRCA. The possibility of a new denomination was not entirely unforeseen when synod adjourned in July 1924. For one thing, an institution that is organically related to the PRCA, chronologically the *first* such institution, had already been formed: the Reformed Free Publishing

65 Bolt, "Unfinished Business, Part II": 292, emphasis Bolt's. Bolt adds, "The full significance of this judgment by the 1967 study committee, vindicating Hoeksema and Danhof on precisely the point they disputed ("the little point of the first point") has not yet been recognized either in the Christian Reformed Church or in the Protestant Reformed Church." Bolt, point noted; thank you!

66 Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924)": 2.

67 Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 65-66, 73-74; Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924)": 11-12, 15, 16, 22, 29; and Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part I": 283-288.

68 John Bolt, "The Unfinished Business of 1924," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 49, no. 1 (November 2015): 14.

Association.[69] Even more pointedly, the synodical delegates had heard Herman Hoeksema say these words: "I seek not schism. If you desire peace, then reject the three points of your committee. All I seek is freedom to develop the line of Reformed thought on those things upon which our confessions do not definitely speak. If you won't allow me this, I will leave the church."[70]

The formation of the PRCA as an institution is not noteworthy per se. Many a new church or denomination have begun, not always for the better. The key point here is that Synod 1924's adopted position on common grace was the occasion for the PRCA continually to oppose that doctrine throughout the century of her existence. In this respect, too, church history affected the future.

The PRCA should not forget 1924 and 1925. The reason we should not forget it is not primarily that it was the year of our birth, and we have now reached our centennial. Rather, the reason we should not forget it is that in 1924 the entire church world was confronted again with a relevant question: "What is God's grace, and for whom?" Both the wrong answer to that question, as well as the correct answer, affect not only the church's doctrine but also her life and practice.

The PRCA answer the question by insisting that God's grace is particular, given only to the elect, earned by Christ, and always saving. It is His grace that turns an unbeliever to faith and that regenerates and sanctifies an ungodly person. If one wishes to speak of God's conduct toward all people, one should refer to the doctrine of God's providence, not His grace.

Appendix: Press Coverage of Synod 1924

The meeting of the CRC Synod 1924 drew attention throughout the state of Michigan. That the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and *Grand Rapids Press* covered the event stands to reason: Synod was held in Kalamazoo, and the CRCNA was headquartered in Grand Rapids.

More intriguing is that several newspapers, especially on the east

69 See Joshua Engelsma, "A Century of the *Standard Bearer*," in *Standard Bearer*, November 15, 2024, 69. Engelsma refers the reader to *The Rock Whence We are Hewn*, ed. David Engelsma (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 160-161, 242, 280.

70 *Gazette*, Thursday, July 3, 2.

side of the state, devoted newspaper space to the synod.[71] Of these southeastern Michigan newspapers, the *Ann Arbor News* had the scantiest coverage, with one article noting who were elected as officers of synod,[72] while the *Saginaw News Courier* devoted two articles to the early sessions of synod and then appeared to lose interest.[73] By contrast, the *Bay City Times Tribune*,[74] *Detroit News,*[75] and *Flint Daily Journal*[76] included several news reports throughout the weeks of synod. Newspapers were still the primary means of gathering information in those days, and news feeds were syndicated. But how interested would the readers of these newspapers have been? The first CRC in Detroit had been organized in 1914, but congregations in Imlay City and Flushing would not be organized until 1928 and 1931. At any rate, synod made news.

If the newspapers on the east side of the state picked up the news, certainly those on the western shore of Michigan, in communities with Dutch Reformed settlements, must have: the *Grand Haven Tribune*, *Holland Sentinel*, and *Muskegon Chronicle*. The database I consulted did not archive them and I did not have further time to find their archives and read them.

But the database did archive the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press*, both of which had a daily update on synod's work. The articles in these papers are distinct from all others: these articles were fuller than those in other newspapers; they appear to be written by on-scene reporters; and, judging from the similarity between the articles in the *Gazette* and *Press*, they have a common source. Regardless of how many other newspapers covered synod's proceedings, these two

71 On October 24, 2024, I searched the Library of Michigan research database and found the following results. I do not claim my search was exhaustive; any others who find additional print editions of these or any other newspapers in June and July 1924 that cover the 1924 Synod are welcome to inform me.

72 *Ann Arbor News*, June 19, 1. Again, the year is always 1924.

73 *Saginaw News Courier*, June 16, 1; June 20, 8.

74 *Bay City Times Tribune*, June 16, 5; June 17, 1; June 18, 6; June 22, 2; July 3, 12.

75 *Detroit News*, June 14, 8; June 19, 6; June 28, 9; July 2, 31; July 4, 16; July 8, 22; July 9, 20.

76 *Flint Daily Journal*, June 19, 6; July 2, 24; July 9, 21.

set the standard and gave the definitive news.

The languages spoken at synod

The *Banner*, the CRCNA's denominational magazine, which at that time took the form of a weekly newspaper, explains several features of the *Gazette* and *Press* news reports. Henry Beets, editor of the *Banner*, observed that as late as 1924 the Dutch language was still predominate in the CRC. Beets wrote:

> The "Kalamazoo Daily Gazette," which had deputized a reporter to our Synod to take care of the news, found that its correspondent was unable to do justice to his assignment on account of the predominate use of Dutch. Consequently the alert and accurate "Press" reporter, Candidate Ralph Bronkema, had to perform the double duty of "Gazette" reporter as well as "Grand Rapids Press" correspondent. Let us say here that the "Gazette" gave far greater space to the doings of Synod than the "Grand Rapids Press." But whatever appeared in the two papers certainly was accurate and to the point.[77]

Not only were Dutch and English spoken; German was too: "Business will be conducted in the English, German, and Holland languages," announced the *Press*.[78] Why *German*, especially when the use of German was discouraged in the United States during and after the First World War? The answer is that in 1924 the CRC still had an entire German-speaking Classis, Classis Ostfriesland, consisting of churches in Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota.[79]

77 *Banner*, Friday, July 25, 468. Ralph Bronkema had been declared a candidate in 1924. In 1929 he had obtained his doctorate from the Free University in Amsterdam and was ordained. He served First CRC in Orange City, IA from 1929-1952. See Harms, *Historical Directory of the Christian Reformed Church*, 166.

78 *Press*, Wednesday, June 18, 2.

79 Classis Ostfriesland was a German-speaking classis in the CRC. In January 1925 the classis consisted of twelve churches in Iowa, one in Illinois, and three in Minnesota. Several of these churches were found clustered together geographically, but others were far removed. The classis geographically overlapped with the Dutch and English-speaking Classis Orange City. See *Yearbook of the Christian Reformed Church in America: 1925* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925), 61. For more, read Henry Beets, *The Christian*

Hoeksema's speech on the floor of Synod

Has anyone ever produced a copy or recording of the speech that Hoeksema gave to the synod on the evening of July 2? It would be a historian's treasure. Hoeksema certainly does not record its essence in his book *The Protestant Reformed Churches*; yet we know, of course, its general theme: God's grace is not common.

But the *Gazette* records a summary. The entire article is reproduced in full:

> The Rev. Herman Hoeksema, pastor of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, one of the pastors against whom accusations of being unreformed in some points of doctrine, were brought, was given the entire session Wednesday evening to defend his standpoint. Although Rev. Hoeksema is not a delegate, the synod nevertheless gave him the opportunity of expressing his opinion.
>
> "I am not fighting for any position in our church," the Rev. Hoeksema said. "I am speaking here because that for which we have striven during the last few years pertains to the fundamentals of our confessions. I am deeply convinced that we have striven for what is the very heart of the Reformed confessions."
>
> The Rev. Hoeksema then went into the history of the Hoeksema-Danhof case showing the developments to the present time. He said that the case began when he was the editor of one of the departments in the church paper, The Banner, a few years ago at which time he began to write articles on the question of common grace. He stated that his view of grace first began to be regarded as unreformed when Prof. Ralph Janssen, deposed by the last synod, accused him of being unreformed.
>
> The Rev. Hoeksema definitely stated that there is no such thing as common grace and that there is no such thing as grace that goes out from God toward the reprobate.
>
> The Rev. Hoeksema maintained very strongly that it is his firm conviction that he has never taught anything that is contrary to the

Reformed Church in North America (Grand Rapids: Eastern Avenue Book Store, 1923), 73, 79-81; D. H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 134-36; and John J. Timmerman, "Memories of Grundy College," in *Markings on a Long Journey: Writings of John J. Timmerman*, ed. Rodney J. Mulder and John H. Timmerman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 133-45.

> Word of God or the church confessions. He also maintained that the three points of the advisory committee condemning certain views he is alleged to uphold are accusations against teachings which he never held.
>
> On the point of civic righteousness the Rev. Hoeksema maintained that man can never do anything that is good for God.
>
> In conclusion the Rev. Hoeksema said, "I seek not schism. If you desire peace, then reject the three points of your committee. All I seek is freedom to develop the line of Reformed thought on those things upon which our confessions do not definitely speak. If you won't allow me this, I will leave the church."
>
> The Rev. J. K. Van Baalen, foremost opponent of the views of Mr. Hoeksema and Mr. Danhof, asked the synod that he be allowed to answer point by point what was said by the Rev. Hoeksema while the same audience was present as a matter of courtesy to the audience.
>
> The synod thought it best to postpone all rebuttal until the morning session.[80]

In light of editor Beets' comments that the reporting in the *Press* and *Gazette* were accurate, we trust that this also was an accurate report.

Synod's haste

The newspapers also refer to the haste with which synod addressed the common grace issue. "Haste" is the word, not because synod treated the matter quickly—after all, it spent eight sessions dealing with it—but because synod treated it at all, rather than appointing a committee to bring recommendations to Synod 1926.

Leading up to synod, and during its opening sessions, people wondered what synod would do when it treated the teachings of Danhof and Hoeksema. "SYNOD EXPECTED TO AVOID ISSUE — Reformed Leaders Advise Putting Common Grace Problem in Committee — WILL COME UP IN 1926," proclaimed the headlines of the *Press* article on June 17. The article went on to note that the CRC had been in touch with its sister church in the Netherlands, the GKN, regarding the matter. Specifically, it had requested Dr. Valentine Hepp, the successor of Herman Bavinck as chair of systematic theology at the Free

80 *Gazette*, Thursday, July 3, 1924, 2. The *Press* report of the same day is condensed; it does not include every sentence in the *Gazette* report but the sentences it does include are worded exactly the same as in the *Gazette*.

University, to be present at synod. Hepp could not be present; he was scheduled to come to the United States in August 1924 and could not come sooner. But he also did not see the urgency of coming sooner. The *Press* reported,

> Dr. V. Hepp, perhaps the greatest Reformed theologian of today, has advised the synod to place the controversy in the hands of a committee so that it may be studied thoroughly for two years before the next synod meets. The committee should then be prepared to give a detailed report on the matter and present to synod definite recommendations.
>
> Sentiment in local church circles seems to be swinging in favor of the recommendation of Mr. Hepp. If his advice is followed the coming synod will spend but little time on this question which is considered the biggest problem before it.[81]

Perhaps the notice in the *Press*, in distinction from that in the *Gazette*, underscores again that the *Press* reporter was more in tune with the synod at its early sessions. The day after the *Press* reported this, the *Gazette* mentioned a "possible heresy trial."[82] By Friday of that week, the *Press* also was reporting that a committee had been appointed to bring advice regarding the matter, and anticipated that the matter "will be one of the last to be discussed by the synod due to the involved character of the issue at stake. The advisory committee began to study the issues from all angles Thursday, but will probably not be able to advise synod until the end of next week."[83]

A full week later, the *Gazette* gave a fuller viewpoint:

> The fact that the committee is spending so much time preparing the report is construed by many to mean that the committee intends to advise the synod to enter into a material discussion of the case. Many who formerly believed that this synod would avoid the issue and place the entire case in the hands of a committee to be investigated for two years are now of the opinion that this synod will take a definite stand

81 *Press*, Tuesday, June 17, 22.

82 *Gazette,* Wednesday, June 18, 1; in slightly different words, the same possibility is stated in the *Gazette*, Thursday, June 19, 1.

83 *Press*, Friday, June 20, 23.

in regard to this matter.[84]

The *Gazette* also reported the motion on the floor of synod to appoint a committee, as synod was originally expected to do: "At the close of the evening session Rev. J. Manni presented his proposal a second time to place the entire matter in the hands of a committee for investigation for two years."[85] That motion, we know, was later defeated.

So why did the synod act on the matter, rather than assign it to a committee, as it was earlier expected to do? The *Banner*, not the secular news outlets, gives the answer: "decisive action was very evidently if not urgently, called for. Synod had to say something."[86]

As often happens, a felt need to speak to a matter before many people were ready to face the question resulted in the question not being settled. Synod "had to say something," and yet because it did, the question remains, should it have?

The purpose of this appendix is not to answer questions of this sort, but to give a flavor of how the area newspapers covered the meeting of synod. Because the articles in the *Gazette* and *Press* were written by a Christian Reformed man with a vested interest in synod and who apparently attended all its sessions, the reports of these two newspapers are as much a primary source as are the *Acts of Synod* itself.

84 *Gazette*, Saturday, June 28, 3. The *Press* report of the same day is identical, except that it ends with the words "will take a definite stand." *Press*, Saturday, June 28, 21.

85 *Gazette*, Friday, July 4, 1.

86 *Banner*, Friday, July 25, 469.

God Giving Good Things to All People: Grace?

Brian Huizinga

The doctrinal issue that I address in this article and that we address throughout this volume of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* (*PRTJ*) on common grace, is first, a *positive* issue. It is true that the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) *reject* the three points of common grace as adopted by Synod 1924 of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Furthermore, we reject that doctrine as it has developed in the last one hundred years. Rejecting common grace, we do not stand alone. We stand united with other churches with whom we have an official relationship of one kind or another: the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church of Northern Ireland, the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church of Singapore, the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines, the Evangelical Presbyterian Churches of Australia, and the Bekennende Evangelisch-Reformierte Gemeinde (a Reformed congregation in Giessen, Germany). Nevertheless, the doctrinal issue is not merely *negative*. It is not true that the PRCA exists only to wage war against the doctrine of common grace and that we would disappear if we could no longer continue this fight.[1] Existing only to deny something is a pathetic existence.

This issue is *positive,* as all of God's truth is. The PRCA stands positively for *grace*, the grace of God, the grace revealed in Christ, the grace communicated by the Spirit, the grace taught in Scripture, the grace woven through the Three Forms of Unity, the grace that we believers experience as sweet and amazing. There is nothing common about this grace! Grace is always particular, to the elect alone. It is always sovereign and saving. Into all eternity no one will ever be able

1 Herman Hanko notes, "Some charged the PRC for existing only to inveigh against and do battle with the evils of common grace. It was said that the PRC rode an old hobby horse, lived to criticize others, found its joy in chiding other denominations, and would disappear if it could no longer fight against common grace." See Herman Hanko and Herman Hoeksema, *Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 16-17.

to find one example of a recipient of divine grace who perished. Hell will never admit through its gates any upon whom the God of all grace has poured out His grace. The triumphant note of the gospel that we in the PRCA love to sound is: God's grace never fails to save! Think of the refrain repeated throughout Psalm 136 as versified in the 1912 *Psalter*, "His grace abideth ever…His mercy faileth never."[2]

Second, the issue addressed in this article is a *theological* issue. I do not mean "theology" only in the broad sense of a study and presentation of all the doctrines of Scripture organized into six loci, but "theology" in the narrow sense as the first locus of Reformed doctrine. Theology proper is the study of *God*. There are certainly important implications for the other five loci of Reformed doctrine (treating mankind, Christ, salvation, the church, and the last things), but the issue addressed in this article is theological from beginning to end. In this article, I am not interested in the human being and whether there is any restraint of sin in him, whether he can do what is truly good, and how his cultural products relate to God's redemptive purposes. I am concerned *with God*—His nature and character.

No one on either side of the debate since 1924 has ever made the fundamental issue, particularly of the first point of common grace, anything less. In 1924 there was a CRC minister without a pastoral charge, worshipping in Eastern Ave CRC where Rev. Herman Hoeksema was pastor. His name was Rev. Johannes Vander Mey. That year he protested Hoeksema's preaching to the consistory, stating, "My first and greatest objection concerns the pastor's wrong conception of God."[3] When Hoeksema later appeared before the CRC synod, the president remarked, "I cannot refute all heretics, not even my own brother who is Baptist, but my Reformed antennae tell me 'that Danhof and Hoeksema proceed from a wrong concept of God and therefore their teaching is to be considered dangerous for our churches.'"[4]

2 Number 378, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1927; rev. ed. 1995).

3 Herman Hoeksema, *God's Goodness Always Particular,* 2nd ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 35. See also Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: n.p., 1947), 32-33.

4 Quoted in Henry Danhof, "God is God," in *Standard Bearer*, October 1,

Being theological, the issue is *not* ecclesiastical self-preservation or promotion. Rejecting common grace is not a Protestant Reformed thing that Protestant Reformed people do simply to maintain their own denomination. The issue here is the truth *of God*, and we are convinced that faithfulness to *God* and *His* revelation of Himself in Scripture demands our rejection of common grace.[5]

Third, the issue addressed in this article is a *relevant* issue. There is widespread, almost universal acceptance of common grace in evangelicalism and in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. If it is not explicitly taught, this doctrine is tolerated. But does the average believer, even in Reformed churches, know what common grace is, or that there was and is a controversy over it? Among those who have heard of common grace, how many simply take it for granted as being orthodox without ever having given it any serious, much less critical, examination? Where common grace *is* explicitly mentioned, *is* understood, and *is* taught, it often functions as the engine driving the hugely popular neo-Calvinist push for the redemption and Christianization of culture. Yet, even in those circles does the average person in the pew stop to consider what the doctrine of common grace is all about? One hundred years after the Synod of 1924, people (still) need to know.

Some outside the PRCA agree that this doctrine, officially enshrined by the CRC at Synod 1924, is worthy of critical examination. They have not ignored but have taken seriously the writings of Protestant Reformed authors and have engaged these writings in a meaningful way. Several names come to mind.

The first is Dr. John Bolt, professor emeritus at Calvin Theological Seminary. Bolt acknowledges that he is "too much of a Kuyperian neo-Calvinist to deny or repudiate the doctrine of common grace."[6] Nevertheless, he is sympathetic toward the PRCA, and in the past twenty-five years has produced several articles in the *Calvin Theo-*

1924, 4. Translation from the Dutch is mine.

5 Hoeksema insisted that "the issue at stake is not dogmatism or maintaining one's church. The issue is the truth, the maintenance and development of the Reformed truth." See Herman Hoeksema, *God's Goodness Always Particular*, 66.

6 John Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (April 2000): 36.

logical Journal in which he has been critical of some of the doctrine and practice of his own denomination, the CRC, regarding the controversy of 1924.[7]

Second, Dr. Raymond Blacketer once penned an article for the *Calvin Theological Journal* in which he defended the PRCA's rejection of the well-meant offer of the gospel.[8]

Third, Dr. Richard Mouw, former professor at Calvin College and former President of Fuller Seminary, is a well-known proponent of common grace and Neo-Calvinism. However, he also takes the PRCA seriously. He is familiar to many in the PRCA after his public debate with Prof. David Engelsma in Grand Rapids, MI in front of several thousand people in 2003. In his most recent publication, *All that God Cares About: Common Grace and Divine Delight*, Mouw says about the Protestant Reformed theologians Herman Hoeksema and David Engelsma, "I regularly check in with their writings to keep myself engaged with the challenges they pose to my way of viewing things."[9] He also acknowledges that he tends to overemphasize common grace and minimize the antithesis; therefore, he reads the likes of Hoeksema and Engelsma to stay challenged.[10] Furthermore, in this recent book he admits that when he wrote his book *He Shines in all That's Fair* (2001) he was mistaken to conclude, "For all I know—and for all any of us can know—much of what we now think of as common grace may in the end time be revealed to be saving grace." Twenty years later he backtracks: "I wish I had not written that sentence…it is misleading…. What I said could be taken as blurring the distinction between common grace and saving grace. So I must say this in a straightforward manner: I am not a universalist."[11] Mouw has not renounced common

7 For example, Bolt describes Hoeksema's expulsion from the CRC as an assault that was "well-orchestrated and hurried, a kind of ecclesiastical blitzkrieg." See *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (April 2000): 18.

8 See Raymond A. Blacketer, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Reexamination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (April 2000): 37-65.

9 Richard J. Mouw, *All That God Cares About: Common Grace and Divine Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 91.

10 Mouw, *All That God Cares About*, 116.

11 Mouw, 145-146.

grace, as we wish he would. He still promotes it vigorously. However, he has not shut his ears to the objections coming out of the PRCA, so we thank him for listening and considering.

Finally, on his podcast "Conversations that Matter" John Harris recently interviewed David Engelsma on "The Issue with Kuyper's Common Grace." This gave Engelsma a platform to help show a broad audience of thousands of people what common grace really is and the dangers of it.[12]

These kinds of voices are in the minority. To this very day, the most common response to the PRCA denial of common grace is to ignore it or dismiss it as extreme. One hundred years after Hoeksema leveled his objections and was called "one-sided," he and the PRCA are still branded as proponents of "Hyper-Calvinism."[13]

Because the doctrine of common grace is usually accepted and promoted as pure Reformed orthodoxy, this issue of the *PRTJ* is relevant and important. One hundred years after the Synod of 1924, people need to know what common grace really is. And people in the PRCA need to know what we believe and why we believe it, especially *now*, lest we react with doctrinal apathy to the radicalism that begat a schism in our midst only a few years ago. Doctrinal distinctives, precision, and polemics do matter.

In this article I treat the first half of the first point of common grace by explaining it and then offering objections from three angles: the confessional, the scriptural, and the practical.

The First Point Stated and Explained

The first point of common grace adopted by CRC Synod 1924 states,

> Relative to the first point which concerns the favorable attitude of God towards mankind in general and not only towards the elect, synod

12 "The Issue with Kuyper's Common Grace," accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuAfcCl7Gy4&t=1341s, accessed February 10, 2025.

13 See Robert Gonzalez, Jr., "The Saving Design of Common Grace," *Founder's Journal* 128 (Winter 2024): 44, 49; Curt Daniel, "What is Hyper-Calvinism," *Banner of Truth Magazine*, 735 (December 2024): 6-11; Cornelius Pronk, "The Order of Salvation (4): Hyper-Calvinism and the Free Offer," *Messenger*, 69, no. 11 (December 2022): 10-12.

> declares it to be established according to Scripture and the Confession that, 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. This is evident from the Scriptural passages quoted and from the Canons of Dordrecht, II, 5 and III, IV, 8 and 9, which deal with the general offer of the Gospel, while it also appears from the citations made from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed theology that our Reformed writers from the past favored this view.[14]

Appended to this point was a list of several Bible verses with no explanation of them or how they proved common grace. The Scripture passages quoted were Psalm 145:9, Matthew 5:44-45, Luke 6:35-36, Acts 14:16-17, 1 Timothy 4:10, Romans 2:4, Ezekiel 33:11, 18:23.

This first point of 1924 distinguishes two kinds of grace. There is a *saving* grace of God that is only for the elect; the result of this grace is everlasting life with Christ in heaven. But there is also *non-saving* grace for all humans, both the elect and reprobate, in this life.

There are three things to know about this grace that is called "common." First, in God, there is an *attitude* of favor, a gracious disposition, toward all human beings. Second, that attitude of God comes to manifestation in good things that are *blessings* God gives to all people: sunshine, rain, plentiful harvests, good health, healthcare, wealth, possessions, gifts, talents, an enjoyable family life, and such like. Third, God's favorable attitude and these good things as blessings are for *this present life*, and only for this life, because afterward is damnation for the reprobate.

This is *grace*. This is *common* grace. This is grace for everyone without any discrimination, without any exceptions. This grace of God is for the Christian's unbelieving next-door neighbor who is a reliable and friendly gentleman living a life that is, by all outward appearances, morally sound. But this grace is also for the vilest sinners who are glaring examples of depravity: pedophiles, rapists, Muslim terrorists, and a blaspheming apostate who spews vitriol against God and His church through slanderous online screeds.

To use a biblical example, this grace is for the unbeliever Jezebel as much as for the believer Elijah. Proponents of common grace would

14 See Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 317.

not deny the clear teaching of Scripture that God would have dogs eat Jezebel and that God would curse her and punish her *everlastingly* in hell for her Baal-worship, pride of life, insane lust for power and pleasure, and murder of Naboth and the prophets. Nevertheless, *in this life,* God gave her many good things: she was a queen, she was rich, she was gifted in mental vigor, she had a capacity for taking charge and strategizing, and she could even paint her face. Although she pressed all those gifts into the service of sin, those good things were blessings that God gave in His grace, favor, and lovingkindness to her. She did not deserve anything good. That God gave her good things was grace.

Rev. Daniel Zwier, minister of Maple Ave. CRC in Holland, MI, from 1920-1946, defended the three points and wrote against H. Hoeksema in *De Wachter*, a magazine of the CRC,

> God is merciful in the proper, full, deep and rich sense of the word only to his people. Only for them his mercy endures forever. But this does not alter the fact that the Bible also speaks of a general mercy and loving-kindness of God revealed in the bestowal of temporal benefits and blessings even on the unthankful, evil and unrighteous. We believe both.[15]

The Confessional Objection

The doctrine of common grace *conflicts with* the Reformed doctrine of providence. Sometimes critics of the doctrine of common grace might suppose that this doctrine is nothing more than an *unnecessary addition* to our Reformed system, unnecessary since we already have a doctrinal category for treating God's good gifts to everyone—providence. Or one might suppose that the doctrine of common grace merely introduces *confusion* with the doctrine of providence. It is my conviction that those who subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity honestly and consistently must *reject* common grace as *inimical* to the doctrine of providence.

The Reformed doctrine of providence holds that God governs and controls everything in the universe with His hand of power, working all things *for* His elect people in Christ (this is grace to them) and working all things *against* His reprobate enemies outside of Christ (this

15 Quoted in Hoeksema, *God's Goodness Always Particular,* 30-31.

is wrath to them). In unpacking the doctrine of providence, there is a fundamental and critically important distinction to be made between God's *hand* and God's *heart*. By God's *hand* I refer to God's *acts* in this world, which includes giving good, earthly, temporal things to all. By God's *heart* I refer to God's *attitude*, which lies behind and explains the activity of His hand.

God's *hand* controls everything. God's *hand* brings all the calamities of this life to every person, and all the good things of this life to each one. The PRCA has never denied this. The PRCA has always taught that with His *hand* God gives good things to everyone. *God* is the one who gave to Jezebel every good thing she possessed and enjoyed as the queen of Israel. That is the Reformed doctrine of providence!

But the Reformed doctrine of providence is not so superficial that it only speaks to God's *hand*. It goes deeper and accounts for God's *heart*. What is His *attitude* toward the elect in Christ and toward the reprobate outside of Christ as He gives all of them good things? God's heart is favorably inclined toward the elect who are in Christ Jesus so that God is *for* them and blesses them in lovingkindness. Although the elect are damnworthy sinners of themselves, they have been chosen and redeemed in Christ and are forever united to Christ. God's heart beats with grace for them, only grace, always grace (Rom. 8:28, 1 Cor. 3:21-23). However, God's heart is full of wrath toward the reprobate who are sinners outside of Christ so that God is *against* them and curses them in hatred. Nothing God gives to the reprobate is a gracious blessing, for everything comes as a temporal judgment that serves their destruction. God works all things together, including their own sin, for the realization of His eternal decree of reprobation. This is the Reformed doctrine of providence.

I do not need to prove that providence is God's *hand* controlling all things, and that God's hand works *for* His children. That understanding belongs to the ABCs of Reformed doctrine as taught in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10. What must be proved is that behind God's hand is a heart of hatred and wrath toward the reprobate, not love and grace. I grant that in their explanation of providence the Reformed confessions do not state this explicitly, but that is because the Reformed confessions—Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10

and Belgic Confession Article 13—never treat providence as a bare doctrine, but always from the viewpoint of the believer's personal comfort and assurance. Nevertheless, the Reformed confessions make clear that providence is not *for* the reprobate in *grace*.

First, notice the pronouns of Lord's Day 10, A 28 in its explanation of the advantage of providence:

> That *we* may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall *us*, *we* place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate *us* from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.[16]

The antecedent for all these first person, plural pronouns ("we" and "us") is, according to Lord's Day 1, elect believers who belong to their faithful Savior Jesus Christ. God's hand of providence is not for everyone in grace. It is only *for* those who belong to Jesus in body and soul, in life and death.

Second, although Lord's Day 10 makes no explicit reference to the wicked outside of Christ, they are implied in the expression "all creatures" (A 28, "since all creatures are so in his hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move"). From a queen bee in her hive to Jezebel in her palace, "all creatures" are in God's hand. The comforting truth is that all rational, moral "creatures" who are evil enemies of the church cannot so much as move to hurt and destroy us. Belgic Confession Article 13 makes that very point explicit when it speaks of "our enemies" and that we are persuaded "that He [God] so restrains the devil and all our enemies that without His will and permission they cannot hurt us." The wicked are not the objects of God's *grace*, but the objects of God's sovereign *power*. They are like vicious wolves trying to tear to shreds God's precious sheep, but He holds them back in His power. This is not grace to *them*, but to *us*. There is no grace to the wicked.

Third, the doctrine of providence in Lord's Day 10 must be inter-

16 All quotations from the Heidelberg Catechism are taken from Heidelberg Catechism, in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 83-140.

preted in light of the doctrine of divine justice in Lord's Days 4 and 5. In Lord's Day 4 the Catechism teaches that God's perfect justice demands that He who detests sin with all His holy being must visit guilty sinners with wrath and judgments, not only in hell at the end, but already *in this life*. Thus, we read in Q&A 10,

> Will God suffer such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished? By no means; but is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins; and will punish them in his just judgment temporally and eternally, as he hath declared, 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things, which are written in the book of the law, to do them.'

In Lord's Day 5, Q&A 12, the Catechism teaches that the only way for a sinner to escape temporal (and eternal) judgment is the satisfaction of God's justice:

> Since then, by the righteous judgment of God, we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, is there no way by which we may escape that punishment, and be again received into favor? God will have his justice satisfied: and therefore we must make this full satisfaction, either by ourselves, or by another.

Then the Catechism continues in the remainder of Lord's Day 5 and into Lord's Day 6 to teach that Jesus Christ is the one Mediator who satisfied divine justice and only if the sinner is in Him can he escape judgment *now* on this earth and *everlasting* in hell.

How important is Christ! If you do not belong to Christ, God is terribly displeased with your sins—all your sins, all your rebellion—and will punish you temporally and eternally. The Reformed faith holds that if you are outside of Christ, you are constantly under the temporal judgments of God. Without Christ you have no comfort in your body or soul and no comfort in your life or death. Without Christ you stand exposed in all your depravity before the infinitely holy God!

We may not conveniently ignore God's perfect justice when we come to providence in Lord's Day 10. When God by His hand of providence brings good things to the wicked, that is not grace to them, fatherly love to them, mercy to them. God is against the wicked and gives them good things in His anger. A good gift like one million dollars

will work together with everything else in the wicked person's life for his ruin. If someone should object and say, "But no wicked man *deserves* one million dollars, therefore, it is grace to him," then that objector needs to understand that his view of God's dealings is much too shallow. That money is a snare unto the wicked and it will pierce him through with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:9-10). God will make it so.

Exactly because God punishes the wicked already in this life, Lord's Day 31, Q&A 84, explains that through the preaching of the gospel Christ declares and testifies "to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted." For the wicked, God's wrath is more than a future reality; it is a present reality. The doctrine of common grace, which holds that God is favorably inclined toward the reprobate wicked and gives them good things as blessings to them in this life, is inimical to the confessional Reformed doctrine of providence.

The Scriptural (Exegetical) Objection

The first point of common grace not only lacks exegetical warrant, but it also flatly contradicts the plain testimony of Scripture. I will demonstrate this from the Psalms. God's children know the Psalms better than any book of the Bible because we *sing* the Psalms, *memorize* the Psalms, *encourage others* with the Psalms, and *repeat* the Psalms. The Psalms make theology simple so that everyone, including boys and girls, can sing with understanding. I do not know how anyone can read the Psalms and conclude that God's heart is favorably inclined toward the wicked and that He blesses them with good things, any more than anyone can read Genesis 1 and conclude that this universe came into existence by an evolutionary process superintended by God through billions of years. Are not the Scriptures perspicuous?

Psalm 1 begins the entire book by making the sharpest distinction between the righteous and the wicked right now, in this life. Only the righteous are known and blessed by the Lord, and that means that the others—the wicked who are driven away like chaff and will perish—are not blessed but cursed. The rest of the Psalms follow suit and limit God's blessing to some people. The Psalms call "blessed" those who put their trust in the Son (2:12), those whose transgressions are

forgiven (32:1), the nation whose God is the LORD (33:12), the one whom God chooses (65:4), they that dwell in God's house (84:4) and know the joyful sound (89:15), those whom God chastens and teaches (94:12), the person who fears the LORD (112:1), and the undefiled in the way (119:1). God does not bless the reprobate wicked.

Does Psalm 2 apply only to the future? God *will* laugh at the wicked, *will* have them in derision, *will* vex them in His sore displeasure, and *will* break them with a rod of iron at the end of history. But did not God's dealings with all the Gentile nations around Israel make plain that He brings those judgments all through history?

Psalm 5:4-6 tell us that God's attitude toward the wicked is hatred: "For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: Neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: Thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: The LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man."

Psalm 7:11-12 tell us that anger lives in God's heart every day with respect to the wicked: "God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day. If he turn not, he will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready."

Psalm 11:4-7 tell us that hatred is God's attitude toward the wicked as He rains judgments upon them:

> The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD's throne is in heaven: his eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men. The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup. For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright.

Psalm 21:8-11 tell us that what God does to the wicked, and according to our Reformed confessions, He does this now and everlastingly:

> Thine hand shall find out all thine enemies: thy right hand shall find out those that hate thee. Thou shalt make them as a fiery oven in the time of thine anger: the LORD shall swallow them up in his wrath, and the fire shall devour them. Their fruit shalt thou destroy from the earth, and their seed from among the children of men. For they intended evil against thee: they imagined a mischievous device, which they are

not able to perform.

Psalm 92:6-7 states, "A brutish man knoweth not; neither doth a fool understand this. When the wicked spring as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do flourish; it is that they shall be destroyed for ever." That final clause, "it is that they shall be destroyed for ever" is a purpose clause in the original Hebrew, indicating that the outward prosperity of the wicked is not intended by God to be a blessing, but destruction.

What about all the imprecatory Psalms? The psalmist, who in the ultimate sense of the word is Christ Himself, asks God to bring judgments upon the wicked (see for example, Psalms 52, 57, 58, 69, 109). If it was established as truth in the mind of the psalmist that in this life God loves and blesses the wicked, how could he plead with God to *destroy* his enemies (Ps. 69:24-25)?

How could any believing Israelite read the Psalms and sincerely conclude that God is gracious toward and blesses the wicked in this life? If an Israelite came to such a conclusion, one would think that Israelite was suffering a serious spiritual malady. In fact, there was such an Israelite and he himself tells us he was spiritually ill. His name was Asaph, the human writer of Psalm 73.

God's correction of Asaph in Psalm 73 should settle any controversy over common grace. Asaph opens by declaring in verse 1, "Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart." Then he describes how he nearly lost his faith and spiritual life because he saw all the material prosperity of the wicked and was convinced God was blessing them in His favor, while all the suffering of the righteous proved that God was punishing them in His wrath. Asaph's thinking did not change "until," as he says, "I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end" (v. 17). The whole Psalm pivots at verse 17. Asaph's faith was weak and he did not *understand*. Therefore, God gave him understanding by showing him the truth of the wicked and "their end" (v. 17). But Asaph already knew that the end of the wicked was destruction. What was God doing to the wicked in *this life*? To that question God gave an answer by telling Asaph that He sets the wicked on a slippery slope and casts them down to destruction (v. 18). He brings them to desolation and consumes them with terrors (v. 19)

and despises their image (v. 20). What are all those good things that God gives to those who hate Him and refuse to thank and worship Him for what He gives? Not gracious blessings but curses. Curses that aggravate the judgment of the ungodly and reveal the perversity of their hearts, making them ripe for everlasting judgment.

Is not this massive testimony of the Psalms confirmed throughout Scripture? For example, Proverbs 3:33 speaks to this present life and teaches us what God is doing to the wicked in it: "The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just." John 3:36 adds, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." Finally, Romans 9 states, "Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated," (v. 13), and verse 22 adds that there are some who are not vessels of mercy fit for blessings, but "the vessels of wrath fit for destruction." The Bible is clear: Outside of Christ there is no grace but terrors and destruction for the wicked in this life.

Urgings from the Scriptural Testimony

Four urgings naturally arise out of this scriptural examination, and they come in the form of prohibitions. First, we should not come to a position in this controversy over common grace by reasoning from our emotions and experiences. The proponents of Arminianism often fall into this error and consequently condemn the God of Calvinism as a cruel tyrant. What does Scripture say? God's Word determines our theology, not our feelings.

Second, if we have Psalm-singing in our churches, we should never abandon this heritage. If more churches would commit to Psalm-singing, I suspect that more people would inquire, "You know, pastor, this thing you preach called common grace, what exactly is that, because it does not seem to harmonize with all these stanzas we sing describing God's judgments upon the wicked?" There are many sacred hymns and choral arrangements that I enjoy as much as other people do, but collectively they do not paint the full biblical portrait of the character of our God, His dealings with humans, and the sinner's desperate need for Christ right now.

Third, we should not quote a few Bible verses without any explanation and then suppose, as Synod 1924 did, that these verses overthrow

this massive testimony presented above and teach common grace. Appeal is often made to Matthew 5:44-45,

> But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

That this text does not teach common grace is evident, first, from the fact that it says nothing about God's heart or attitude, only His hand: He gives rain and sunshine to the unjust. Second, this passage does not teach a love or grace of God for all humans as many claim when they argue that Jesus is making a comparison: We must do good to our neighbors *in love*, exactly because God does good to everyone *in love*. It is argued that the implication of Jesus' teaching is that God commands us to relate to our neighbor as He does: *in love*. However, the text does not say God loves everyone, nor does it imply this. God does not relate to our neighbor as we do, and therefore, He can call us to love someone He does not love. Our neighbor is our equal or peer whom we must love; however, that same neighbor is to God a creature He made, and now a desperately wicked rebel who hates Him.

Third, the parallel passage in Luke 6:35-36 does not teach a kindness or love of God for everyone. It reads,

> But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Indeed, Jesus explicitly teaches that God is "kind unto the unthankful and to the evil," but He is speaking to God's children who are unthankful and evil by nature. One might object, "But, if 'the evil' and 'the good' in Matthew 5 refers to the reprobate and elect respectively, then 'the evil' in Luke 6 should also refer to the reprobate; thus God does have an attitude of favor to the reprobate." However, that is not the case, for "evil" can have a different referent in each passage and must. Matthew 5 and Luke 6 are parallel in treating the same subject,

but there is a difference between them. Matthew 5 distinguishes between "the evil" and "the good," and then between "the just" and "the unjust." It is legitimate to distinguish those objects of God's goodness as elect (good, just) and reprobate (evil, unjust). God gives rain and sunshine to both. However, Luke 6 makes no distinction between morally good and evil people but refers *only* to "the unthankful" and "the evil." Since "the unthankful" and "the evil" are objects of God's *kindness* (heart attitude), these descriptors must be referring to us, God's elect children, as we are by nature. This harmonizes with the rest of Scripture.

Finally, as to urgings that arise out of Scripture's testimony, we should not resort to "paradox" or "mystery" as many do. We may not contend that some passages of Scripture teach common grace to the wicked, while others teach God's wrath and curse to the wicked; therefore, we have an apparent contradiction that we must simply accept as a paradox or mystery that lies beyond our finite understanding. God does not curse those to whom He is gracious. That is a contradiction, and there are no contradictions in God.

The Practical Objections

In conclusion, I raise only two brief practical objections to the doctrine of common grace. First, this doctrine is very discouraging to the true Christian. If the good things of this earthly life are manifest tokens of divine grace to all who receive them, then what are the evils of disease, warfare, family strife, poverty, and natural disasters? This question becomes still more urgent by the fact that throughout history the wicked are often wealthier and more prosperous in material things than the righteous. If good things are grace, then are evils God's curse? Job's three friends, who had to be rebuked for their misguided theology, would seem to be early proponents of the three points of 1924 as they tried to convince Job that all the evils of his life were caused by a just and wrathful God pursuing him as an impenitent sinner.

However, God's curse is not in the adversity *itself* any more than His blessing is in the prosperity *itself*. We must go behind the *hand* of adversity and prosperity and see God's *heart*. In God's heart there is no grace to the wicked, not even in earthly prosperity. And in God's heart there is no curse to the righteous, not even in adversity. Romans 8:28

is clear: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

Second, it is very difficult, practically speaking, to keep common grace from evolving into saving grace. The CRC could not keep these two graces separate for one paragraph. Before the synod finished writing its first point it moved from a non-saving grace in temporal things to a saving grace for all in the gospel of Jesus Christ (the well-meant offer). Invariably, those who go to Scripture to prove a non-saving common grace point to texts that speak of *saving* grace. Earlier I referenced an article entitled, "The Saving Design of God's Common Grace." The author writes,

> Saving grace is, as its designation suggests, efficacious in effecting the redemption of those to whom it is given. Common grace, on the other hand, does not guarantee the salvation of its recipients. Nevertheless, God's common grace is saving in its design. That is, God sincerely intends the kindness and patience he shows to all sinners (whether elect or non-elect) to lead them unto saving repentance.[17]

I understand how this evolution of ideas works. If I were a proponent of common grace, I could not maintain the distinction between non-saving and saving grace. All grace, in my own thinking, would invariably become saving, for I know that in Scripture *grace saves*.

17 Gonzalez, Jr., "The Saving Design of Common Grace," 39. Recognizing that grace needs a basis, and there is no other basis than the cross of Jesus, John Murray goes so far as to say, "The unbelieving and reprobate in this world enjoy numerous benefits that flow from the fact that Christ died and rose again." Later he adds, "It is proper, therefore, to say that the enjoyment of certain benefits, even by the non-elect and reprobate, falls within the design of the death of Christ." See John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 61-62. Neither could Louis Berkhof avoid connecting common grace to the cross of Jesus. He writes, "It is perfectly true, of course, that the design of God in the work of Christ pertained primarily and directly, not to the temporal well-being of men in general, but to the redemption of the elect; but secondarily and indirectly it also included the natural blessings bestowed on mankind indiscriminately. All that the natural man receives other than curse and death is an indirect result of the redemptive work of Christ." See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 438-439.

It is that simple. Grace saves. Grace never fails to save. Besides, it is very wrong and contrary to the nature of an immutable I Am that He would be gracious to someone all through this life but then damn and curse him in the next.

That brings me back to the beginning and therefore to the end. Theology. For the honor of God, we must say today, one hundred years later, we still reject common grace. We stand for grace, and there is nothing common about the amazing, saving grace of our God in Christ Jesus. That being true, let us be busy in testifying of the gospel of Christ, for all our ungodly neighbors are subject to the temporal and everlasting judgments of God and need to hear the gospel that they might be brought to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, in whom alone is grace and safety.

The General Offer of the Gospel: Grace?

Ronald Cammenga

The preaching of the gospel is grace, a *means of grace*, as Scripture teaches and the Reformed confessions affirm. The preaching is *God's* means of grace. It is God's means of grace to all who hear the preaching, that is, to all who hear the preaching who are elect children of God. To them and only to them is the preaching grace. They alone are blessed under the preaching of the gospel. Through the preaching of the Word, the grace of God works sorrow over sin, faith in Jesus Christ, and a life of gratitude in obedience to God's commandments. Faithful preaching is a means of grace because "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God," as Heinrich Bullinger famously declares in the first chapter of the Second Helvetic Confession.[1]

The preaching of the gospel is *not* grace to all and everyone who hears the preaching, as they teach who maintain the general, or free, or well-meant offer of the gospel (WMOG). That is the error closely associated with the teaching of common grace. That error was defended by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1924.[2] That error was also adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in 1948.[3] The teaching of the WMOG, as it was adopted by the CRC, was

1 Heinrich Bullinger, Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter I, "Of the Holy Scripture Being the True Word of God," in *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA, 1999), 53.

2 The first point of the three points of common grace is included previously in this issue.

3 Consult the report that was recommended to the churches, "Report of the Committee on the Free Offer of the Gospel," at https://opc.org/GA/free_offer.html. This report was drafted by a majority of three men, including two professors of Westminster Theological Seminary, John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse. A minority report is attached to the majority report. The minority report was submitted by William Young and Floyd E. Hamilton. Some have contended that the majority report was only "recommended" to the churches but was not formally adopted as the settled and binding position of the OPC.

opposed by the founding fathers of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA), Revs. Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema. A bit later, they were joined by Rev. George M. Ophoff. They and the churches that they founded have maintained for the one hundred years of their existence that the teaching of the WMOG is a serious departure from the teaching of Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. A century after the common grace controversy, the PRCA continue to oppose the error of the WMOG, it is hoped, with the zeal of our forebearers.[4]

We ought to be clear on certain matters of terminology. First, some in the past have spoken of the "offer of the gospel," while not embracing the error rejected in this first point of common grace. The expression can be found in the Three Forms of Unity, as in the Canons of Dordt, 3/4.9: "It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted.[5] Once in this first sentence

The subsequent history in which Dr. Gordon H. Clark was denied ordination in the OPC because of his opposition to the WMOG demonstrates that the teaching was for all practical purposes made the official position of the OPC. Anyone who is interested in the history of the "Clark Case" can obtain the booklet by Herman Hoeksema entitled *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2005) from the Trinity Foundation at www.trinityfoundation.org.

4 In 2002 the Banner of Truth, in Edinburgh, Scotland, republished a booklet by John Murray (1898-1975), formerly Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, entitled *The Free Offer of the Gospel*. In 2014 this booklet was included as a chapter in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 4: *Studies in Theology*, 113-132. The reprint, which is readily available, includes a new foreword by Dr. R. Scott Clark, Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary California. That foreword can also be read at https://heidelblog.net/2012/09/the-free-offer-of-the-gospel/. An excellent critical analysis of both the foreword by Clark and the content of the pamphlet by Murray was published by the Rev. Matthew Winzer, a minister in the Australian Free Church. That review is well worth reading and I highly recommend it. It can be found at https://www.thebluebanner.com/pdf/bluebanner9-10&12.pdf.

5 Canons of Dordrecht, 3/4.9, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 168.

of Article 9 reference is made to the gospel being "offered;" twice the gospel is referred to as the "call" of the gospel. This, in fact, is ordinarily the way in which the confessions refer to the preaching of the gospel. Far and away the favored expression is the "call of the gospel." This is the way in which the Canons of Dordt usually refer to the preaching of the gospel.

John Calvin often spoke of the preaching as the gospel "offer," both in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and in his commentaries. By the word "offer" as used to describe the preaching of the gospel, Calvin and others made use of the Latin *offero*. *Cassell's New Latin Dictionary* defines *offero* as "*to carry* or *bring to*, *place before*, *present*, *offer*."[6] This original use of the word *offer* as *"to place before"* or *"present"* is unobjectionable. In the preaching of the gospel, Christ is brought forth, He is placed before sinners in all His saving glory, and He is presented as the Son of God in whom alone we must believe and to whom alone we must look for eternal salvation.[7]

Calvin certainly did not embrace the error of the theologians who are today promoting and defending the WMOG. Calvin opposed the theology that is part and parcel of the contemporary teaching of the WMOG. Commenting on Isaiah 49:5, Calvin wrote:

> In like manner, although the preachers of the Gospel be "the savour of death unto death" to the reprobate, yet Paul declares that they have a sweet and delightful odour before God, who determines that wicked men shall thus be rendered the more inexcusable. God is indeed doubly glorified if success corresponds to their wishes; but when the ministers of the word have left nothing undone, though they have good reason to lament that their labour is unprofitable, still they must not repent of having pleased God, whose approbation is here contrasted with the

6 D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's New Latin Dictionary* (Glasgow: Collins Reference, 1977), 380.

7 For a more extensive evaluation of Calvin's view, the interested reader may consult Herman Hoeksema's comparison of Calvin's position of the preaching of the gospel with two leading proponents of the WMOG in his day, Louis Berkhof and H. J. Kuiper. See "Calvin, Berkhof, and H. J. Kuiper," in *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn: God, Grace, and Covenant*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 291-347.

perverse judgments of the whole world.[8]

Second, as far as terminology is concerned, I am not going to make any sharp distinction between the terms "the general offer of the gospel," "the free offer of the gospel," or "the well-meant offer of the gospel." For a couple of reasons, I prefer the expression "the well-meant offer of the gospel." One of those reasons is that the gospel is, of course, free. It proclaims the free grace of God over against earning and merit. A second reason for preferring the term "well-meant offer of the gospel" is that it gets at the heart of the issue: in the preaching of the gospel is God well-meaning towards *all* who hear or is He well-meaning *to the elect alone*? That issue divides those who promote the WMOG and those who reject it as heresy. Nevertheless, I am not primarily concerned with quibbling over terms. Nor is terminology my main interest. But my concern is the *theology* behind the terms—the theology of the teaching of the WMOG. What is the teaching of the WMOG, and what are its underpinnings?

The "Three Points of Common Grace"

Before proceeding to examine the WMOG, I want to step back for an overview of the three points of common grace that were adopted by the CRC Synod of 1924, which met in Kalamazoo, Michigan. (see pages 3-12 of this issue). I want to emphasize that the three points "hang together." There is a logic that binds them. They are a seamless garment, though not, indeed, the seamless robe of our Lord. But, for all that, they are a seamless robe.

The first point states what common grace is. Common grace is "a favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general" both to the elect and reprobate in this life. Included in the proof from Scripture that is referenced in support of the first point are "texts which speak of a well-meaning offer of salvation." Synod 1924 cited two texts. The first is Ezekiel 33:11, "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" The second is Ezekiel 18:23, "Have

8 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 4:16-17.

I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?"[9]

At this point, bells and whistles ought to have sounded in the ears of every delegate to the CRC Synod of 1924. These were among the same texts to which the Arminians appealed at the Synod of Dordt in defense of their teaching that God desires the salvation of everyone and freely offers salvation to everyone. There was nothing novel in the CRC's appeal to these passages in support of the teaching of the WMOG.

The second and third points call attention to the negative and positive effects of common grace. The second point speaks of a gracious restraint of sin in the heart of natural humans. This restraint of sin keeps him from becoming as sinful as otherwise he would become.

The third point speaks of God's gracious enabling of unregenerate persons to do good. "Civil righteousness," the synod called it, and "civil good," deeds that are good in the sight of God and that are also rewarded by God.

That is an overview, a big-picture survey of the three points of common grace.

That to Which We Are Not Objecting

Before we turn to an examination of the WMOG, our readers ought to be clear to what we are *not* objecting.

We are not taking issue with the teaching that there are non-saving operations of the Holy Spirit. There are such works of the Spirit. Among them is the Spirit's work in the creation of the world (Gen. 1:2). The Holy Spirit enabled wicked kings to rule in the Old Testament, like wicked king Saul whom the Spirit left in the latter part of his reign (1 Sam. 10:5-13; 11:6; 16:14; 18:12; 28:15). The Holy Spirit hardens sinners in their sin and convicts them of sin. In John 16:8, reference is made to the Holy Spirit's work of reproving the world of sin, and

9 A careful exegesis of these texts is beyond the scope of this article. An exegesis of these texts by Herman Hoeksema, pointing out the erroneous interpretation of the Arminians as well as that of the CRC Synod of 1924, can be found in *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn: God, Grace, and Covenant*. Confer specifically "A Triple Breach in the Foundation of the Reformed Truth," 386-87.

of righteousness, and of judgment: "And when he [the Comforter] is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment."

But there are no *gracious* operations of the Holy Spirit, gracious operations *in the hearts* of the unregenerate, operations of the Holy Spirit that are the fruit of God's love for the sinner, be it only in this life. Grace is an aspect of God's love. If God is gracious to the unregenerate, in some sense and to some degree God loves them. Common grace posits a certain love of God for all people "in common."

In the second place, while the PRCA deny that the preaching of the gospel is grace to everyone who hears the gospel, they do not deny that the gospel must be preached promiscuously, and not only to the elect—if that were even possible. The use of the word "promiscuously" is found in the Canons of Dordt, 2.5:

> Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.[10]

We affirm what the apostle Paul teaches in Acts 17:30, "And the time of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent." The PRCA strive to fulfill the Great Commission, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). But the promiscuous call (command) is not an offer of salvation to everyone, driven by a love of God for all humanity and a sincere desire on the part of God to save every human being, at least those human beings who come under the preaching of the gospel. That it is such an offer we deny.

In the third place, the PRCA agree that God gives good gifts to wicked people. In Psalm 73, Asaph was tempted to despair because while the righteous suffered, he "saw the prosperity of the wicked" (vs. 3). Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:45 that God causes "his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." There is nothing wrong with God's sunshine and rain, which

10 Canons of Dordrecht, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 163.

cause the crops of the wicked farmer, as well as the righteous farmer, to grow. But our objection concerns the *attitude* of God in giving these good gifts—God's *motivation* and *intention* in bestowing them. He is not motivated by love for the ungodly. He does not give His good gifts out of His grace that extends to all people alike.

An apt illustration of this is the farmer who is fattening up a turkey for Thanksgiving Day. He gives the turkey lots of good grain so that the turkey becomes as plump as can be. Does the farmer do that because he has a special place in his heart for the turkey? Or is he fattening the turkey on his good corn and grain in order to slaughter the turkey and eat him with his family on Thanksgiving Day? The answer is obvious. That is the same answer that Asaph gives in Psalm 73:18-19, "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castest them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors." God is fattening the wicked for the day of slaughter. Clearly, that is not grace on God's part.

In the fourth place, the PRCA do not deny that God restrains sin. In the Belgic Confession, Article 13, the article that deals with the doctrine of providence, Reformed believers confess that they are "persuaded that [God] so restrains the devil and all our enemies that, without His will and permission, they cannot hurt us."[11] God does, indeed, restrain sin—by His providential ruling. What we deny is that God, by an operation of the Holy Spirit within the heart of sinful humans and as the fruit of His love and grace, keeps the sinner from becoming as sinful as he otherwise would become. This is the error of those who teach common grace. Reflecting on the restraint of sin, Abraham Kuyper writes that common grace temporarily "stems and arrests the continued effect of sin."[12] The Presbyterian theologian John Murray teaches that

> God places restraint upon the workings of human depravity and thus prevents the unholy affections and principles of men from manifesting all the potentialities inherent in them. He prevents depravity from bursting forth in all its vehemence and violence.[13]

11 Belgic Confession, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 37.

12 Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 1:264.

13 John Murray, "Common Grace," in *Collected Writings of John Murray:*

But God's restraint of sin has nothing to do with grace. It is the policeman with his radar gun tucked out of view of oncoming traffic, ready to write a speeding ticket, who restrains a driver from breaking the law. It is the shame and consequences of "getting caught" that keep the sinner from committing the sins after which his flesh lusts. It is the fear of being expelled from high school for participation in underage drinking at a weekend party. It is the fear of the drug user or gambler losing his job, his wife, and his family. It is the fear of being discovered frequenting the pornographic websites by his wife or parents. There is no grace here, no gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the natural humans. Rather, it is sinful self-love and self-preservation. This was Herman Hoeksema's position over against the second point of common grace:

> Sin is determined by various, often contradictory, motives in the deceitful heart of the sinner, such as fear of punishment, shame, ambition, vainglory, natural love, carnal lust, love of money, jealousy, envy, malice, and vengeance. These various motives often conflict with one another, but they remain sinful, although one sinful desire or motive will often prevent the sinner from satisfying another.[14]

And last, the PRCA do not deny that the unbeliever does perform works that are in outward conformity to the law of God. The unregenerate person may be faithful to his wife or her husband in marriage. He may be a decent neighbor, often very helpful when you find yourself in a predicament. He may be a hard-working employee or a generous employer. She may be a good housekeeper and faithful to her husband in marriage. He may be an honest businessman, who can be trusted to fulfill his part of an agreement. They may be philanthropists who do-

Lectures in Systematic Theology (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 2:98.

14 Herman Hoeksema, "Continuous Development of Sin," in *The Rock Whence We are Hewn*, 410. A significant part of Hoeksema's response to the second point of common grace was the organic development of sin. Sin develops along with the development of greater means with which to sin. In biblical times there were no computers or internet. These modern inventions have contributed significantly to the organic development of sin. The development of sin continues until at the end of the ages it has reached its ultimate manifestation and the cup of iniquity is full.

nate millions to worthy causes: hospitals and famine relief, cancer and Alzheimer's research, aid for victims of hurricanes and earthquakes, educational institutions and environmental restoration.

But none of these require grace. They are the "glittering vices" of the ungodly, as Augustine referred to them. In promoting worthy humanitarian causes, the ungodly are motivated by acclaim and honor among society, or being remembered after they die, or a legacy to their children and grandchildren after they have passed away.

The unregenerate person cannot obey the law of God. This becomes plain when it is borne in mind what is the fundamental requirement of God's law. What is the demand of God's law? "Thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40). The law of God demands love. No unbeliever loves God. No unbeliever *can* love God. And no unbeliever can love his neighbor *for God's sake*. Whatever motivation may account for his outward conformity to God's law, it is not love for God and an interest in the glory of God.

The "Little Point" of the First Point

Within the teaching of the first point of common grace that was adopted by the CRC Synod of 1924 was the teaching of the WMOG. The teaching of the WMOG was not included in the body of the first point. Rather, it was included in the proof from Scripture that was offered to support the teaching that there is "a favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect." For this reason, it became known as "the little point within the first point," or, in Dutch, the *kleine puntje*.

Three things are important to note regarding the appeal to the WMOG in support of the teaching that God is gracious to the unregenerate. First, not only were "[t]exts which speak of a well-meaning offer of salvation" included as proof from Scripture for a favorable attitude of God, but they were the *first* line of proof from Scripture. Texts that set forth the WMOG were the cornerstone upon which the structure of God's favor to the ungodly was erected. And, indeed, if the

preaching is grace to all who hear, if the preaching is the expression of the desire of God to save all who hear the gospel, there is clearly a favorable attitude of God—grace—to those who are not elect. The logic is irrefutable. But the logic is irrefutable only if the premise is true. The logic is irrefutable only if the gospel is an offer of salvation, motivated by a sincere desire of God to save all who come under the preaching of the gospel. Then clearly, God's love is extended more widely than to the elect.

In the second place, it was simply assumed by the Synod of 1924 that the teaching of the WMOG was true. That is striking. By presenting the teaching of the WMOG as proof for the first point, the view of the synod was that the WMOG was universally accepted within the CRC and that all were agreed what the nature of the WMOG was. In the mind of the synod, it was incontrovertible that the WMOG is biblical and confessional. No one in their right Reformed mind would dispute the fact that the preaching was a well-meant offer of God to save all who hear the preaching of the gospel. This was in reality an indication of the extent to which the teaching of the WMOG had become accepted in the CRC. Altogether apart from the three points of common grace, the CRC was firmly committed to the WMOG.

Thirdly, by its appeal to the WMOG the Synod of 1924 made clear that God's favor to the ungodly extends beyond the good things of this earth. That had been the contention of the defenders of common grace, as is indicated by the Scripture passages to which the Synod of 1924 appealed in defense of the first point. The synod cited such passages as Psalm 145:9, "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works," and Matthew 5:45, "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." The benefits of common grace are limited to this life. They include food and shelter, health and wealth, a stable government and order in society, educational institutions and scientific discoveries.[15]

15 An important implication of the teaching of common grace is that if all the positive experiences of earthly life are indications of God's grace to all, the negative experiences of earthly life are an indication of God's wrath and judgment. This was precisely the struggle of Asaph in Psalm 73. This was the viewpoint of Job's three friends and is why they were "miserable

According to the proponents of common grace, it is only in this life that God is gracious to the unregenerate. Common grace is distinct from special grace. Whereas the benefits of special grace are spiritual and extend into eternity, common grace extends only to this life. Whereas the defenders of common grace teach that God's favor rests upon the ungodly here and now, in eternity they are the objects of God's wrath and judgment.[16] The appeal to the WMOG makes plain that "grace" is the love of God that provides salvation. According to His common grace, God desires the spiritual salvation of the unregenerate. That takes common grace beyond the realm of the here and now. Grace can never be limited only to the present life.

As we will see, the *kleine puntje* was not so little a point. In fact, its error is grievous and it has led to still more grievous errors. From many points of view, it is not a "little" point, but a huge point that has had devastating, corrupting consequences on the very heart of the gospel in those churches that have embraced this error.

Of the numerous objections that may be raised against the teaching of the WMOG I want to focus on three in this article. I will demonstrate that the WMOG guts the authority of the preaching of the gospel. I will show that the WMOG denies God's twofold purpose in the preaching of the gospel. And I will point out that the teaching of the WMOG implies the egregious error of free will. There are other issues related to the WMOG, such as the efficacy of God's will, the contradiction of the truth of reprobation, the implicit denial of the extent of the atonement, and the inconsistency it introduces into the will of God. But an evaluation of these concerns must wait for another time.[17]

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comforters." From all that had happened to Job, they argued that God was angry with Job and that Job was guilty of some secret, unconfessed sin.

16 This clear contradiction and the introduction of contradiction into God's attitude towards the reprobate wicked is another objection to the teaching of common grace. Common grace introduces conflict within God. In time His attitude is one of favor and love towards to the ungodly, but in eternity they suffer in hell under His wrath. This contradicts all of Scripture, including Malachi 3:6: "For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."

17 These issues have been addressed by Protestant Reformed theologians in the span of the one hundred years of the existence of the PRCA. Interested readers can consult the index to the *Standard Bearer* magazine, the index

Denial of the Authority of the Preaching of the Gospel

Those who hold to the WMOG teach that the preaching of the gospel is an offer of salvation. It is a *sincere* offer arising from the desire of God to save all who come under the preaching, including the reprobate wicked. God's offer is well-intentioned. It is not a "diplomatic ploy" intended to manipulate the hearer into unwitting compliance with the will of God. Emphatically not. God truly desires to save everyone who hears the gospel and in the preaching of the Word, He makes this desire known. This is true of preaching in the instituted church and this is true of preaching on the mission field.

This view is inconsistent with the *authority* of preaching. The preacher is not a beggar, pleading with sinners "to close with Christ." But the preacher is the mouthpiece of the King. He is the King's servant and representative, doing the King's business, and standing in the place of the King. He is the ambassador of the King. Behind him is the commission of the King. When he speaks, he speaks with the authority of the King and in the King's name. His word is to be regarded as the very word of the King.

In the preaching of the gospel, hearers are authoritatively *called* and *commanded* to repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is not offered to them, but Christ commands them.

This is the teaching of Scripture. In Acts 17:3 the apostle says, "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now *commandeth* all men everywhere to repent." Notice, first, that the apostle does not teach merely that preachers now command humans to repent. Rather, he says that "*God*…now commandeth all men everywhere to repent." Now certainly, God does this through the preaching of the gospel. Paul was at this time preaching in Athens. But significantly, he does not say that *preachers* now command all people everywhere to repent. He says that *God* is the one who commands people to repent.

In the second place, notice that the apostle describes the preaching of the gospel as God "*commanding* all men everywhere to repent." The gospel is not an offer, which offer may be accepted or rejected according to the will of the one to whom the offer is made. But the gospel comes to sinners as a command—God's command to repentance

to the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, and *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*.

over sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle John writes in 1 John 3:23, "And this is his *commandment*, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment." God commands us to believe on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ. As much as He commands us to love one another, He also commands us to believe in His Son, the only Savior of sinners.

Romans 10 is a very important passage of Scripture regarding the preaching of the gospel. In the chapter the apostle underscores the importance and necessity of hearing the gospel unto salvation: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (vs. 17). He teaches that in the preaching of the gospel we hear Christ Himself speak to us (vs. 14): "How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?"[18] In verse 16 he notes that "they have not all obeyed the gospel." He does not say that they have not all accepted the offer of the gospel. But he says that they have not all "obeyed" the gospel. The gospel calls for obedience, the obedience of repentance and faith.

In the preaching of the gospel, God and Christ *call* people to repentance and faith. This is the word that is used throughout Scripture for the preaching of the gospel: the *call* of the gospel. Scripture does not speak of a free or well-meant offer of the gospel, but of the call of the gospel.

Matthew 9:10 records that Jesus and His disciples dined with "many publicans and sinners." When the Pharisees observed what they regarded as reprehensible behavior, they questioned Jesus' disciples, "Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?" (vs. 11). When Jesus overheard them, He responded, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come

18 In Romans 10:14, the KJV incorrectly translates, "and how shall they believe in him *of* whom they have not heard?" The "of" should be removed from the translation. The apostle does not teach that we hear "of" or "about" Jesus Christ in the preaching of the Word. Instead, we hear Christ Himself: "and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard?" I have taken the liberty of correcting the translation.

to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (vss. 12-13). In His own words, Jesus was sent to call sinners to repentance.

In Matthew 22, Jesus tells the parable of the marriage of the king's son. According to the opening verses of the parable, the king "sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come" (vs. 3). The king "called" those who were "bidden," that is, those who were commanded to come. He did not merely send forth an invitation that the guests could accept or reject. But He called them; they were bidden to come. When they refused to come, the king sent forth his armies "and destroyed those murderers" who had abused and slain the king's servants, and "burned up their city" (vs. 7). Then he sent forth his servants and "gathered together all as many as they found…and the wedding was furnished with guests" (vs. 10). Jesus applies the parable in the well-known words of Matthew 22:14, "For many are called, but few are chosen."

In 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 the apostle Paul charges the Thessalonians "as a father doth his children, that ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory." When and how had God called the Thessalonian Christians to His kingdom and glory? Clearly the answer is, through the preaching of the apostle Paul they had been "called" into God's kingdom and the glory of His kingdom.

In contrast to those upon whom God sent strong delusion so that they believed a lie in order that they might be damned who rejected the truth and took delight in living unrighteously, the apostle gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians, whom God had "chosen…to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:11-13). He goes on to say, "Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 14). The Thessalonian believers had been "called" by the preaching of the gospel. They had not been presented with an offer that they were at liberty to accept or refuse, but they had been called. They had been summoned or commanded. And that command of the gospel, by the power of God's grace, they had obeyed.

An important truth comes out here. That truth is that God uses commands to accomplish what He commands. To put it another way, the command of God is the very means by which God realizes that which He commands. That was true in the beginning when God cre-

ated the world. According to Genesis 1:3, "And God said, Let there be light and there was light." Throughout Genesis 1, God spoke and what He spoke came into existence. The mode of creation is celebrated in Psalm 33:6 and 9, "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast." In Psalm 148:5 God's people are enjoined, "Let them praise the name of the LORD: for he commanded, and they were created." Celebrating God's creative acts by command in Romans 4:17, the apostle Paul extols God as the one "who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were."

This was the manner of our Lord's resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. Christ did not offer to raise Lazarus from the dead; Lazarus was in no position to accept or refuse such an offer. Similarly, they who are spiritually dead can neither desire to be raised to spiritual life, nor cooperate in their resurrection, nor fulfill any conditions upon which their resurrection might depend. Just as our Lord commanded Lazarus to come forth, and in obedience to that command he came forth bound hand and foot in grave clothes (John 11:43-44), so also by the command of Christ in the gospel sinners are raised up to new and heavenly life.

This applies to the preaching of the gospel. For the life and salvation of dead sinners, God does not use a helpless offer. Rather, God uses a command: "Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ!" That command God uses to work repentance over sin and create faith in Jesus Christ in dead but elect children of God. For this reason, "he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph. 5:14).

The New Testament Word for "Preach" Emphasizes the Authority of Preaching

One of the two words for preaching that are used in the New Testament emphasizes in a special way the authority of the preaching of the gospel. There are two words used in the New Testament for preaching. One of the words emphasizes the *content* of the preaching. It is a word that refers to the gospel as the announcement of good news. That is the Greek word εὐαγγελίζω, from which we get words

like "evangel," "evangelism," and "evangelize."

This word occurs frequently in the New Testament. Jesus uses this word in His first sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth in Luke 4:18. In this passage, Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 61:1-2. Applying Isaiah's prophecy to Himself, He says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me *to preach the gospel* to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised." The Lord Jesus has been sent to proclaim the good news to the poor. In Romans 1:15-16, the apostle says that he is ready "to preach the gospel" in Rome and goes on to say that he is not ashamed "of the gospel." In both instances, he uses derivatives of the Greek word for proclaiming the good news. In 1 Corinthians 9:16, the apostle expresses his commitment to his calling as a minister of the gospel: "For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel." Twice in this verse, the apostle uses the word that emphasizes the content of the gospel as the good news. This verb and its matching noun occur frequently throughout the book of Acts.

But there is another Greek word for preaching that emphasizes the *authority* of the preacher and the preaching. That is the Greek word κηρύσσω, which is derived from the noun κήρυξ. A κήρυξ was a very special kind of servant in Bible times. Usually he was the servant of a king or some other important person. He was a herald. Thayer says that a κήρυξ was "vested with public authority, who conveyed the official messages of kings, magistrates, princes, military commanders, or who gave a public summons or demand, and performed various other duties."[19]

These were the days before cell phones, the internet, texting, Twitter, and instant messaging. If the king had an important message to deliver to a certain village, he sent his herald, who ran to the village. On arriving at the village, the herald proceeded to the town square where he often mounted a raised platform and blew a trumpet. Everyone recognized the trumpet blast as the indication that the king's herald

19 Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, eleventh printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014), 346.

was among them and that he brought a message from the king. The duty of the herald was to speak the word of the king, nothing more and nothing less. Woe to those who ignored the message of the herald and despised his authority. Generally, the herald's message was good news, the good news that the king was coming to commune with his subjects. This is the word that became the designation for the preacher and for preaching in the New Testament Scriptures.

It is worthwhile to take note of a few passages of Scripture where this word is used. In Matthew 4:17, the word is used to describe the preaching of the Lord Jesus: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God." The apostle admonishes Timothy, "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2).

The preaching of the gospel is not an offer but the authoritative call to repentance and faith. That is true because preaching is the word of the King—the very word of God in Jesus Christ. The preacher is the King's herald. Jesus said that in John 10:27: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." In the preaching, the voice of the great and good Shepherd is heard.

At the same time, this is the seriousness of the preaching of the gospel. No one may shrug off the faithful preaching of the gospel by responding, "That is the opinion of one man." No one may hear a faithful preacher of Jesus Christ and react by saying, "That is his viewpoint." No one may hear a faithful exposition of God's Word, accompanied by the call to turn from his sin and believe on Jesus Christ, and make a lackadaisical or indifferent response. For what he has heard is not merely the voice of a man, but the very word of God.

The WMOG Contradicts God's Twofold Purpose in the Preaching

Our second main objection to the WMOG is that it contradicts God's twofold purpose in the preaching of the gospel.

Scripture teaches and history demonstrates that there are two fruits

or results to the preaching of the gospel. There is a positive fruit, a response of faith and obedience. But there is also a negative fruit, according to which God's Word is rejected in unbelief. This is clearly the Bible's teaching in both the Old and New Testaments. This was one of the main reasons for God's judgment on the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom, and later the nation of Judah, the southern kingdom. The last chapter of 2 Chronicles makes this plain:

> And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand." (2 Chron. 36:15-17).

Think of the rejection experienced by the faithful prophets Elijah and Elisha, or Isaiah and Jeremiah.

This was also the case with Jesus' ministry. There were those who believed His preaching and believed on Him as the promised Messiah. But there were others who rejected His preaching, despised Him as the Son of God in the flesh, plotted against Him, and finally nailed Him to a cross.

The book of Acts demonstrates that this was the experience of the apostles as well. Always there were those who believed the apostolic preaching. But there were also always those who rejected the apostles' preaching and persecuted them for the word that they preached.

Throughout history, this has been the experience of the church. This has been the fruit of the preaching in the established congregation. And this has been the fruit of the preaching in missions.

Scripture teaches not merely that there are two *results* to the preaching of the gospel, but also that this is God's *purpose* with the preaching of the gospel. This is God's design with the preaching of the Word. God intends these two results. He has determined and ordained that to the preaching of the gospel there will be two results. And if God has determined that the gospel shall not only result in the

salvation of some, but the hardening and condemnation of others, it cannot be maintained that God loves the reprobate wicked, has a desire for their salvation, and sincerely and lovingly offers salvation to them in the preaching of the gospel. Yet this is precisely the teaching of the WMOG.

We ought to see from Scripture that God intends the preaching of the gospel to accomplish His twofold purpose. God's twofold purpose in the preaching of the Word is plain from His commission of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6:9-10: "And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." Jesus quotes these words of Isaiah in Matthew 13:10-13 in His explanation to His disciples for the reason on account of which He spoke in parables. Notice that God sent the prophet, as well as His Son, to make the heart of some people fat, to make their ears heavy, to shut their eyes, and to harden their hearts, so that they do not convert and are not healed. Deliberately, God uses the prophetic word to accomplish a negative effect.

In Hosea 6:5, God says through the prophet, "Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth: and thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth." God deliberately sent His prophet to hew some people—many of the people. How can such language be reconciled with a love of God for all humans and a sincere desire of God to save all humans? It simply cannot. God attaches a negative purpose to the preaching of the Word.

The WMOG contradicts 1 Peter 2:7-9, where the apostle teaches that there are those who "stumble at the word, being disobedient." They are offended at the gospel and refuse to obey the Word by believing it. But this stumbling and disobedience, the apostle goes on to say, was something to which "they were appointed." Obviously, they were appointed *by God*. God appointed them to stumble at the Word and to disobey. Once again, it is plain that God has not only a positive purpose but also a negative purpose with the preaching of the gospel.

Another passage that teaches clearly that God has determined that there will be a twofold result to the preaching of the gospel is 2

Corinthians 2:14-16:

> Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

God always causes the faithful preacher of the gospel to triumph, no matter the fruit to his preaching. For the purpose of God is not only that the gospel is to be a sweet savour of life unto life but also a sweet savour pleasing in His nostrils when the gospel serves as a savour of death unto death. God always causes the preacher to triumph in Christ.

God has and God accomplishes a twofold purpose in the preaching of the gospel. The preaching is not a sincere offer of God to all, expressing God's desire to save everyone. But God uses the preaching of the gospel also to accomplish His eternal purpose of reprobation. In the case of the reprobate wicked, God uses the preaching of the gospel to set before them their calling to repent of their sins and believe in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He uses the preaching to harden them in their unbelief and other sins. And He uses the preaching of the gospel to leave them without excuse and make them ripe for the coming day of judgment. The teaching of the WMOG cannot be reconciled with the negative purpose of God with the preaching of the gospel.

The WMOG and Free Will

One very serious objection to the teaching of the WMOG is that it implies the teaching of free will. The free offer of the gospel implies free will.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that everyone who teaches the WMOG openly embraces the teaching of free will. The teaching of free will is that the sinner is able to exercise the freedom of his will to choose God, Christ, and salvation. The great Reformer Martin Luther identified this false teaching as the chief error of the Roman Catholic Church of his day, as did John Calvin after him. They both wrote works that defended the bondage of the will of the fallen sinner. The teaching of free will was also the teaching of the Arminians at

the time of the Synod of Dordt. They taught that, although we can do nothing to merit our salvation, we could desire to be saved. It is not the case that everyone who teaches the WMOG openly endorses free will. Many do not and would be appalled at the allegation that they are promoting free will.

But what I am contending is that those who defend the WMOG are by implication teaching the heresy of free will. Consistency demands that if they teach the free offer, they must also teach free will. If you buy one part of the package of the WMOG, you must also buy that part of the package that is the free will of the sinner.

Let me compare what I am contending to another false teaching that has made headway in Reformed and Presbyterian churches: theistic evolution. Those who defend theistic evolution change the clear teaching of Genesis 1. The "days" of Genesis 1, they contend, were not ordinary days of twenty-four hours, but rather long periods of time. Neither were these "days" necessarily successive days, one following upon the other. Adam was not immediately created by God but was the culmination of the development of a long line of ape-like creatures. Death did not enter the world on account of Adam's sin, but instead death was present from the very beginning, as one life form died off, giving way to a higher, more advanced life form.

Those who teach theistic evolution undermine the truth that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. They may not do that explicitly; but by implication they are rejecting the infallibility and authority of Scripture. Even though they claim as Christians to hold to the rule of Holy Scripture, in reality they do not. And if they were honest and consistent, they would admit this.

So, it is also with the WMOG. The teaching of the WMOG *implies* free will. Consistency demands that the proponents of the WMOG also embrace the teaching of free will. One thing is evident, that in the churches where the WMOG is accepted, the members, the people in the pew, generally hold to the teaching of free will. They see the necessary implication of the WMOG. And they generally take for granted that the Bible does indeed teach free will.

We ought clearly to understand the reason for the charge that the WMOG implies the error of free will. The teaching of the WMOG is that God loves and God desires the salvation of everyone, at least

all who come under the preaching of the gospel. He sincerely desires to save them all. And He bestows sufficient grace to enable them to accept the offer.

But if God offers salvation to all who hear the gospel and provides them all with sufficient grace to accept the offer, why do not everyone accept the offer? Clearly, humans themselves must make the difference. If they are all provided with sufficient grace, that some accept the offer must be due to their choice, their decision, the exercise of their will. And that is precisely the teaching of free will.

One cannot consistently maintain the free offer without also maintaining, if not openly then at least by necessary implication, the teaching of free will. This was one of the main reasons why the Protestant Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema alleged that the teaching of the WMOG brought Arminianism into the Reformed churches. The WMOG smuggled Arminianism into the Reformed camp in the form of free will. Those who taught the WMOG were guilty of promoting Arminian sympathies by reducing the preaching of the gospel to an offer to be accepted by the exercise of the sinner's free will.

The Reformed and Presbyterian confessions are adamant in their rejection of the heresy of free will. The interested reader can consult especially the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 9, "Of Free Will;" the Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 14, "The Creation and Fall of Man, and His Incapacity to Perform What Is Truly Good;" and the Canons of Dordt 3/4.10 and 14.

Of special interest regarding the controversy over the WMOG are the Geneva Theses of 1649.[20] The Geneva Theses were formulated especially to counteract the influence of Amyraldianism. There are five sections in these theses. Each of the sections is followed by an additional section containing rejection of errors. These sections repudiate the errors that are embraced by the contemporary proponents of the WMOG. The second section concerns predestination. Appended to this section are four errors that are rejected. The errors are to be rejected of those:

20 The Geneva Theses (1649), in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation,* volume 4, *1600-1693*, compiled and edited by James Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 413-22.

1. Who teach that in God there is granted, under the condition of faith and repentance, some good will of saving those who perish.
2. Who ascribe to God the inclination or volition or disposition or affection or less ardent love or power or intention or desire or will or counsel or decree or covenant or necessary or universal conditional loving kindness, by which He wills each and every man to be saved if they believe in Christ.
3. Who assign to God a design previous to election in which He determined to be merciful to the whole human race without limit.
4. Who attribute to God a twofold loving-kindness, one clear or first and universal by which He willed each and every person to be saved: the other more clear, second, and particular towards the elect.

The third section of the Geneva Theses concerns Christ's redemption. At the end of this section, the error is rejected of those:

> Who teach that Christ died for each and every one sufficiently, not merely by reason of worth, but also by reason of intention; or for all conditionally, if they were to believe; or who assert that Scripture teaches that Christ died for all men universally; and most especially the places of Scripture (Ezek. 18:21 etc. and 31:11; John 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9) ought to be extended to each and every man and by these the universality of love and grace ought to be proved.

Two things are worth noting in this rejection of error. The first is the rejection of any teaching that universalizes grace, that there is a "love and grace" of God towards all men. Second, it is noteworthy that the first two passages that are referenced by those who universalize grace are Ezekiel 18:21-23 and 31:11. These passages were the very ones cited by the CRC Synod of 1924 in support of the WMOG.

Section four of the Geneva Theses concerns humanity's disposition to grace. Two errors are rejected. The errors are rejected of those:

1. Who teach a universal and common call to all men to salvation and to the author of salvation; and (who teach) that each and every man, if he wishes, is able to believe and be saved.
2. Who teach that by His revealed disposition, God wills the salvation of each and every one.

It ought to be clear that the Geneva Theses of 1649 effectively

repudiate the main tenets of the WMOG: a general love of God that desires the salvation of all who come under the preaching of the gospel, "some good will of saving those who perish," and that "each and every man, if he wishes, is able to believe and be saved." If the CRC had been aware of its creedal heritage and the consensus of the Reformed church of the past, the WMOG would never have been given a place in the teaching of that denomination.

Conclusion

A few matters by way of conclusion. First, denial of the WMOG does not make missions impossible, any more than it prevents the call to repentance and faith in the established congregation. This is often alleged against those who repudiate the WMOG. Indeed, the error of hyper-Calvinism, the error at the other extreme of those who are inconsistent Arminian-Calvinists, is a real error, not simply an imaginary boogeyman. The PRCA have frequently been charged with this error. But the PRCA oppose the error of hyper-Calvinism as vigorously as they oppose the error of the WMOG. A plague on both houses!

We call everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and believe on Jesus Christ for their salvation. In obedience to the will of God, Protestant Reformed ministers and missionaries are able to preach to the unconverted, as well as to issue the ongoing call to repentance to the people of God. And we are confident that God uses the command actually to work repentance and faith in the hearts of the elect.

Secondly, it is our view that the command in the preaching of the gospel works repentance and faith in God's elect actually gives us confidence in our preaching. The preaching of a weak, powerless, ineffectual offer cannot inspire confidence in preaching. Even then, the effectiveness of the preaching does not depend on the fine rhetoric or the powerful personality of the preacher. But our confidence in preaching is that God is pleased to use the preaching of the gospel to gather His elect. That is not His only purpose, but it is His main purpose. Through the preaching, God is pleased to gather the elect in their generations. And through the preaching, He is pleased to gather the elect in their generations out of the nations of the world.

Thirdly, our rejection of the WMOG does not mean that we cannot proclaim the gospel passionately. We can and we must. How can any

faithful preacher proclaim the gospel in any other way? How can he possibly proclaim the gospel lifelessly, coldly, or matter-of-factly? No, a thousand times no! We preach the gospel earnestly, beseeching those to whom we preach to repent of their sins and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. That was the attitude of the apostle Paul, as he indicates in 2 Corinthians 5:20: "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." This sentiment is echoed in Q&A 159 of the Westminster Larger Catechism:

> Q. 159. *How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?*
> A. They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.[21]

21 *The Westminster Standards: The Doctrinal Standards of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church and The Presbyterian Church in America* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 2007), 62.

Neo-Calvinism: The Error of the Second Point

Barrett Gritters

Introduction

I was not always onboard with those opponents of common grace in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) who, it seemed to me, were concerned about very little else. That is not to say that I ever embraced the doctrine of common grace, for I was well taught in catechism and seminary what it was all about. I understood and agreed with the PRCA's opposition. But it is to say that I did not think incessant pounding of that drum was necessary. I imagined that there were bigger fish to fry, and that in our opposition to the old error of common grace it would probably suffice a PRCA minister to remind his flock of their history when occasion permitted and perhaps devote a few lessons to it in catechism for the youth.

My convictions could not have shifted more dramatically. That is not to say that I do not see any other fish to fry now, for there are, and some whoppers. But it is to say that I have come to see the doctrine of common grace presently driving one of the most dangerous enterprises that is doing incalculable damage to, and disfiguring, the church of Christ. I refer to the enterprise called "neo-Calvinism." In my estimation, that is a big fish. I will explain that more fully in the second part of this article, but my reasons, if I may state them now briefly, include that neo-Calvinists appear to be far less interested in the church institute than in the restoration of creation, and less focused on gospel-preaching to convert unbelievers than on politics and social matters to bring about neo-Calvinism's vision of shalom. This is a strong indictment early in this article and will need to be proven and not just asserted. The point I will make is that what drives neo-Calvinism is the doctrine of *common grace*.

To be clear, I do not believe that eliminating the doctrine of common grace would suffice to eliminate the enterprise of neo-Calvinism. But I do believe that if the doctrine of common grace were not taught with such widespread vigor, the impetus that neo-Calvinism has today would be far less; and that, if the doctrine of common grace had

not been given the prominent place it was given 100-150 years ago, neo-Calvinism might not have come into existence at all.

The doctrine of common grace—in particular that of the second point—is ubiquitous. It has reached critical mass in Reformed and Presbyterian churches and the chain reaction has been triggered. That history follows, briefly.

Early on, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the doctrine worked its way relatively slowly into English-speaking Reformed denominations, mostly of Dutch background, through two main means. First, common grace entered Reformed churches of Dutch immigrants in the United States and Canada through the writings of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. Kuyper and Bavinck are considered the "fathers" of the doctrine of common grace and, second only to John Calvin, the heavyweights in Reformed theological circles. Most prominent among Kuyper's writings is his *Lectures on Calvinism* (commonly known as the Stone Lectures) at Princeton Seminary in 1898, in which he promoted the culture-forming and culture-transforming purposes of common grace. These lectures were available immediately for the English-speaking world.[1] In addition, Bavinck's writings, especially his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, promoted common grace doctrine, although his works were of lesser influence because they mostly remained in the Dutch language.

Second, the doctrine of common grace spread through the philosophy of two other Dutchmen who taught at Kuyper's Free University from the 1920s to the 1960s: Herman Dooyeweerd and his brother-in-law Dirk Vollenhoven.[2] Their philosophy was heavily promoted by two Canadian bodies: the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship (AACS) and the related Institute for Christian Studies (ICS). In part through these organizations, Dooyeweerdian

1 *Lectures on Calvinism* was available in print already in 1899. For the explanation of how this *Dutchman's* lectures were both presented in English and then published in *English*, see the Reformed Forum's podcast with George Harinck, https://reformedforum.org/podcasts/ctc744/, accessed March 11, 2025.

2 Dooyeweerd's influence in promoting neo-Calvinism's common grace is noted by Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), xviii, xix, 4, 10.

philosophy and Kuyperian common grace became part of the DNA of the Reformed Christian colleges in the United States and Canada that were established by Dutch immigrants: most notably Calvin College (now University, in Grand Rapids, MI), Dordt College (now University, in Sioux Center, IA), Redeemer College (now University, in Toronto, ON), and Trinity Christian College (Palos Heights, IL). The curriculum of these colleges included the required readings of the disciples of these Dutchmen and their theologies, popularized by engaging teachers like Richard Mouw at Calvin College. All this in the 1970s through the late 1990s.

More recently, the speed of embracing Kuyper's common grace doctrine has been accelerated by English translations of both Kuyper and Bavinck. Kuyper's works have been translated into English and his common grace doctrine is promoted at the scholarly level by various Kuyper foundations, such as Kuyper College and the Acton Institute, and on the popular level by writers such as Richard Mouw.[3] Even more popular are Bavinck's works. They have been and are being translated, beginning with his influential and orthodox *Reformed Dogmatics*.[4]

Such is Bavinck's current influence that a Bavinck Institute has been created at Calvin Theological Seminary to sponsor lectures and to publish books as well as an annual scholarly journal, *The Bavinck Review*. According to its website, the Institute's aim is to promote Herman Bavinck's writings, those of his nephew J. H. Bavinck, and "his neo-Calvinist contemporaries such as Abraham Kuyper."[5] Neo-Calvinism plays first chair in the Institute.

The translation of these Dutch fathers' books has created an appetite for other books promoting the doctrine of common grace, with the main purpose being the promotion of neo-Calvinism. One of the more recent important scholarly books is Cory Brock's and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto's *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction.*

3 For example, Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); and *All That God Cares About: Common Grace and Divine Delight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020).

4 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008).

5 https://www.bavinckinstitute.org, accessed March 11, 2025.

The authors claim that the main purpose of maintaining the doctrine of common grace is the worldview of neo-Calvinism.[6] "It is hard to overemphasize," they say, the significance of "neo-Calvinism's theology of common grace."[7] In this article, I reflect largely on this work and that claim.

So I return to my opening admission and freely confess as error my earlier opinion that common grace doctrine was probably an "error of the old" but not of "the new day,"[8] and that Protestant Reformed ministers could best serve God's people by focusing on other errors. But, just as Brock and Sutanto cannot overemphasize the place of common grace for neo-Calvinism's theology, I cannot overemphasize the paradigm-shifting character of common grace in Reformed churches today. Common grace doctrine changes everything for life in the church and Christian activity.

In this article I examine the second point of common grace, especially as it is one great engine that fuels neo-Calvinism.

The PRCA's Historic Objection to the Second Point

First, however, we do well to remember the PRCA's *original* objections to the second point of common grace. The second point alleges that God *graciously* restrains sin in the unbeliever and in society generally.

In order to simplify our understanding of the three points (perhaps for those unfamiliar with the debate and controversy), and to put the second point in context of the three, I offer a Gritters-Revised-Version of the three points of common grace.[9]

The first point is c*ommon favor*. God has a favorable attitude towards everyone, not only to the elect. Proof of this first point was

6 Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism,* 13.

7 Brock and Sutanto, 24.

8 In the Dutch Reformed Form for Installation of Professors of Theology, the instructors are commissioned to caution students "in regard to the errors and heresies of the old, but especially of the new day." See *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: The Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 297.

9 For the official decision in Dutch, as well as an unofficial English translation of the three points, see the Heritage Hall at Calvin University's Hekman Library, online at: https://library.calvin.edu/hh/acts-of-synod#1910-1928.

twofold. First, the good gifts God gives to the reprobate ungodly show that He favors all, reprobate included. Second, the so-called well-meant offer of the gospel to all, in which God expresses a gracious desire that all who hear the gospel be saved, shows that He favors all, reprobate included.

The second point is *gracious restraint.* God graciously restrains sin in the ungodly person and in society so that some of mankind's original goodness is preserved.

The third point is *good works*. As a result of this gracious restraint, the ungodly are able to perform good works in the realm of society. These works are called "civil good," but they are really *good*, not only in our eyes but acceptable and pleasing to God.

This article's emphasis is on the second point. The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) stated the second point as follows:

> Relative to the second point, which is concerned with the restraint of sin in the life of the individual man and in the community, the synod declares that there is such a restraint of sin according to Scripture and the Confession…God by the general operations of His Spirit, without renewing the heart of man, restrains the unimpeded breaking out sin, by which human life in society remains possible.[10]

Two things should be understood about the second point. First, this restraint checks and restrains the corruption of sin in the human nature "in such a way that a remnant of the original goodness in the state of righteousness is constantly preserved in it."[11]

Second, and this is key, this restraint is *gracious*. The point itself does not say so, but the context of the point makes that clear, for the

10 This translation is from Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine* (n.p., 1936), 346. The CRC's English Translation is: "concerning the restraint of sin in the life of individuals and in society, Synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confessions there is such a restraint of sin," consisting of this, "that God through the general operation of His Spirit, without renewing the heart, restrains sin in its unbridled expression through which remains possible, a societal relationship…" (*Acts of Synod 1924 of the CRC*, trans. Henry De Mots), 146.

11 Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches,* 348.

main heading of the subject in 1924 was "common grace." These are three points of common grace. That is, God's restraint of sin in people and in society is evidence of His favorable (*gracious*) attitude toward those people and toward that society.

This explanation of the CRC was based largely on the teachings of Kuyper and Bavinck and is the essence of the teachings of their disciples today.

According to Brock and Sutanto, Kuyper taught *three dimensions* of this gracious restraint of sin: "Absolute sin was curbed in *the human heart*. Complete death was curbed in *the human body*. The universal curse was curbed in *nature*."[12] In his *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kuyper asserts the importance of this restraint by referring to it as one side of a "great principle." Calvinism "has at once placed to the front the great principle that there is a particular grace which works salvation, and also a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, *relaxes the curse* which rests upon it, *arrests its process of corruption*…"[13] Sin "is a deadly quick-acting poison that if unrestrained immediately leads to spiritual, temporal, and eternal death."[14]

So important is this second point of common grace that Brock and Sutanto present Kuyper as teaching that the "entire doctrine of common grace is built" on common grace's teaching of restraint.[15] Later they say that the "benevolence of God arrests the potency of sin and preserves much of the goods of the original creation unto the kingdom of God."[16] Thus, "the restraint of ruin that lurks within sin" is the "first purpose" of this "temporal grace."[17]

Thus far my brief explanation of the second point.

The PRCA's rejection of the gracious restraint of sin is not a denial that God restrains sin, either in the sinner or in society. He does. Without speaking for the PRCA, I personally am willing to go even further (believing that this going further does not threaten Reformed orthodoxy) and say that at times God even restrains sin by the Holy Spirit, and by the Spirit even in a person's heart, that is, stopping

12 In Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism,* 220.

13 In Brock and Sutanto, 24. Italics added.

14 In Brock and Sutanto, 25.

15 In Brock and Sutanto, 25.

16 In Brock and Sutanto, 215.

17 In Brock and Sutanto, 218.

him internally even before external restraints are at play. I think, for example, of Proverbs 21:1, where God is said to turn the king's heart "withersoever he wills." Of course, the PRCA do not go so far as to say that God *always* restrains sin actively and directly. Herman Hoeksema rightly warned about confusing the Holy Spirit's work with that of the policeman. But to my main point here: Protestant Reformed theology holds that God *does* restrain sin (and I say that sometimes He may even do that by His Spirit *within* a person). Protestant Reformed theologians have always tried to make this clear, because it is a misrepresentation that the PRCA's rejection of common grace is a denial that God restrains sin.

This needs brief demonstration. In his *Sin and Grace,* Hoeksema says, "God's government very really controls sins. Not every sinful inclination or desire comes to manifestation in an evil deed."[18] When Herman Hanko explains Hoeksema's theology, he reminds the reader: "Hoeksema did not deny a restraint of sin. But he found restraint of sin in God's providence, as God controlled and directed all the circumstances of the lives of people. Restraint of sin was not grace…. Sin is restrained outwardly by all the circumstances of life which are determined and executed by the decree of God's providence."[19] Hanko repeats, "the second point, which deals with the restraint of sin, can stand the test of orthodoxy if permitted to stand by itself. There is an element of truth in this."[20]

But the PRCA deny that this restraint is an act of *grace* to the reprobate in an attitude of *favor* towards him, or that this restraint checks further corruption of a remnant of good allegedly left in one's nature. Positively, the PRCA assert that sin develops, grows, matures, under the judgment of God. Speaking practically, they contend that in preaching and witnessing to the unbeliever it must be said, in love, "If God's providence does restrain you from doing worse than you have done, it is not God's grace to you, but His favor towards His people. And if you desire any favor of God toward you, you must

18 Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 139.

19 Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the PRC* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 94, 95.

20 Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake,* 96.

find it by faith in His Son, for apart from Jesus the curse of the Lord is in your house (Prov. 3:33). There is no peace for the wicked (Isa. 48:22; 57:21)." No unbeliever—destined for eternal condemnation in his unbelief—may imagine that he is the object of God's favor. A journal article is not a sermon, but how can one refrain from making the vital, practical application of this theological point?

Thus far, a brief summary of the PRCA's historical objection to the second point.

What Errors the Doctrine of the Second Point Drives Today

But the purpose of this article is more than to remind us of the PRCA's old objections to this error. Such a reminder of the old objections will enable PRCA members to explain (not simply justify) their separate existence some one hundred years after the theological controversy. A lengthier reminder may even help vindicate the PRCA for the theological position she took some one hundred years ago.[21]

But my purpose is neither to justify the PRCA's existence nor to vindicate her doctrine, but rather to show how today the doctrine of common grace is so alive and so well, unto the hurt of Christ's church. We do not want our coming generations to imagine that common grace was dangerous one hundred years ago but poses no threat to them today. It is my estimation that the threat is even greater today than it ever has been, especially when our young people attend the Christian colleges and universities mentioned above where this doctrine has full

21 As to vindication, we are very thankful for Dr. John Bolt's efforts in the past twenty-three years. He has done a great service to the PRCA by showing both how Hoeksema and Danhof were treated unjustly (from Hoeksema's point of view) and treated unwisely (from the CRC's point of view) and also how Hoeksema may have been right on the three points of 1924. Bolt defends Hoeksema in many respects, both church politically and theologically, even when Bolt does not agree with him completely See John Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 no. 1 (April 2000): 7-36; Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part I" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (November 2022): 271-312; and Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part II" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 58, no. 2 (November 2023): 265-304.

control, and when our young people have friendly relations with other Christian young people who have been taught these doctrines in their high schools and these Christian universities. This doctrine is found in almost all Reformed churches—conservative and liberal—to one degree or another. And my prayer is that this article will help some in these churches to keep the error at bay, or root it out altogether.

The second point of common grace helps drive many errors today, such as weakening of the antithesis (a fear of which the CRC gave voice to already in 1924), and an earthly-mindedness that cuts the nerve of our hope for heaven and the soon-coming again of the Lord. But these errors and others are related to the one I see at the center of them: common grace redefines the central purposes of God and of His church in the world. This is the enterprise of neo-Calvinism—to turn the attention of believers from being *ecclesio*-centric to being *cosmos*-centric. Less and less attention goes to church, and more and more attention to world—its renewal and transformation.

For the newcomer to this discussion, a brief note regarding the term may be helpful. *Neo-Calvinism* simply means "new Calvinism." But neo-Calvinism as a movement does not aim at a renewal of *old* Calvinism, a return to Calvin's theology that has been downgraded or lost, but at a Calvinism that is *new,* at least for our day. Neo-Calvinism's intent is to emphasize what its proponents consider neglected aspects of Calvin's thought in areas of politics and social activity. Neo-Calvinists would contend that Calvin's heirs have properly and sufficiently emphasized his theological thought but have failed to do justice to his political and social thought. Thus, the new Calvinism studies the application of Calvin's views to today's society, culture, and political activity. Culture can be redeemed; societal structures can be Christianized. What Calvin attempted in Geneva Christians must attempt in their own country.

James Bratt, a proponent of neo-Calvinism, and one to whom Brock and Sutanto appeal, speaks enthusiastically of their efforts to "baptize whole cultures as 'Christian'"[22] And George Harinck notes

22 In Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism,* 24. Bratt puts *Christian* in quotation marks, and Brock and Sutanto try to salvage what they might judge to be Bratt's overstatement of the case. But the difference between *Christian* and "*Christian"* ought to be recognized and admitted as being the

that neo-Calvinism "is appreciated…for its engagement with culture and society, where theology seems to play a minor role and where the public role of the institutional church is limited or absent."[23] Brock and Sutanto describe neo-Calvinism as focusing on one of the four dimensions of God's "re-creative" work. God's re-creation of all things occurs in four stages. Neo-Calvinism does not focus on the first stage: the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus; nor on the second: the re-creation of the self, which is regeneration and the application of Christ's victory to the elect; nor on the fourth, which is the second coming of Christ. Rather, it focuses on the third: the re-creation of the "goods of the spheres," by which they mean *outside* the sphere of the church where the concern is for the re-creation of the self. The "goods of the spheres" are "all those life spheres that exist in society" and the "Christian life is exhibited in the work to sanctify those spheres."[24]

Neo-Calvinism's patriarchs emphasize the "goods of the spheres." Kuyper describes these spheres as state and politics, culture, family, art, public charity, and business. The "life of the re-created Christian can…serve the good of each of these spheres of existence."[25]

World Transformation as the Mission of God

On the practical level, neo-Calvinism plays out in terms of two related concepts. Even though neo-Calvinism is more than these two, for the purpose of this article I concentrate on these two.

The first concept is *world transformation*. Synonyms of world transformation are world renewal, societal redemption, cultural transformation. Because God is in the business of transforming the world, Christians must consider it their business.

Brock and Sutanto complain that it is only at the "popular level" that neo-Calvinism has become associated with and even becomes a synonym of "transformationalism (a public theology defining the mission of the church as social as much as evangelical)."[26] But when

difference between *Christian* and *not*-Christian, and not some lesser form of true Christianity.

23 George Harinck, "Foreword," in Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism,* xv.

24 Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism,* 159.

25 In Brock and Sutanto, 160.

26 Brock and Sutanto, 4.

it comes to doing theology, the theologian must be *most* concerned with the popular level—not first of all with other theologians but with the people of God at the ground level of their everyday living.

To come back to the point: neo-Calvinism has driven the thinking that the Christian's calling is to engage in world transformation on the basis of God's common grace.

Second, on the practical level, neo-Calvinism relates to the concept *missio Dei*. The Latin *missio Dei* means "the mission of God." Among theologians, and especially among missiologists, *missio Dei* refers to God's mission to restore the world to its original, creational form, with its original, creational purposes where shalom exists in justice and goodness in every sphere. In terms of the church's calling in the world, because God's mission must be the Christian's mission, the *missio Dei* tasks the church with bringing the world back to its original creational form and activity. The CRC defined the *missio Dei* in 1997: "the goal of God's mission is…the establishment and acknowledgement of his rule over all creation in our present age and for all eternity"[27].

Neo-Calvinism, then, using this definition, distinguishes between *missions* (in the plural) as evangelism to bring sinners to Christ and membership in the church—the old Calvinism; and *mission* (in the singular) as world renewal, redeeming society, preserving or restoring creation structures—the new Calvinism.

To sum up, world transformation and the *missio Dei* are similar concepts with different names, both expressing neo-Calvinism's main purposes.

One of the most important books on missions late last century was David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of*

27 *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 2001), 401 (emphasis added). For other treatments of the concept, see Paul Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist, Johann Herman Bavinck, 1895-1941* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), chapter 6; and David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1980), chapter 23, "Missio Dei," where he asserts that the concept was introduced at the Willingen conference in 1952.

Mission.[28] A paradigm shift is a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions. Bosch, a South African missiologist, suggests that there have been fundamental changes in various churches' view of their mission calling. The paradigm shift is from missions considered as gospel preaching for gathering God's sheep into the church, to missions (or "mission") as earthly efforts to renew creation. Writing in 1991, Bosch agrees with the noted missions historian, Stephen Neill, who had said already in 1966 that "the age of *missions* is at an end; the age of *mission* has begun."[29] Bosch believes that this new understanding of "mission as *missio Dei* has been embraced by virtually all Christian persuasions."[30]

Before I show that this paradigm shift is explained by the doctrine of common grace, I note one other important definition in neo-Calvinism.

The Kingdom of God

I have shown in other places that the church's old view of the kingdom basically identified kingdom with church.[31] The kingdom was the church, and the kingdom purposes of God regarded the church's welfare, especially church as institute. That kingdom concept included both *realm* and *rule*: the realm was the church, and the rule was Christ's gracious power exercised there. "Realm and rule" are from Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 48, where the Reformed confession teaches that the prayer "Thy kingdom come" is a petition, first, that God would "…*rule* us so by thy word and Spirit"; and second, that He would "preserve and increase [His] church." Thus, the central work of God in the world from start to finish, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, is that "the Son of God from the beginning to

28 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

29 Quoted in John Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part II": 293. Emphasis added.

30 Bosch, *Transforming Missions*, 390.

31 Barry L. Gritters, "Doing (Material) Good to All Men," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 38, no. 1 (Nov. 2004): 19-42. Although I have taken this view since 2004, these next two sections are enriched by John Bolt's recent article, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part I."

the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to Himself by his Spirit and word…a church chosen to everlasting life."[32] So the Westminster Confession can say, "the visible church is…the kingdom."[33]

Indeed, although kingdom and church are not identical in every respect, they are essentially the same, looking at the same reality from different perspectives. Thus, Scripture allows us to say that the kingdom of Israel was God's Old Testament church, and that the New Testament church of Christ is God's kingdom (Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9; Ex. 19:6).

Louis Berkhof judged that the Reformers "agreed in identifying it [the kingdom] with the invisible Church"[34] as Calvin did in his comments on Amos 9:13. Although R. E. Nixon criticizes the church father Augustine for "institutionalizing the concept of the kingdom by identifying it with the church," his criticism reveals what he saw as Augustine's view of the kingdom.[35] The historic view makes kingdom and church almost identical realities.[36]

Understood in this way, all the elements of a kingdom fit in the church. In God's kingdom the king is not any earthly magistrate, but King Jesus. Admission into this kingdom is not by natural birth, but by

32 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 104.

33 Westminster Confession 25.2, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), 108.

34 Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 24.

35 R. E. Nixon, "The Kingdom of God," in *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 568. Mark Gornik repeats the criticism in *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 24, where he says that Augustine gave the world too incidental a role, and the church too central a role, "especially if he is taken to conflate the church with the city of God."

36 For more on the spiritual nature of the kingdom and the identification of church and kingdom, see Ronald Hanko, "Kingdom and Church in 'Christian' Reconstruction," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 32, no. 1: 29-68, and the following works of David Engelsma: *Christianizing the World: Reformed Calling or Ecclesiastical Suicide* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2016); *The Kingdom of God* (Grandville, MI: Evangelism Committee of Southwest PRC, 2002); and *Christ's Spiritual Kingdom: A Defense of Reformed Amillennialism* (Redlands, CA: The Reformed Witness, 2001).

the spiritual rebirth of regeneration. So the Belgic Confession speaks of the subjects of the king as members of the *church* (Article 27). The power of His kingdom is not military or political, but sweet and irresistible grace, imparted by gospel preaching and teaching. According to the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 31) the kingdom's keys are spiritual—the preaching of the gospel and Christian discipline. Her rulers and protectors are duly ordained elders, whose keys open and shut the kingdom's gates. Her educators are preachers and parents; and the church's deacons are her "social workers." Her constitution is the Word of God, and her treasures are the rich blessings of Jesus Christ. Scripture says, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 14:17).

Thus, for many centuries, and not merely in a period of decline after the Reformation, the prayer that God's kingdom would come was not a prayer that He rule the world or restore creation, but that He gather His people into His church and rule them by His Word and Spirit. For these many centuries, the Reformed Christian understood that, although he must be faithful in his earthly life and earthly citizenship, his primary calling was to promote the kingdom of God in the church.

If this were not an accurate description of the church's *former* view of the kingdom, it would be very difficult to understand Bosch's reference to a paradigm shift. But Bosch and his colleagues who agree with him acknowledge the church's shifting vision of her mission-calling to be a paradigm shift. Focus has turned from gospel preaching that aims to turn unbelievers into believers and faithful church members to politics and social work that aims to Christianize nations and renew the world. That focus shift could happen when kingdom, which formerly was "church," now becomes "world." More than a few scholars have noticed the change[37] but most notably and recently John Bolt. In his 2022 reflections on the CRC Synod of 1924 and its teaching of common grace Bolt helpfully outlines the change, connects it to the

37 In his analysis of J. H. Bavinck's missiology, Paul Visser writes that the ecumenical gatherings for missions after the Willingen Conference of 1952 gradually shifted the thinking that missions was for planting churches, to the mind that missions was for the coming of the kingdom, but that J. H. Bavinck rejected this shift. See Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World,* 98, 218.

broader movement of "progressive modern theology" that made the *mission dei* the "dominant missiological paradigm," and connects it all to his call for the CRC to re-examine their doctrine of common grace.[38]

To make clear what this change is, in the past church and kingdom could be illustrated by making both concepts to be concentric circles that have not only a common *center* but almost identical *radii*. The new view makes *kingdom* a circle with a lengthy radius within which is *church*, a circle with short radius. The small church is limited to the people of God and the re-creation of their souls, whereas the large kingdom extends to the re-creation of everything. The church is the body of Jesus Christ comprised of believers redeemed by His cross and their children. The kingdom is outside of the church, in creation. The activity of the church includes worship, preaching, sacraments, discipline—the work of elders and deacons, preachers and missionaries with a view to the salvation and preservation of souls—things spiritual. The activity of the kingdom involves everything else: politics, society, economy, business, science, art—things physical. Thus, kingdom is primary, church is secondary, even demoted in status by calling her a "sign" of the kingdom.[39] As Bolt puts it, this new thinking "involves an intentional shift of attention away from the church and the salvation of individual persons toward the world."[40]

The neo-Calvinist finds support in both Kuyper and Bavinck: "everything earthly, insofar as it is cleansed and consecrated through Christ, constitutes the kingdom of God."[41] Brock and Sutanto explain Bavinck to mean that "…the church is not itself the kingdom of God, but the means for preparing for, and witnessing to, the kingdom."[42]

Common Grace's Restraint of Sin Drives This Kingdom View

Thus, the *church* is established and maintained by special grace, whose origin is the cross of Christ and whose recipients are only God's elect; and the *kingdom* is established and maintained by common grace, whose origin is not the cross (lest limited or particular atonement be

38 Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924, Part II": 292-97.

39 Gornik, *To Live in Peace,* 91, 102.

40 Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924, Part II": 296.

41 Bavinck, in Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism*, 162.

42 Brock and Sutanto, 162.

denied), and whose recipient is everyone, elect and reprobate alike.

In this common grace God restrains sin in society and preserves some of His original righteousness in everyone in order that His work of establishing His kingdom may take place. The church is not unimportant, for she is, as was said, both a *sign* of the kingdom ("Observe the church: governed by God's law, orderly, just, gracious. This is what the kingdom should look like!") and an *instrument* for the promotion of the kingdom ("Go into the world to fulfill the Creation Mandate, to subdue the earth"). But the kingdom is God's main and crowning work, energized primarily by common grace.

In one of the familiar passages in his *Lectures on Calvinism,* Kuyper asserts that "great principle that there is a *particular grace* which works salvation, and also a *common grace* by which God... relaxes the curse which rests upon it [the world], arrests its process of corruption and thus allows the untrammeled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator."[43]

So Brock and Sutanto explain: "…the benevolence of God [common grace] arrests the potency of sin and preserves much of the goods of the original creation unto the kingdom of God."[44] The "temporal grace" of God has as its "*first purpose*…'the restraint of ruin that lurks within sin.'"[45]

Theological and Exegetical Weaknesses

What remains is to outline a few of the objections we have to this view of neo-Calvinism.

First, neo-Calvinism improperly extends God's gracious *kingdom rule outside of the church.*

In defense of this extension, appeal is made to David's kingdom and reign—as type of Christ's—that extended more broadly than did the boundaries of Old Testament Israel. According to Psalm 72:8, the boundaries would reach "from sea to sea." The interpretation of this

43 Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 30.

44 Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism*, 215.

45 Brock and Sutanto, 218 (emphasis added); the imbedded quote is from Kuyper.

history as *type* is to extend the boundaries of Christ's New Testament gracious kingdom reign more broadly than the church institute.

The response to this contains two parts.

First, the extending of the kingdom from "sea to sea" is a prophecy, not of the common grace work of God outside of the church, but of the *catholicity* of the church. The church extends "from sea to sea" when it breaks the bounds of the nation of the Jews and the physical descendants of Abraham. The citizens of the kingdom no longer are limited (as they were almost exclusively) to Abraham's physical seed, but now extend to his spiritual seed who come from all nations.

Second, the kingdom of David and Solomon did extend beyond the boundaries of the national Jews, from the Euphrates to Egypt, where unbelievers and idolaters were under David's control. So David's dominion was indeed an extensive dominion and did typify Christ's. About this dominion, however, note:

1. It was a dominion of power and not of grace, corresponding to the classic Reformed distinction between Christ's *regnum potentia* and his *regnum gratia*.[46]
2. Those outside of the nation of Israel came under the *power and authority* of David and Solomon, but to receive their *blessings and favor* these Gentiles must become members of the nation, the church. Even though Israel's physical prosperity perhaps spilled over to these nations, these physical gifts were not the favor or blessing of God (see Psalms 37 and 73, where the psalmist expressed how he learned that the material wealth of his wicked neighbor was in fact not a sign of God's favor).
3. The nation of Israel—God's people—always remained antithetically distinct from these other nations (Deut. 33:28: "Israel then

46 It is a mistake to scuttle this classic distinction for the distinction between Christ's rule *de facto* (over those who willingly submit to it) and his rule *de jure* (over those who do not). For Christ is King *de facto* and *de jure* over all His creatures, whether one acknowledges it or not. For an instance of the wrong distinction, see "The Grand Rapids Report on Evangelism and Social Responsibility," in *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989*, ed. John Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 189.

shall dwell in safety alone").

4. The relationship between the two was that these nations existed for the sake of Israel as the Old Testament church. Tribute was levied upon them so that Israel could prosper, so the kingdom and true people of God could be rich. Thus, if an Israelite on the outer boundary of the kingdom was interested in the real welfare of his neighbor across the field (and he should be!), he would proselytize him, that is, bring him into the nation of Israel so that he would receive the true goodness of the kingdom through the worship of Israel's God through the sacrifice God required. The corresponding reality of this in the New Testament will be clear. At the end of the day, the believer says to his neighbor, "The fashion of this world passes away. And besides, what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Our pilgrim hope is in Jesus Christ; our real prosperity is in the gospel; our genuine freedom is as His people. To have this, I humbly call you to believe in Jesus Christ. If you remain in unbelief (and I pray you do not!), you will perish under His wrath.

Second, one makes hermeneutical and exegetical mistakes when looking at Scripture with these common grace and kingdom lenses.

A common but relatively new interpretation of Jeremiah 29:7 uses the text to justify "kingdom building" outside of the church. Addressing the Jews in Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah calls them to "seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace."

Missiologist Mark Gornik is representative when he finds in this passage one of the most powerful mandates to call Christians to their duty of reclaiming *cities* so that these cities may be part of God's kingdom. For Gornik, whose book subtitle (*Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*) is indicative of his missiological perspective, Jeremiah 29 is a call to "redeem the city," to engage in God's project of "the renewal of the community," to be involved in a "non-violent social resistance." Although he concedes it might be an "over-reading" of the text, Gornik approves of John H. Yoder's translation of the text

as, "Seek the salvation of the culture to which God has sent you."[47]

None of the older Reformed or Presbyterian commentators that I have read find any mandate in the passage for promoting the idea of, or hoping for a change in, the cities of *Babylon*. The passage does not call the captive Jews to seek to transform (even develop) Babylon into the kingdom of God.

Instead, throughout Scripture Babylon is always the inveterate and incurable enemy of God's people that is not won over by the church but continually threatens to destroy the church and is herself destroyed in the end. The passage does not call Israel to hope for Babylon's transformation or to pin any hopes on Babylon's change, for the concern of the Lord as He conveys this message to His people is not Babylon, but *the church in Babylon*. A study of the context indicates that the people of God in captivity might be tempted to subvert the rulers in Babylon or to live in a revolutionary spirit toward Babylon. But because the Lord's judgment on Israel required that they remain in captivity for seventy years, the people must settle in there, marry there, have children and build houses there. And in order for Israel, the Old Testament church, to do that and prosper, Babylon herself must not be at war and in turmoil: "for" if she is troubled, you will be troubled, but if she is at peace, you will be at peace. Thus the call: Pray for the peace of Babylon; even seek her welfare.

In New Testament terms, the call to the people of God is this: "Although you are only pilgrims in the world, and you must pin your hopes on heaven, you must live in the world. Therefore, pray that there might be peace in the world. And as you do so, remember that the purposes of God remain in the welfare of His beloved church." This explanation of Jeremiah 29 conforms to the reason that Paul, in the New Testament, gives to Timothy for prayers for civil rulers: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Tim. 2:1,2).

The purpose of these prayers for the welfare of civil authorities is "that" (purpose clause) *the church* may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. Timothy and his congregation may

47 Gornik, *To Live in Peace,* 104, 105.

have imagined that their shalom lay in the destruction of the world. Ultimately it did. But until Christ returns, the church's welfare usually is promoted by the existence of a peaceful empire. And her hope is not in the transformation of Rome or Greece, but in the salvation of God's elect who would be called to come out of these perishing nations and join the kingdom that would endure.

Most helpful in this discussion is a study of Jesus' own ministry, and specifically His very first activity after His public ordination by baptism. Driven into the wilderness to be tempted of the Devil, Jesus would learn what must govern His mind and ministry, what was and was not His task as Jehovah's servant. The first temptation, which by being first becomes the temptation that lies at the heart of all Jesus' temptations, was the temptation to transform His surroundings from a barren wilderness into a food-rich and, therefore, independent and strong society. "Jesus, if you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread!" A simplistic understanding of this temptation, with very little application for the rest of Jesus' ministry as well as for the church today, has as Jesus's great struggle the temptation to satisfy His own hunger when God is more pleased when He goes without. Although Jesus' great hunger after fasting for forty days, and thus His desire to eat, was an aspect of it, this was not merely a temptation for Jesus to eat when He was supposed to fast, but a temptation to turn the barren and hungry wilderness into an inexhaustible supply of food for hungry people. Otherwise, one stone, rather than "these stones," would have sufficed. But Jesus rejected the temptation because it involved turning a barren wilderness into a San Joachin valley for the Western Mediterranean where no one would be hungry and all would be happy and follow Jesus. But that was not the nature of His saving work. He must go to the cross and suffer in order to accomplish the work God sent Him to do. The Devil was trying to distract Him from gospel work so that He would do social work—just what the majority of Jews in His day wanted.

Jesus faced this temptation again in His ministry. When He multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed the 5000, the hungry-but-now-well-fed crowd was ready to force Him to become their king (John 6:15). They wanted Him to be a social savior, a great man who would take care of the earthly needs of the people. But again, Jesus left them,

refused to be their king. And when they found Him the next day, He underlined the point when they asked Him, "Rabbi, when camest thou hither?" Jesus answered them in a way that would confuse many missiologists with community transformation ideals: "I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed." And because Jesus adamantly and repeatedly refused their proposals, they crucified Him.

Which inclines one to say that if Jesus came again today and was *able* to fix all the world's problems and did not, but instead gave them the gospel, they would crucify Him again.

The neo-Calvinist's common-grace vision of what the church is all about is eerily similar to the vision of those whom Jesus opposed.

The practical outworking of this view for neo-Calvinist churches is both a cooperation with the world (in the end denying the antithesis), and a failure clearly and passionately to warn the unbelievers with whom they cooperate to flee from the wrath to come; that is, to flee to the cross where alone there is true shalom.

The cooperation with non-Christians lies at the root of the common grace of Kuyper and Bavinck, as is well known. So Brock and Sutanto, both early in their work and at the end, speak of this cooperation as a primary goal of neo-Calvinism. "…[R]egenerate and spirit-indwelled Christians" can "labor in the world and for the world, and often ally with the world, for common good."[48] Common grace is "God's work to carry on a unity and commonality among the regenerated Christ-bought church and those outside the family of God despite," they say, "the antithesis."[49]

And the consequence—unintended by many but the consequence nevertheless—is one about which Klaas Schilder complained: a failure to preach the wrath of God. Schilder called it "a catastrophic misjudgment to conclude from the preserving activity of God's love, or the limitation of his wrath, a general love and thus, in a culturally

48 Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism*, 25.

49 Brock and Sutanto, 221.

optimistic myopia, to exclude the reality of God's wrath."[50]

In the end, social concerns become more important than the gospel of Jesus Christ and the salvation God has obtained for His people through Him. Brock and Sutanto recognize this criticism, which is not only from the side of the PRCA. Neo-Calvinism, they recognize, faces the criticism that it "sacrifice[s] the classical confession that salvation is ultimately the vision of God" and makes "too much of the material goods of re-creation." Neo-Calvinism is guilty of "maximizing the extent of salvation and…minimizing the God of salvation."[51]

The PRCA would join these critics, and not only because of what is *written* by neo-Calvinists, but because of what is *taught* at the institutions supportive of neo-Calvinism, which filters down very strongly into the lives of the common member, the "popular level" folks. Over twenty years ago, working on an advanced degree at Calvin Theological Seminary, I took eight courses on missions and New Testament studies. The prevailing emphasis, with one happy exception, was the strong missional emphasis for which Brock and Sutanto say neo-Calvinism is criticized. From the reports of students currently attending the universities mentioned at the beginning of this article, the criticism Brock and Sutanto hear is justified. I pray that my grandchildren—some of whom attend these universities at present—finish their education not with such a passion to work with a Roman Catholic on social problems, but to witness to a Roman Catholic about what is the way of salvation according to Jesus. They will have spent their tuition dollars in vain if their instructors were soft on "the classical confession that salvation is ultimately the vision of God" and strong on "the material goods of re-creation." I am thankful for much of what these universities have; I am fearful for their neo-Calvinism.

The generation to come must be willing and eager to give their neighbor bread in an emergency, but more interested in giving them the bread of life. "My dear neighbor, God is displeased with your (accursed) idolatry in the mass. For the eternal well-being of your soul, put it away and depend on Jesus alone, not your works. Join with me in a true church identified by the marks, where Jesus is honored

50 In John Bolt, "The Unfinished Business of 1924," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 49, no. 1 (Nov. 2015): 17.

51 Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism,* 136.

properly and the Word of God alone is our authority for faith and life."

If the Reformation is worth celebrating at all, it is worth saying that.

Learning from the neo-Calvinists (or: Concluding Cautions for the Protestant Reformed "Choir")

Errors in theology are often—not always—reactions or over-reactions to other errors. This article does not conclude with the judgment that neo-Calvinism is a reaction to some error in Calvinism or in Calvinism's later degeneration (as some may assert). Instead, I conclude with cautions not to over-react to the error of neo-Calvinism.

First, neo-Calvinism emphasizes God's restraint of sin and sinners. The Reformed Christian must do justice to and be thankful for the reality that God restrains sin.

Although God's restraint of the unbelieving sinner is not an expression of grace to him, it is indeed grace to you and me as Christians. We ought to thank God daily that, although He does give the wicked over to sin and always allows sin to develop, He also restrains sin so that His purposes in Jesus Christ can be fulfilled in the gathering of His church. This was never so clear as in the life of Jesus Christ Himself. Time and time again, the sovereign God restrained Jesus' foes from executing Him, in order that Jesus could fulfill every detail of His earthly ministry. From His first sermon in His hometown of Nazareth where His boyhood acquaintances tried to push Him off the cliff, but He "passing through the midst of them went his way" (Luke 4:30), until the end of His life when He confessed, "My time is at hand" (Matt. 26:18), God's powerful providence kept his foes at bay. The power of God restrained the Jews from executing Jesus, not in goodness to these unbelieving Jews, but in grace to His church. It was restraint, and it was grace.

Praise God for His gracious-to-the-Christian restraint of the non-Christian. Adversaries will be stilled, and "vengeful foes restrained" (Ps. 8). Psalm 79 even calls Christians to pray for this restraint. "Loose the prisoner, save the dying, All Thy enemies restrain."[52]

52 Number 378:4, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1927; rev. ed. 1995).

That worshippers may gather in peace on the Lord's Day, uninterrupted, may God restrain the antichristian powers in Myanmar. That children may be taught in the good Christian schools and the catechism rooms and come to faith, may the Lord hold back the enemies of the church in every land. Restrain, until the time is fulfilled, and Christ returns.

Second, neo-Calvinism emphasizes God's positive purposes in this creation. No Reformed Christian should belittle the praise God receives through His creation—still marred by the curse, but beautiful and God-glorifying nevertheless.

An over-reaction to neo-Calvinism's focus on God's purposes in the first creation will have Christians ignore, waste, and maybe even abuse God's earthly bounties and cosmic beauty. Although the first creation was not God's ultimate purpose, and Jesus' re-creation is not to bring creation back to its original state, creation does have a grand purpose still today, to the glory of the Creator.

So let us do justice to creation, first, by enjoying it. Let us "consider the lilies" (and hibiscus and peony and sunflower, dogwood and cherry and oak, eagle and osprey, dolphin and whale) and their glory—the lily's, according to Jesus, is greater than even Solomon's. Second, let us do justice to creation by preserving it. We may not be tree-huggers, but neither are we abusers of creation and its resources. Third, let us do justice to creation by studying and examining it, both how to understand how to preserve it, and how (especially) to praise God for His wisdom in it. Let us encourage our children to be geologists and physicists, biologists and chemists, astronomers and oceanographers, not especially to make a living, but to advance our knowledge of God's great name revealed in the earthly creation. I like to imagine what our enjoyment will be of the *new* heavens and *new* earth—no small part, I believe, for the eternal praise we will give to God someday.

Third, neo-Calvinists seek justice in society and lawfulness in politics.

An overreaction to the neo-Calvinist's apparent overemphasis of these matters would be to hide in a little corner and take a laissez-faire attitude toward society. Of course, the accusation against the oppo-

nents of common grace by its proponents is "Anabaptist!" by which is meant that one goes with his religious book in a small circle of pious Christians and ignores society around him. Protestant Reformed Christians ought to hear the warning and recognize the possibility. Even if for biblical reasons they reject the Anabaptist philosophy of life, it is possible to adopt that mindset practically. I have heard more than one dismiss the idea of voting for elected officials, belittle the attempt to protest a national evil, or even scorn a suggestion that one ought to speak his mind at a local township meeting. There are no biblical laws that mandate one's participation in any of these events, but it seems to me to be more than a little tendency toward an Anabaptistic mindset to oppose participation.

Herman Hoeksema's attitude can help us here. Although he rejected a flag in his church building *on Sunday,*[53] claiming that the church of Jesus Christ does not represent any one nation, he said that he welcomed that flag as a sign of patriotism in that same building during the week when his choir gave a program. Good ecclesiology understands that the church is not a building, but the gathered people of God wherever they assemble; such was Hoeksema's argument. Twenty-five years later Protestant Reformed patriotism (if not also Hoeksema's) showed on the Sunday bulletin of First PRC. The bulletin promoted an upcoming mass meeting at the Civic Auditorium, "a sympathy and protest meeting regarding the cruel invasion of the Netherlands by Germany." In the same bulletin was advertisement for support of a relief committee that would solicit funds to be sent to the Netherlands to "relieve the suffering caused by the invasion of our old country"[54] There is no indication that Hoeksema merely suffered these announcements. Hoeksema was interested in political matters and promoted Christian activity by Reformed Christians.

So should we be. Even if we reject neo-Calvinism.

53 Remember the flag controversy when he was pastor of Fourteenth Street CRC in Holland, MI during WWI. For more on this history, see Gertrude Hoeksema's biography of Herman Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), 81-90, and see https://leben.us/herman-hoeksema-flag-church-controversy.

54 First Protestant Reformed Church Weekly Bulletin, May 19, 1940, Archives of the PRCA, 415:15.

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The Good Unbelievers Do: Grace?

Cory Griess

Introduction

Jon A. Roebling, a genius of a man, engineered and built the Brooklyn Bridge. Having already built complex bridges in Pittsburgh, in Cincinnati, and over the Niagara Falls, Roebling was convinced such a bridge could and should be flung over the East River connecting Manhattan and Brooklyn. Though he was an unbeliever, Roebling was so convinced that such a bridge would benefit the common good that he gave much of his own time and money to get the project started. Once it was in motion, he willingly allowed himself to be cheated out of much financial gain to keep the project moving.[1] Roebling's work on the Brooklyn bridge is a prime example of the kind of action that the 1924 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) termed "civil righteousness."

But beyond this, there are more moving examples of the "good" that unbelievers perform. What of the man who walked out of the tent to die in the cold of Antarctica in order to give his men a slim chance of surviving on the food they had left?[2] Or of Monique, who found herself and her infant son in the middle of a gang fight in a parking lot, threw herself over her child, and took a bullet in the heart so that her young son might live?[3] How does Reformed theology explain these kinds of occurrences in a fallen world full of totally depraved people?

The Reformed faith, of course, has no trouble explaining the fact that Roebling had an odd fascination with spiritualism and repeatedly held seances in his living room to speak to the dead. There is no challenge to the Reformed faith when it is called upon to explain the revisionist historians who attempted to besmirch the real history of

1 David McCullough, *The Great Bridge*: *The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

2 Karen May, "Heroism and Betrayal in Antarctica," *Naval History Magazine,* April 2023, https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2023/april/heroism-and-betrayal-antarctica.

3 Deborah Nelson, "My Baby Made the Ultimate Sacrifice to Save Her Baby's Life," *Moms Demand Action*, n. d, https://momsdemandaction.org/my-baby-made-the-ultimate-sacrifice-to-save-her-babys-life.

the expedition into the Antarctic. It is not difficult for the Reformed faith to explain the gangs who started a street fight in a mall parking lot, killing a young mother. But what about these other matters? Do they challenge the Reformed faith? How do the Reformed fit these realities into a biblical worldview?

This is what the controversy in 1924 over the third point of common grace was about. Two different explanations for these occurrences were given. The Synod of Kalamazoo officially explained them as the work of a universal grace of God different from the redemptive grace of God given in Jesus Christ. Instead, synod explained, this grace allows unbelieving people, apart from regeneration, to do good works that are pleasing in God's sight.

With this explanation, Herman Hoeksema and others could not agree. The Hoeksema party and the subsequent denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA), explained these occurrences instead as the fruit of God's providential working. These works, though *outwardly* conformable to the law of God, are yet sinful from the heart, not pleasing to the Lord. Grace, Hoeksema said, is in Christ, and is redemptive. Providence is universal and non-redemptive.

This article explains this debate and its theological origins. It argues for Hoeksema's position and, on the basis of Scripture, the Reformed confessions, and the consequences of the Synod of Kalamazoo's position, critiques the position held by the synod. The article concludes with some cautions for the PRCA and others who rightly reject the teaching of common grace.

The Teaching of Common Grace Regarding the Good Works of the Unregenerate

Synod of Kalamazoo's Third Point of Common Grace

The third point of common grace adopted by the Synod of Kalamazoo in 1924 states that the unregenerated can perform civil righteousness: "Concerning the third point, in regard to the doing of so-called civil good by the unregenerate, Synod declares that according to Scripture and the confessions, the unregenerate, though unable to do any saving good (Canons of Dort, III, IV, 3), are able to do civil good."[4] The unregenerate can perform *civil* good, synod

4 *Acts of Synod 1924 of the Christian Reformed Church*, trans. Rev.

said, as opposed to *saving* good. *Saving* good is good that arises out of a *regenerated* heart, is the fruit of the process of sanctification, and produces good works that follow the believer into glory (Rev. 14:13). *Civil* good is good in the realm of the temporary, good that is good for society and this earthly life. Yet, civil good is emphatically still true *good.* Saving good and civil good have in common that they are both deemed "good" not merely by *people* but by *God*. The teaching of synod was that, though there is certainly sin in the good works of unbelievers as there is in the good works of the regenerate, God may not call this civil good "sin." As with the good works of believers, He may only call these works "good" in His sight.

According to synod, the unregenerate are able to perform this good by the working of the Holy Spirit. Synod's third point attributes the good works of the unregenerate to God who influences the heart without regenerating it: "God, without renewing the heart, exercises such influence on mankind that it is capable to carry out civil good."[5] Synod's second point, which is closely connected to the third, indicates that this is accomplished specifically by God the Holy Spirit: "God through the general operation of His Spirit [His operations in the world generally as opposed to His operations on the elect specifically] without renewing the heart, restrains sin in its unbridled expression through which remains possible, a societal relationship."[6] By a gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the unregenerate, the wicked are not only restrained in their sin, but, the third point adds, positively they are enabled to perform good works pleasing to God in the civil realm.

It is important to understand that synod was not merely saying that the unregenerate do works that outwardly conform to the law of God, while inwardly they are sinful and against God (something Hoeksema himself taught). Rather, synod officially taught that *inwardly* as well as outwardly, the unregenerate do genuinely good works about which God Himself declares, "This is good in my sight."

Henry De Mots (Grand Rapids: Archives of the Christian Reformed Church, 1924), 146.

5 *Acts of Synod*, 146.

6 *Acts of Synod,* 146.

Abraham Kuyper's Teaching

One cannot understand synod's teaching in the third point without understanding something of Abraham Kuyper's teaching on common grace. If synod's first point was in opposition to Kuyper (and it was), the second and third were a wholesale embrace of Kuyper. This is why, when Herman Hoeksema wrote a catechism of the issues surrounding 1924,[7] he first wrote a catechetical chapter on Kuyper's teaching on common grace before he began to treat what synod itself decided.

Kuyper was adamant that the good deeds of the unregenerate were good before God at the level of the "inclination," "mind," and "will."[8] Kuyper concluded from this that "the fallen sinner [has] strength to do what is good."[9] When facing the question how a totally depraved unbeliever's works can be good at the level of the inclination, mind, and will, Kuyper theorized that there was a gracious work of God in the heart of the unregenerate:

> We must understand the wonder that God worked in the heart of man immediately after the fall by injecting an antidote into the heart against the poison of sin. We must understand that this miracle of grace had already been performed when Adam fled from God, before the seeking, rescuing grace reached out to call Adam forth from his hiding place….God seized Adam by his heart and performed the miracle of common grace in it.[10]

For Kuyper, this was not a work that God would perform exclusively upon Adam. Rather, all humanity after Adam would receive

7 This material was first published in Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: n.p. 1936). Later this section of that book was republished along with other material in Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko, *Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997).

8 Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, ed. Jordan J. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 2:346.

9 Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2:19.

10 Kuyper, 1:302. Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof reference this portion of Kuyper in Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016), 226.

the same work of God in their hearts: "Thus, this common grace is the omnipresent power of divine mercy, which reveals itself in every way wherever the heart of man beats, and spreads its blessing over those human hearts."[11] Kuyper's teaching is that God drips grace into the hearts of everyone as the antidote to total depravity. This grace comes between the small kernel of total depravity in the essence of humanity and human hearts, so that what people think and will and desire can be truly good in the sight of God, from the depths of the motive to the heights of the action. More than restraining sin, this common grace allows the unregenerate both inwardly and outwardly to please God positively. The result is that, though *civil* good, these deeds are *spiritually good*, civil good.

Criticism by Way of Direct Arguments

The Loss of the Doctrine of Total Depravity

Anyone who embraces the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism immediately questions how one can reconcile the above teaching of both Kuyper and the Synod of Kalamazoo with the confession the Reformed make in Q&A 8, "Are we then *so* corrupt that we are *wholly incapable* of doing *any good*, and inclined to *all wickedness*? Indeed *we are*, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God."[12] Question 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism is not asking, "Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing *saving* good, while we are capable of doing *civil* good?" It asks whether we are so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing *any good* [truly good in God's sight], saving or civil or otherwise. Indeed, we are incapable of such, *except we are regenerated*. Though Kuyper tried to maintain this confession while holding to his teaching of an efficacious work of grace in the hearts of all unregenerate, in the end he really had to

11 In Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 226. Compare Kuyper, *Common Grace,* 1:303. Klaas Schilder also pointed to Kuyper's teaching here as key in his critique of Kuyper's teaching. See Jochem Douma, *Common Grace in Kuyper, Schilder, and Calvin: Exposition, Comparison, and Evaluation*, transl. Albert H. Oosterhoff, ed. William Helder (Hamilton, ON: Lucerna CRTS Publications, 2017), 170.

12 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 8 in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: PRCA, 2005), 92 (emphasis added).

answer the Heidelberg Catechism's question this way: "Indeed we are, except we are regenerated, *or we are given common grace*."

Anyone who embraces the teaching of the Westminster Standards immediately questions how one can reconcile the teaching of Kuyper and the Synod with the Westminster Larger Catechism's description of the state of the fallen human race in Q&A 25. The Westminster Larger Catechism defines the state of fallen mankind as "the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually."[13] The catechism teaches total depravity. Both creeds then, teach the total depravity of the human race after the Fall so that fallen mankind is "wholly incapable of any good" and "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good."

The Reformed creeds make their strong statements regarding total depravity based on the witness of Scripture. The Scriptures make the sharpest distinction between being "in the flesh" and being "in the Spirit." In Romans 8:5-8 the inspiring Spirit says, "For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." What follows is the inspired conclusion based on this reality: "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God." The Scriptures do not say that natural mankind cannot please God except by common grace, but they state as the logical conclusion of verses 5-7 that the unregenerate "cannot please God."

In 2003, Prof. David Engelsma debated Dr. Richard Mouw on the subject of common grace, after Mouw published his original book on the subject.[14] In the years since, Mouw has published another book on common grace entitled *All That God Cares About.*[15] Some things in

13 John Bower, *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 129.

14 Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).For the debate, see https://www.prca.org/current/Articles/a%20debate%20on%20common%20grace%20-%20engelsma-mouw.htm.

15 Richard J. Mouw, *All That God Cares About: Common Grace and*

this book help clarify Mouw's position. However, regarding the central question of reconciling Kuyper's teaching of an inward working of God's grace and the Reformed confession of total depravity, Mouw gives no help. In fact, Mouw really glosses over the concern while stating that the contradiction must be accepted:

> Including "a little more" in our theology means being willing to affirm deeply grounded convictions without knowing how to explain exactly how they fit together within the system of our beliefs. And that is also the case with affirming both total depravity and common grace. They each have their place within a larger theological perspective that attends to "a little more" than what some Calvinists are willing to engage.[16]

In the context of this quotation Mouw recognizes Kuyper's insistence that the work of common grace operates *in the hearts* of the unregenerate.[17] Yet, even though the question of how this internal gracious work can be reconciled with total depravity has been one of the, if not *the,* central questions since Kuyper taught it, the above is all Mouw says about it in his book. At least Kuyper knew he had to attempt to reconcile the two teachings, strange though his conclusion was.[18] As Mouw glosses over a central issue, he merely admits that the two cannot be reconciled. One must be content not "knowing how to explain exactly how they fit together." Such "paradoxical" theology, however, generally ends in a denial of total depravity for the sake of common grace.

Divine Delight (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020).

16 Mouw, *All That God Cares About*, 56.

17 "For Kuyper of course, what we pay attention to in the operations of common grace is more than a *little* more. His insistence on the "internal" dimension of God's favorable dealings with the non-elect opens up a much larger perspective—one that has both continuity and discontinuity with the views of Calvin on the subject." Mouw, *All That God Cares About,* 56. This honesty about Kuyper's teaching and its relation to Calvin's teaching is appreciated.

18 In addition to looking up the references above, one could attempt to work out Kuyper's "copper wire" illustration. See Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2:346-347.

Scripture's Testimony that the "Good" Works of Unbelievers Are Not Truly Good

Siding with the Reformed creeds and their doctrine of total depravity, let us dig deeper when we think about the good things unregenerate people do. First, we ought to question the notion that these works are truly good in the sight of God.

In John 15 the Lord Jesus teaches that He is the vine and His people are the branches. The Lord says that through the life that flows from Him, His people can bear fruit. In addition, He teaches the negative side of this truth, explicitly stating that without this life no one can bear any fruit: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). What is pleasing to God is fruit, real fruit of works that are truly good in His eyes. The Lord says that being connected to Him, such fruit can and will be produced. However, without being connected to Him, a person can do "nothing." Clearly the "nothing" of verse 5 is the opposite of "bringeth forth much fruit." Thus, the conclusion is that those who remain not united to Christ can bear no fruit and thus cannot please the Lord in any way. Nothing pleasing to God can be done outside of Himself, says Christ.[19]

The testimony of the rest of Scripture is the same: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23); "They that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8); "A corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit… neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matt. 7:17-18); "But without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Heb. 11:6). When the apostle Paul looked back on his life before he was regenerated and converted, he not only said the works that he did to attempt to earn his righteousness were dung, but "yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss…and do count them as dung" (Phil. 3:8).

To be sure, there are glimmerings of natural light in the unregenerate. By this the unregenerate person "retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and

19 Christ here does not allow an escape to the notion that civil good may be judged good by God according to another standard than that He uses to judge saving good. God cannot have two definitions of good.

for maintaining an orderly external deportment" (Canons 3/4.4).[20] Hoeksema confessed this, and was even willing to retain the term "civil good" to show that he confessed it, so long as his opponents confessed the article properly according to its own terms.[21] Article 4 goes on to say that fallen man "is incapable of using it [glimmerings of natural light] aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness." What is "wholly polluted" and "held in unrighteousness" cannot be called spiritually and truly good in God's sight.[22] So long as his contemporaries would admit that there is no grace working in the unregenerate heart so that the civil good is not *truly good* in the sight of God, pleasing Him spiritually, and so long as the full confession of the Canons was honestly maintained, Hoeksema would allow the term "civil righteousness." But alas, his opponents were not interested in this.

These glimmerings of which the Canons speak can be helpful for us. They can be useful for society. The Christian must thank the sovereign God for the fact that they remain in us. But these glimmerings are all corrupted by sin in God's eyes and are declared to be sin by God, for mankind renders them "wholly polluted."

This is precisely the same conclusion to which the Westminster Confession of Faith comes when it faces the question concerning the "good" the unregenerate do:

> 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

20 Canons of Dordrecht 3/4.4 in *Confessions and Church Order*, 167.

21 "If only we both establish that this civil good always remains sin in the sight of God, we can subscribe to the statement as cited above. But that is exactly what the common grace theory does not do. It regards this civil good as the fruit of a work of grace in the heart whereby wickedness is restrained and is somewhat removed." Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 191.

22 What is not done out of faith, according to the law of God, and to the glory of God, is sin; see Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 91, *Confessions and Church Order,* 121.

> 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.[23]

Even the good works that the unregenerate do are "sinful" and "cannot please God," according to the Confession. This is the case, the Confession says, even if the neglect of them is *more* sinful. The best works of the unregenerate are, in the words of Augustine, "splendid vices," a description Kuyper explicitly rejected,[24] but one that the Westminster divines were certainly embracing.[25]

When Jon A. Roebling died, he left a diary behind. In an entry written by the accomplished man at the twilight of his life, he said,

> A man may be content with the success of an enterprise; he may have succeeded in overcoming obstacles; in vanquishing his adversaries and enemies; in achieving a great task; solving a great mental problem, or accomplishing work, which was previously pronounced impossible and impracticable. The hero is admired and proclaimed a public benefaction; observed of all observers, he feels himself elated, and in his own estimation a great man. Retiring for one calm moment within the recesses of his own inner self, he reviews his past deeds, his thoughts and motives of action. And before the stern judgment of his own conscience, he stands condemned, an untruth, a lie to himself. But nobody knows! Does he himself know? Who can hide me from myself?[26]

Is this not true of all people if they reflect upon their life? And even if they do not admit the guilt in their best works so frankly, will this not be what is exposed in the end? People themselves know that they labor for their own glory. And in the end all the deeds they do, some of which are outwardly marvelous, they do without faith, contrary to the divine law that governs the heart, and against God in

23 Westminster Confession of Faith 16.7, in Philip Schaaf, *Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:635-36.

24 Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 122.

25 Turretin, for example, maintained Augustine's description. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1:683.

26 David McCullough, *The Great Bridge*, 56-57.

their heart and life.

The Source of These Works Is Not God's Grace

The testimony of Scripture and the Reformed creeds is that the outward good the unregenerate do is not the result of the grace of God. Herman Hoeksema made the argument that the second and third points of the Synod of Kalamazoo confused "grace" for "providence" with respect to the ultimate source of the good works of the unregenerate.[27] Synod had illegitimately expanded the concept of grace. This judgment has a long history.

Pelagius misused the term grace, applying it to more than the redemptive work of Christ. Augustine was concerned about this error and wrote against it. At the time of the Synod of Dordt, the Remonstrants made the same error as Pelagius, broadening the content of the term as well so that it applied to more than the redemptive blessings found in Christ and given to the elect. Douma informs us that the delegates to the great Synod who were from Friesland made an extended point about this. These delegates argued along the same line Hoeksema later traced, stating that describing the glimmerings of natural light as "grace" was Pelagian. The Frisian delegates even concluded that in Scripture "grace" refers to the redemptive blessings found in Christ alone:

> Augustine says that God's servants having heard this and being proponents of the general truth, can recognize no other grace of God than what they were accustomed to read about in God's books, and which they preached to God's people. But he (Pelagius) accepted a different grace, namely, the grace…common to Gentiles and Christians, the ungodly, believers and unbelievers, which he regarded as that general grace that is the light of nature. Each of us must determine the extent to which the Remonstrants take a different view of this meaning of the word 'grace.' But we are not afraid to say that their views are more akin to those of Pelagius and his adherents than to what the Holy Spirit taught in Holy Scripture, when they confer the name 'grace' on the

27 Turretin points almost exclusively to providence to explain the gifts God gives to the unregenerate. "Almost exclusively" is not exclusively, but the weight Turretin gives to providence is overwhelming and significant, even in comparison to Calvin. See Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:13, 681-683, 685.

> light of nature. For the Holy Spirit always understands grace to be either the fountain of all saving gifts, including the mercy of God, or the gracious and supernatural actions and the supernatural and spiritual gifts which are given us out of mere…mercy in Christ and through Jesus Christ our mediator.[28]

Pelagius, not Augustine. The Remonstrants, not the Reformed, called the light of nature *grace*. Kuyper and the Synod of Kalamazoo traced the wrong line.[29]

If one denies Kuyper's view of God's grace as working *inwardly* in a person, yet still considers grace to be the source of the unbelievers' "good" works, the result is still a misuse of the term "grace" and a doubling up of theological concepts. Kuyper called it grace precisely because it was working on the inclinations and will and understanding and was producing true good in the sight of God. If one does not agree with this, he errs in calling this common *grace*. In fact, one then has a grace that does exactly what providence is already doing, upholding the creation and society so that it may be the theater for the accomplishment of God's sovereign purposes.[30]

Continuation of the world is not the fruit of grace; it is instead the fruit of providence.[31] It does not bring nature to a higher state than it

28 In Douma, *Common Grace*, 131-32.

29 As far as Richard Mouw is concerned, he has settled confidently on "grace" as the proper concept. "In my earlier book on common grace I endorsed Henry Van Til's expression of caution. 'We do well,' I said, 'to heed Van Til's misgivings about any talk of common grace that does not at least put mental quotation marks around 'grace'.' While I see no reason to retract that word of caution now, neither do I see any reason to re-issue it with any passion. I think Van Til was willing to go along with the term-albeit with mental reservations. I have now come to be more confident regarding Kuyper's use of the term 'grace' than I was when I wrote my earlier book on the subject. I think it is a fine term, with no quotation marks needed." Mouw, *All That God Cares About*, 84-85.

30 Kuyper admitted that common grace could also be used to develop sin. But this is providence, not grace. See Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 134.

31 One of Kuyper's central arguments was that if it was not for common grace, immediately after the Fall the world would have turned to hell and Adam and Eve would have gone to hell. Though there is no mention of a gra-

currently is. It upholds the creation until Christ returns and removes the curse from creation, lifting nature to its highest potential by a special grace rooted in His redemptive work.

As explained further below, providence can account for the outward good the unregenerate do. God has given good gifts to people, distributing them according to His wise purposes, and at times endowing unbelievers with special gifts to an astounding degree for specific purposes He has for them in His providence.

Criticism by Way of Pointing out Ill Effects

The Third Point Devalues *Christ and His Grace*

Perhaps one admits the points made against the third point of common grace in this article but believes the issue is not very important. To highlight the importance of the issue, I put forward five "D's" that are the ill effects of the doctrine. First, the doctrine *devalues* Christ and His grace.

If the Scriptures place the concept of grace in the realm of Christ's redemptive work, and we broaden out the concept, we are misusing the concept at best and cheapening it at worst. T. F. Torrance says, "It would be safe to say that Paul never speaks of grace, except as grounded in the self-giving of God in the person and death of Jesus."[32]

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cious work of God to prevent this, Kuyper thought this ought to be surmised. Hoeksema countered that the curse itself presumed continuation of society because the curse prophesied of childbearing and labor. Continuation is not grace; it is the foundation for the manifestation of God's grace. See Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 90, 99-100, 105-106, 123-124.

32 The full quotation of Torrance is worth consideration: "It would be safe to say that Paul never speaks of grace, except as grounded in the self-giving of God in the person and death of Jesus, and in every instance, it is the objective side of its content that predominates. ...Grace means the primary and constitutive act in which out of free love God has intervened to set our life on a wholly new basis, but also means that through faith this may be actualized in flesh and blood because it has been actualized in Jesus Christ, who by the Cross and the Resurrection becomes our salvation, our righteousness, and our wisdom. Thus, any attempt to detach grace in a transferred sense from the actual embodiment of God's grace in Jesus Christ is to misunderstand the meaning of the Pauline *charis* altogether." Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock,

Christ is the manifestation of God's grace. All that is known of grace is in Him. Why does Jesus say in John 15:5, "Without me ye can do nothing?" Because the grace that transforms and makes the spiritually ugly beautiful is found in Him and Him alone. If one does not have Him, that one does not have grace, and does not have transformation. Without Him one is dead, graceless. Even the creation's tasting of grace at the end when it is lifted to a higher plane in the new heavens and new earth is in union to Christ in His cross and resurrection. To teach otherwise devalues the work of Christ as the source of grace.[33]

It Disparages *Regeneration*

The doctrine of the third point of common grace holds that this grace can accomplish what the Reformed have confessed only the miracle of regeneration can accomplish in a person—true good coming out of the sinner by a renewing work of the Spirit in the heart. Thus, the third point of common graces disparages the miraculous work of the triune God in regeneration.

It Discards *the Goodness of Creation*

Hoeksema taught that sin does not destroy the essence of created reality.[34] This explains the good that the unregenerate do. When Mouw speaks of the inner lives of unregenerate people, he uses examples like the two I gave at the head of this paper. Mouw argues that providence

1996), 28–29, 33.

33 Kuyper saw grace coming from a source other than Christ and His cross. Did Kuyper see the problem with the alternative? If Christ and His cross are the source of this grace, it is redemptive in some way. This was a notion Kuyper would not allow. John Bolt mentions the first problem, "How does one square Kuyper's claims that Christ is Lord of all with his contention that common grace has an independence rooted in creation and providence? How does Christ's redeeming work affect common grace?...It remains unresolved." John Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924: Unfinished Business on Common Grace Part II," *Calvin Theological Journal* 58, no. 2 (2023): 298.

34 Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace,* 150. That is not to say that there are not times when human depravity is so worked out in an individual or even a group that it overshadows some of the most basic of human characteristics. "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget…" (Isa. 49:15).

is not enough to explain, for example, the natural love of a child who sees his father come home from war.[35] Those who deny common grace believe that God in His providence gives good gifts to everyone, including the good, created gift of natural filial love. But the gift is being used by a rational, moral being. Even this good gift is being taken up in opposition to God. The act of the mother mentioned in the introduction must be interpreted the same way. A mother taking a bullet for her child is an expression of a good creation reality upheld by providence after the Fall, not a gracious reality. The child of God can and ought to appreciate a mother's love for her child as a good creation of God. Yet, he ought to see that it is used sinfully, apart from grace and thus to the end of the glory of mankind. The third point teaches that sin would have destroyed the essence of created reality, and only common grace can uphold it.

It Destroys *the Antithesis*

It is not the case that the third point of common grace produces an imbalance or eclipses the antithesis to some extent. Rather, the argument is that Kuyper's teaching adopted by the Synod of Kalamazoo destroys the antithesis.[36] Whereas Scripture speaks everywhere, consistently and repeatedly, of two spiritual spheres, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the evil one, Kuyper's doctrine created a third spiritual sphere.

While there is common life that the regenerate share with the unregenerate, yet spiritually there is no common ground. Kuyper, by contrast, created a third spiritual sphere where the regenerate and unregenerate have a spiritual common space. In this sphere, they may both glorify and please God *together*. It is not enough to say that theologians need to balance common grace and the antithesis. Kuyper's common grace, by its very nature, destroyed the antithesis altogether. Hoeksema repeatedly made this argument throughout his corpus in many ways, one of which was his repetition of the phrase, "Righteous and ungodly men have everything in common in the world,

35 Mouw, *All That God Cares About,* 64-68.

36 Regarding Kuyper himself, he had developed the concept of the antithesis, but by the time he delivered his Stone lectures, there was not much of it to be found. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 31.

except for grace."[37]

The book of Revelation, which sheds light on the spiritual reality of the world in which we are currently living, shows what the eye cannot see. The book uncovers what is going on behind the scenes. The book reveals that there are two spiritual kingdoms that seek the death of each other. One will find no trace of a common spiritual unity between the church and the world in the book of Revelation. But by Kuyper's teaching the world has an opening to pour itself into the church. The church does not have the spiritual eye that the book of Revelation seeks to give her. The theological position itself tempts her to be entranced by the world and desensitized to its rebellion.[38] It leaves her in a posture of acceptance.

Over the last one hundred years, voices have occasionally joined Hoeksema's in recognizing that Kuyper's common grace negated the antithesis.[39] As the culture becomes more and more corrupt, it appears those voices have increased somewhat. There has been more open criticism of Kuyper's cultural project and even of his doctrine: "I began to worry that 'common grace' while often invoked to encourage Christians to 'transform culture' was actually functioning as a license for assimilation to culture."[40] Again,

> Nevertheless, great as he was, I consider Kuyper's movement to be a dead end for American Reformed Christians for both theological and political reasons…Theologically, Kuyper's movement used a flawed concept of 'common grace' as the basis for cooperation between be-

37 Among other instances: Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof, "Not Anabaptist, but Reformed," in *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn: God, Grace, and Covenant* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 142 (footnote); and Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace,* 50, 67, 170.

38 See Herman Hanko, "Editor's Introduction," in Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace,* xx.

39 See Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 133-36; more illustrations are given by Barry Gritters, "Grace Uncommon: A Protestant Reformed Look at the Doctrine of Common Grace" (Byron Center, MI: The Evangelism Society of Byron Center PRC, nd), 24-25.

40 James K. A. Smith, "Reformed Monasticism?" in Marius van Rijswijk, *Wie is die man?: Klaas Schilder in de eenentwintigste eeuw* (Uitgeverij De Vuurbaak, 2012), 197.

> lievers and non-believers in the public arena, a concept that continues to bear bad fruit both in the Netherlands and in the churches of Dutch descent in this country, because it has been used to blur the antithesis between believer and unbeliever, and between Revelation and human efforts to grope for truth.[41]

And,

> The second great leader was Abraham Kuyper…a brilliant theologian….Theologically, he formulated speculative doctrines of presumptive regeneration and common grace. Especially in the hands of his disciples, these dogmas have had a detrimental impact upon the Dutch Reformed churches around the world, as they have tended to lessen the difference or 'antithesis' between the church and the world.[42]

Still more: "Personally, I do not recognize common and special grace, but God's grace bestowed upon the elect, and that which we are wont to call common grace is the overflow of God's abundant grace so bestowed upon His elect."[43] Finally, though wrongly attempting to overlap the concepts of grace and providence, and not understanding how committed to common *grace* the Synod of Kalamazoo was, R. Scott Clark says that the three points of the Synod of 1924 are "really a way of speaking about what we traditionally have called "providence."[44]

It Distracts *from Gospel Proclamation and Missions*

Fifth, the effect of this doctrine is that it tends to distract the church from what she ought to be focused upon, the proclamation of the truth of Scripture, church building, and missions. Kuyper lived and wrote during a period of great optimism in the world. Kuyper himself was

41 William Edgar, "Reformed Systematic Theology Textbooks: Hand Maiden to the Enlightenment Privatization of Faith," *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal,* 2.2 (Spring 2016): 8.

42 Thomas G. Reid Jr., "Modern Church History, 2001 Edition" (Pittsburgh: Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, unpublished, 2001), section 4.4.1.

43 Chuck Baynard, *Westminster Larger Catechism Commentary*, 1:142, commenting on LC 45.

44 R. Scott Clark, "Common Grace and Atonement," Nov 1, 2004, https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/god-so-loved-world-clark.

optimistic that it was time for Calvinism to rise and be the leading force in cultural advancement in the world.[45] The ultimate purpose of common grace for Kuyper, was that by it God would allow the continuation of society not only, but that the true good that society thinks and wills and writes and produces would be brought into the new heavens and new earth. One of the great goals of the church then ought to be to help the world use its common grace goodness to furnish this life and the new heavens and new earth with cultural products that will glorify God.

With this as the great project of the church, the "regular" things she is to do seem not to be very exalted and often become eclipsed. It has to strike any Calvinist who reads Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*, which are to be a charter for Calvinism in the twentieth century, that there is little to no mention of the church's task of gospel proclamation and missions. The call is almost entirely for cultural transformation.

This past summer my family visited the *Ark Encounter* in Williamstown, Kentucky. Although there were hints of Arminianism in its gospel presentations (and at times much more than hints), I was impressed that they did not hide the judgment of God due to sin apparent in the Flood, and the call to turn from sin to Christ. It made me wonder what the *Ark Encounter* would be like if neo-Calvinists had built it. It is a presumption, but I am afraid the presentation would be dominated by God's supposed common-grace covenant with Noah and the culture building we are all to engage in together, perhaps even void of the cross of Jesus Christ and the call to repentance and faith.[46]

Suggestions and Cautions for the PRCA: Develop

Develop in Missions

But this highlights an area of needed self-examination for the

45 "I claimed for Calvinism the honor of being neither an ecclesiastical, nor a theological, nor a sectarian conception, but one of the principal phases in the general development of our human race." And, "…it represents a peculiar principle dominating the whole of life, but it also meets every required condition for the advancement of human development *to a higher* life." Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 34, 38. See also Douma, *Common Grace,* 299.

46 John Bolt highlights concerns about the missional movement redirecting attention "away from the church and the salvation of individual persons toward the world." John Bolt, "The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924": 296.

PRCA. The PRCA is not afflicted with transformationalism. And yet, I do not think it is erroneous to say that we have not always had a zealous pursuit of missions over the years. Unhindered by the common grace worldview, by God's grace, this we can, and ought to, develop.

Develop the Doctrine of Providence

In addition, there are other developments the PRCA ought to make going forward. One is highlighted by a comment my internship-supervising minister made on my internship before I entered the ministry. The minister was telling me about a Muslim doctor who had performed a lifesaving surgery on one of the church members. The minister said he told the doctor, "Thank you, and I thank God for you, God used you to save this man's life."

This struck me because I had never heard a PRCA minister speak like this. But we ought to. We ought to think more about and be thankful for the Lord's provision through people as yet unregenerate. Providence is not different from common grace in this, that it recognizes that these works are ultimately God's doings. While recognizing that the unregenerate cannot but sin before God, we must realize that God accomplishes His purpose through them and we ought to thank the Lord for it.

Develop the Reformed Worldview

The PRCA and others who share a convicted denial of common grace would benefit from a full-orbed publication of a Reformed worldview built on special grace and providence. David Engelsma has given us a start.[47] We ought to continue this effort. In my judgment this will require more careful reflection on the cultural mandate as a command of God, fulfilled by Christ, and yet in force for God's people. It is a mandate that only God's people can truly obey, though the world cannot escape its formal rule over their lives.

This will require continued commitment to one purpose of God with His world, not two. It will require an understanding of the good creation of God in distinction from its sinful use by the unregenerate. It must be a worldview that understands, as Engelsma has pointed

47 David J. Engelsma, "Reformed Worldview on Behalf of a Godly Culture" (Grandville, MI: Evangelism Committee of Grandville PRC, 2005).

out, the distinction between producer and product.[48] And it ought to be one that, I add now, distinguishes between cultural products of unbelievers that carry more spiritual and moral content, and ones that carry less or none.

This worldview requires a denial that the works produced in this world pass through to the next life, but the affirmation that God's people do pass through, with all that they are and gain from this life in every way. Such a worldview will help the PRCA's own youth, in addition to her own witness.

Suggestions and Cautions for the PRCA: Maintain

Maintain the Antithesis

But let the PRCA and others develop that worldview while maintaining the antithesis in this evil day, theologically, and in her life. Denying common grace does not guarantee antithetical living. It certainly helps and, Lord willing, will prevent any official compromise, but the difference between church and world may not break down for the people of God living their life in the world. In this, her hundredth year, let the PRCA in particular discuss and redouble her commitment to antithetical living.

Maintain Love for the Church

Let God's people love the church as God loves her, both as organism and as institute, not letting cultural engagement distract her from her central purpose of God, and her beauty.

Maintain an Emphasis on the Christian as a Pilgrim

Let the PRCA and others continue to remind God's people that they are pilgrims and strangers here below. No Reformed worldview may minimize the pilgrimage that is this life. In my judgment, losing sight of this is one of the causes of the problems in Kuyper's worldview and that of his disciples. In addition to missions not having an important place in Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*, the concept of the believer as pilgrim and stranger does not either. In fact, in all

48 David J. Engelsma, "Book Review: Once More, Dr. Richard Mouw on Common Grace," September 23, 2020, https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/once-more-dr-richard-j-mouw-on-common-grace?

his writing, "Kuyper posits the idea of pilgrimage, but it does not permeate his views on common grace at all." Again, "Kuyper does mention pilgrimage here and there, but it never becomes constitutive for ethics as it was for Calvin."[49]

This world is not the Christian's home and may not be. We have callings here, and they are important. Christians must do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God in all spheres of life in this world. We may not become Anabaptists, nor arrogant isolationists. But it is true as Calvin says, "There is no place for us among God's children, except we renounce the world, and…there will be for us no inheritance in heaven, except we become pilgrims on earth."[50]

49 Douma, *Common Grace,* 314.

50 Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Baker Book House, 2005), 285.

Book Reviews

The Presbyterian Philosopher: The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark, by Douglas J. Douma. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017. Pp. 292. $37 softcover. ISBN 9781532607240. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

A correction of the title of this book that might increase its appeal to the average Presbyterian and Reformed reader (who ought to read the book) is *The Presbyterian Theologian*, or, *The Presbyterian Philosopher/Theologian*. "Clark came to believe that all knowledge possible to man is limited to the propositions of the Bible and that which can be logically deduced from the Bible" (68). "Clark…claimed that the Bible is the sole source of all human knowledge." Therefore, Clark's philosophy later came to be called "Scripturalism" (186).

Gordon H. Clark was very much a theologian, and an orthodox theologian at that. Not only did he honestly subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith, but he also based all his philosophy and theology upon this creed of Presbyterianism. He asserted, as indicated above, that all sound knowledge derives from the Bible as rightly set forth in the Westminster Confession.

Clark's life and work ought to be of special, indeed compelling, interest to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and its members. Clark was deeply involved in the forming of the OPC in 1936–1939 and in the creation of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929. He was prominent in the reformation that drew what would become the OPC out of the apostate Presbyterian Church in the USA. The main occasion of this reformation was the Auburn Affirmation of 1923 (*nota bene*: this date!), which denied all the fundamentals of the Christian faith, including the inerrancy of Scripture and the virgin birth of Jesus. So intensely was Clark involved in this reformation that, as a young man, he joined in filing charges of heresy against the authors of this grossly heretical document.

Douma's concise history of this struggle of orthodox Presbyterianism for the gospel in the 1920s and 1930s is a reason that not only Presbyterian and Reformed believers but also all evangelicals should read the biography of Gordon Clark. The book is not only the

biography of an important Presbyterian thinker and warrior on behalf of the Reformed faith. It is also the account of an important slice of church history.

The dominant aspect of Clark's theological and ecclesiastical career, in Douma's judgment, was Clark's controversy with leaders in the OPC over what were then, and still are today, fundamental truths of the gospel. OPC historians judge this controversy to have been "the greatest theological debate that has ever occurred in the denomination's history" (83).

Although his sympathies obviously lie with Clark, and although his theological convictions are—rightly—those of Clark in the controversy, Douma is scrupulously objective and fair in his account of the controversy. For instance, he bends over backwards in not ascribing malignant, personal motives to Clark's adversaries in the controversy. This is a mark of a good historian, and noble. Even then it is difficult for the reader not to suspect that the Van Til–Clark case was an instance of the dark under-belly of the church institute (personal dislikes and carnal struggles for supremacy) coming to the surface.

To a Reformed outsider, there were two main doctrinal issues in the controversy in the OPC in the 1940s: first, the nature of the believer's knowledge of the truth revealed in the Bible in comparison with the knowledge that God Himself has of Himself and His saving works, and, therefore, of the reality, or un-reality, of the knowledge of the believer. The second doctrinal issue had to do with the theory of the "free," or "well-meant," offer of the gospel. Both issues are significant not only to members of the OPC but also to all Presbyterians and Reformed who hold to the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity. This makes Douma's book virtually required reading.

Although there is some truth to the judgment of Herman Hoeksema at the time of the conflict that the debate over the knowledge of God belongs more to a conference of theologians than to a case of censure, the issue of the relation of God's knowledge of the truths of revelation to the knowledge of the believer is an issue of the greatest importance. The issue at bottom is the reality of revelation and, therefore, the reality of the believer's knowledge of God, His nature, and especially His saving works as revealed in Scripture.

The book demonstrates that Clark's main antagonist in the con-

troversy, even though he carefully stayed in the background, was the extremely influential Cornelius Van Til, professor of theology at Westminster. Van Til held that the believer's knowledge particularly of the saving will, works, and ways of God, as set forth in the Bible, is merely "analogous" to the knowledge that God has of His will, works, and ways. The believer's knowledge is not the "same" as the knowledge of God. Clark contended that the knowledge of the believer is the *same* as the knowledge of God, not in comprehension or in depth, but in *meaning*. That Jesus was born of a virgin as the incarnation of the eternal Son for the redemption of elect sinners means the same to the believer as it does to God. That "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" means the same to us as it does to God. This is the meaning and wonder of *revelation*.

For Van Til, biblical revelation is "paradoxical." By "paradox" Van Til did not mean a merely *apparent* contradiction. He intended a *real* contradiction, at least to the mind of humans—regenerated, believing humans. The church and her theologians are unable to demonstrate the harmony of the two seemingly contradictory statements in the paradox, *because they are truly contradictory*. What Van Til intended by "paradox" and its implication for the believer's knowledge of God, His works, and His ways was expressed in these words by his advocates in their campaign against Clark: "We dare not maintain that [God's] knowledge and our knowledge *coincide at any single point*" (112, 259; emphasis theirs). Clark argued that if the truths of the gospel are contradictory, or as Van Til expressed it, "paradoxical," the church and the believer can know nothing with certainty. Revelation is a failure.

The application of Van Til's theory of a paradoxical theology to the doctrine of the call of the gospel was the second main issue in the Van Til–Clark case. Van Til and his allies taught what was called in the controversy "the free offer of the gospel." By the phrase, both parties meant the doctrine that God is gracious with a would-be saving grace to all humans, so that in the preaching of the gospel God sincerely desires the salvation of all humans. This doctrine obviously contradicts the biblical and Presbyterian doctrine of predestination (cf. the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 3). It also obviously contradicts Westminster's doctrine of the "effectual calling" in Chapter 10.

Van Til defended this doctrine of the free, or well-meant, offer

in relation to the doctrines of predestination of effectual calling as an instance of the truth being paradoxical. Clark contended that Van Til's doctrine of the free offer of the gospel was the Arminian heresy of universal, ineffectual grace—saving grace dependent upon the will of the sinner.

The controversy over the offer resulted in the OPC adopting a confession of a well-meant offer of salvation that is bolder and stronger—and more offensive to a Calvinist—than that adopted by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1924. This confession is readily accessible at the website of the OPC.

Douma treats this aspect of the controversy at length and in detail. In the course of this treatment, Douma references the Protestant Reformed Churches and their theologians, without the bias of seeing only one side of the vaunted "paradox" and of being blind, indeed hostile, to the other.

The controversy arose in the OPC in response to Clark's application for ordination into the ministry in the OPC. The assemblies approved his application. But an influential group of theological professors at Westminster, headed by Van Til, were determined to oppose Clark's ordination. They virtually drove Clark out of the OPC. A large number of Clark's supporters, both clergy and laity, left the OPC because of the mistreatment of Clark and because of the adoption of the false doctrines of the believer's dubious knowledge of God and of the well-meant offer. This was an ugly chapter in the history of the OPC.

The OPC's adoption of the doctrine of the free offer has influence in the conservative Presbyterian and Reformed community of churches because the denomination is a main player in the ecumenical organization known as NAPARC. Approving or embracing the doctrine of a free, or well-meant, offer, as confessed by the OPC, the churches of NAPARC, committed as they are to the Westminster Confession or to the Canons of Dordt and the confession of these creeds regarding the doctrine of predestination, commit themselves also to the OPC's theory that the truth of the gospel is "paradoxical."

Especially the issue of the nature of the call of the gospel—according to the OPC a well-meant offer—makes the controversy involving Gordon Clark of great interest to the Protestant Reformed Churches and their clergy. But there was another factor in the Van Til–Clark

controversy that intrigues the Protestant Reformed reader. The three main opponents of Clark and advocates of the free offer in the controversy were sons of the CRC: Van Til himself, Ned Stonehouse, and R. B. Kuiper. All were ordained ministers in the OPC. The three played the leading role in introducing into the OPC the theology of the offer as the common, or universal, ineffectual grace that the CRC had adopted in 1924.

> The CRC's teaching on the Free Offer of the Gospel came to the OPC and the Clark controversy via the former CRC ministers Van Til, Stonehouse, and Kuiper, and it was through the lens of this teaching that they viewed Clark's theology…The doctrine of the Free Offer of the Gospel was not one that arose in the OPC from consulting their own Presbyterian history (122).

Clark spent the rest of his life teaching philosophy and theology in a secular university.

A recent effect of Douma's biography of Clark is that this reviewer has been motivated to read Clark's magnum opus, *A Christian View of Men and Things*.

The Predestination of Humans and Angels [*Augustinus,* Tome III, Book IX], by Cornelius Jansen, transl. by Guido Stucco. Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2022 (vii+322). $65.00 hardcover. ISBN 9780813235424. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

This book review was first published in the April 2025 issue of the *Calvin Theological Journal*, and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the *Calvin Theological Journal*.

Today the Roman Catholic bishop Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638) is mostly forgotten except by a few scholars, and his masterpiece *Augustinus* (defending Augustine's teachings on human depravity, irresistible grace, and divine predestination to a Roman Catholic audience) is not well known. Yet the Jansen controversy was no flash in the pan; Jansen's book was born out of great controversy and added fuel to it.

Guido Stucco has not forgotten, and his translation of part of *Au-*

gustinus promises to make English-speaking scholars more familiar with Jansen. This first English translation of this significant work is one reason to read this volume.

First published in 1640, Jansen's work brought Augustine's teachings to the fore in Roman Catholicism. Jansen's aim was not to respond to the Reformed[1] but to counter Rome's semi-Pelagianism and to address an ongoing controversy between the Dominicans and Jesuits. He sought to present Augustine's teachings, with their biblical and philosophical grounds, as a sound and timely pattern. Jansen's summary of Augustine is replete with quotations from and references to Augustine, Fulgentius of Ruspe, and Prosper of Aquitaine.

The work consists of three tomes, or major parts. The first, in eight books, surveys the development, doctrine, and errors of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. The second, in four books, covers the doctrine of God's pre-fall grace to humans and angels, original sin and its consequences, and the effect of Adam's fall on the human nature and will. The third, in ten books, treats the nature and effects of grace to humans and angels after the Fall. Stucco provides a table of contents of the entire *Augustinus* on pages 271–312. This helpful overview of the whole work is the second reason to read this book: it promotes familiarity with the entire work, even that part that is not translated. Of Jansen's massive work (1,336 pages), Stucco translated only the twenty-six chapters of the ninth book of the third tome, focusing on the predestination of humans and angels.

The well-written and helpful forty-eight-page introduction is the third reason to read the book. Ably placing Jansen in his historical context, Stucco notes six phases of the controversy between the Dominicans and Jesuits that preceded *Augustinus* (2–28). After noting Jansen's involvement (29–34), Stucco gives an overview of each chapter (35–48). The chapter overview is helpful for two reasons. First, while the main point of every chapter can be discovered easily enough,

1 Jansen's service to the church was contemporaneous with the Synod of Dordt, and both took place in the Low Countries. Dordrecht was 130 miles northeast of Ypres, where Jansen began writing *Augustinus* about 1620. Yet nothing in Stucco's translation suggests that Jansen was aware of, or writing in light of, the Synod; Jansen was addressing a controversy within Roman Catholicism.

the reader might get lost in the weeds, especially in longer chapters. The overview distills the chapter's contents. Second, the overview gives context by making explicit what philosophical assumptions Jansen made, and which scholars of Jansen's day were his interlocutors.

The fourth reason to read this book is to assess not merely whether *Jansen's* view of predestination, but whether *Augustine's* perspective squares with Roman Catholic teaching. In the judgment of this reviewer, Jansen presents a view of divine predestination, and consequently also of sin and grace, that is completely inimical to Rome's. First, Jansen highlights Augustine's teaching that in predestination, God *determined* the end (chapter 1); election is not merely divine foreknowledge (chapter 7).

Second, Augustine taught *double* predestination, both election and reprobation (chapter 3; Book X also treats the doctrine of reprobation at greater length). Third, Augustine taught a double *aspect* of predestination. Some theologians spoke of predestination as being only a designation of one's end (heavenly glory). Others spoke of the need for human beings to believe and obey in order to be saved; predestination was not the designation of one's end, but the determination of God to give faith and obedience by which humans can reach the end. Augustine emphasized that predestination regards both the end and the graces given in time by which God brings believers to the end (chapter 4).

Fourth, Augustine emphasized the grace and unmerited character of election (chapter 6). Fifth, this election is unconditional, explained neither by human works nor faith, nor by God's foreknowledge that certain humans would believe and obey. Jansen devotes eleven chapters (15–25) to state and prove this point. Sixth, this election is definite in number; not one more than the elect, and not one fewer, is saved (chapter 26).

Finally, this election is certain; God will bring to faith and obedience and will bring to heaven in the way of faith and obedience all whom He has chosen. His severity regarding the sins of the elect serves their salvation, while His gentleness toward the reprobate serves their condemnation (chapters 19–20). The certainty of election means also that divine predestination necessarily implies divine preservation.

All this Augustine taught, and more. Reading this part of *Augustinus,* one concludes that the Canons of Dort, twenty years earlier, stated

nothing new; Augustine had taught it all already.

Chapters 10–14 and 26 compare and contrast the predestination of humans with that of angels. The elect angels were not predestined by an election of grace, but of merit; they persevere by their own free will, and their glory is a reward for their merits. In this area others developed and refined Augustine's thought in later years.[2]

The reasons to read this book are many. Chiefly, this translation makes Jansen accessible and makes Augustine as relevant today as he was in Jansen's day. The Bible passages on which Augustine based his view are those to which all supporters of the doctrine appeal and all detractors explain as irrelevant (chapter 16). The objections to Augustine's view (that it was fatalistic, destroyed morals, and made prayer and exhortations unnecessary) are the same as have been lodged against it ever since (chapter 23).

The book is not a quick read. Many sentences in the translation reflect the long, convoluted Latin original. Furthermore, the reader who does not understand Roman Catholic terminology will encounter unfamiliar terms: medicinal grace, "justice" as referring to a righteousness that conforms with God's law, free will as Rome defined it, condign merit, and congruent merit. After all, Jansen remained within Roman Catholicism and considered himself a faithful son of the church.

The translator and the publisher have certainly made a worthwhile contribution here. It is striking that the Catholic University of America Press should publish that part of *Augustinus* that seems most contrary to Roman Catholic teaching. One simple explanation is that this volume is historical theology with contemporary relevance (30; the book is part of the Early Modern Catholic Sources series), demonstrating that even within Rome there were some who read the Bible as authoritative, and interpreted it differently than most. Another reason is that Stucco has translated other significant works by Roman Catholic theologians regarding the doctrine of predestination, and has written some histories of the doctrine as taught within Roman Catholicism during specific eras.[3] The translation of this part of *Augustinus* fills another gap in

2 The Belgic Confession Article 12, for instance, ascribes the fact that the elect angels persevered in uprightness to God's grace, not to the angels' free will.

3 See Guido Stucco, *Not Without Us: A Brief History of the Forgotten*

that ongoing work.

The interested reader should follow the reading of Augustinus with the publisher's companion volume *Jansenism: An International Anthology* (ed. Shaun Blanchard and Richard T. Yoder; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2024).

[Addendum: The companion volume just mentioned serves a worthwhile purpose for those who desire to trace the historical development of Jansenism as a movement, and the development of the ideas and teachings of members of the movement. However, the selected readings presented in the *Anthology* do not focus on doctrinal matters, but on other social, cultural, and some church political issues that the Jansenists addressed. The book, in other words, has great value historically, but would not be of interest to the average Protestant Reformed reader. – DJK]

Catholic Doctrine of Predestination During the Semipelagian Controversy (n.p: Fenestra Books, 2006); *God's Eternal Gift: A History of the Catholic Doctrine of Predestination from Augustine to the Renaissance* (n.p.: Xlibris, 2009); *The Doctrine of Predestination in Catholic Scholasticism: Views and Perspectives from the Twelfth Century to the Renaissance* (n.p: self-pub., 2017); *The Catholic Doctrine of Predestination from Luther to Jansenius* (n.p: Xlibris, 2014).

A New History of Redemption: The Work of Jesus the Messiah through the Millennia, by Gerald R. McDermott. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024. Pp. 448. $44.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780801098543. Reviewed by Marco Barone.

A History of the Work of Redemption is a series of sermons by Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758). He preached these sermons in 1739, and they were published posthumously in 1773. Edwards planned to revise and expand these sermons into

> a body of divinity, in a new method, and in the form of a history; in which he was first to show, how the most remarkable events, in all ages from the fall to the present times, recorded in sacred and profane

> history, were adapted to promote the work of redemption; and then to trace, by the light of Scripture prophecy, how the same work should be yet further carried on even to the end of the world.[1]

However, Edwards died before he could begin this great project.

McDermott's *A New History of Redemption* is an attempt to do the same thing from the chronological standpoint of the twenty-first century. The general goal is to show how "every event in history is a link on a gigantic chain, the first link from God and the last going to God" (407) and, more specifically, how "the history of the human race is driven by the history of redemption, so the story of human history is, at its heart, the story of redemption" (408).

Positives

History is the product of God's free decree and creative act, and God is the object of the science of theology. Therefore, McDermott rightly and beautifully expounds how theology is necessarily historical, and history is necessarily theological (chapters 1–2, 33). In his *City of God*, Augustine denied that history was guided by the gods of paganism or by the impersonal *logos* of any other philosophical system. On Augustine's shoulders, in *A History of the Work of Redemption* Edwards directly attacked the Enlightenment myth that humanity makes its own destiny through inevitable progress in virtue and science. Rather, history is *God's* history. God creatively started, sustains, and guides all events of history, from the smallest to the greatest. History is directly mankind's history only through the Son of God who assumed human nature in the man Jesus Christ, and indirectly through all those individuals who are united to Christ. McDermott never tells "brute facts," both because there is no such thing and because all historical events, most mysteriously and others more clearly, are related to the unfolding of God's plan for the world in general and His people in particular.

McDermott is successful in integrating several topics that Edwards left out or neglected, such as the role of world religions, the Jewish roots of Christianity, and the place of liturgy and sacraments in the his-

1 Jonathan Edwards, Jr., "Preface to *A History of the Work of Redemption*," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Vol 1*, ed. Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995), 532.

tory of redemption (2). Chapter 27 on the explosion of Pentecostalism is informative, among other things, because it shows how Pentecostalism, for better or worse, has been spreading Scripture and the name of Jesus Christ to an almost worldwide extent, and often with a zeal that is sadly rare to see in historical Protestant churches. Especially (but not exclusively) chapter 29 (titled "The Church's New Center of Gravity in Asia and Africa") can help us Western Christians to get out of our bubble as it shows how God does not "need" the West, and He can change the centers of Christendom if He wishes to (He has done that in the past, and He can do it again).

McDermott is refreshingly catholic (that is, universal) in his outlook of church history. He reads it contextually and in its own terms. With a charitable spirit, with both awareness of the redemptive revolutions of the past and insight into the possible future developments of redemption, McDermott avoids what C. S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery," that is, the presumption that one's standpoint, creed, or denomination is the definitive center of God's redemptive plan.

Finally, despite the book being wide in scope, McDermott is able to expound complicated periods of packed history in a way that is both coherent and engaging, something that is far from being an easy thing to do.

Negatives

The book, however, has problems. Everything is a development in the history of redemption. But a development can be either good or bad, or something in between. McDermott is broader and more ecumenical than Edwards when it comes to establishing what is a good development in redemption history. Though it is relatively clear what Edwards' standards are, it is not as clear what are McDermott's criteria to discern positive development from negative in the history of redemption. For example, in chapter 26, the Oxford Movement is positively presented. In the very following chapter, the explosion of Pentecostalism is also positively presented. On the one hand, the Oxford Movement placed great emphasis on formal liturgy and sacraments. On the other hand, evangelical Pentecostalism (with some exceptions) antagonizes traditional formal liturgy and high views of the sacraments. How these two "developments" in the history of re-

demption harmonize we are not told with sufficient detail. The same can be said in other instances discussed in the book.

Relatedly, McDermott approves purgatory (379–382, 386–387) and condones relics (231, 243–244). However, he rejects the belief common within much of Protestantism according to which the Old Testament visible church (Israel) was a type of the New Testament universal church with both Jews and Gentiles (with a pedigree from the tradition going back at least to Augustine). Antisemitism is wicked and a direct attack on the catholicity of the gospel (tragically, the church in history has often been cruel to the Jews). However, ignoring all qualifications and nuances, McDermott shallowly generalizes all positions that do not see Israel according to the flesh as still at the center of God's redemption under the umbrella of "supersessionism" or "replacement theology."

Instead, McDermott is unashamedly Zionist. There are today Messianic (that is, Christian) Jews who desire to maintain their Jewish identity and some of their Jewish practices. One has to be careful with judgments, as we risk confusing cultural preferences with normative obligations. But the point is not whether one keeps his Jewish identity; the point is whether one, Jew or Gentile, believes in Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and promised Messiah. The relevant passages from Galatians and Hebrews are not even mentioned in this 400 plus page book (for instance, Galatians 3:28 and Hebrews 13:10 are absent). One wonders whether McDermott believes that the non-Messianic Jews need to be called to repentance for their sinful denial of the true Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of Jehovah made flesh. Though McDermott rejects classical dispensationalism (371–372, 382–385), he promotes a modified dispensationalism inasmuch as he, just like classical dispensationalism, divides the people of God into two by making Christian Jews a special category within that people, and by stipulating Christ-less covenants with the Jews only (see chapter 30 especially).

Unsurprisingly, McDermott sees the current state of Israel in the Middle East as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies (chapter 30 and elsewhere). Besides the exegetical erroneousness of this claim, politically one does not even want to go there in a brief review like this, because what McDermott says about the Christianization of the

Roman Empire applies here also: "politics is a dirty business" (244). Ironically, McDermott's modified dispensationalism will disappoint the amillennialists, his right rejection of the rapture (372) and of a literal millennium (382–385) will disappoint the dispensationalists, and his rejection of a literal millennium will disappoint the postmillennialists!

Conclusion

With these reservations in mind, overall, *A New History of Redemption* was an enjoyable read. Though many will disagree with several of McDermott's *conclusions*, his *approach* is correct in that his philosophy of history is decidedly Christian and theocentric. Coupling that with his writing skills, McDermott writes a theological history of redemption that is informative, engaging, and at times even edifying. That is key, because a history of the church that focuses on merely recounting facts and events has missed the mark; behind all those is the triune God who is leading His church into all truth and, ultimately, into that renewed history that will never end.

Predestination in Early Modern Reformed Theology, by Richard A. Muller. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2024. Softcover. Pp. vii +226. $25.00. ISBN 9798886861075. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

Richard Muller is a well-known contributor to the study of doctrinal developments in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. Having read the Reformers extensively in Latin or their native language, Muller addresses these doctrinal developments directly and knowledgeably. This has enabled him often to do two things: provide additional insights into doctrinal development and debunk wrong views that have developed. These two things he does again in this volume that treats the early Reformed understanding and development of the doctrine of predestination.

Additional insights

Each chapter sheds new or more light on the doctrine of predestination as the Reformers developed it. Chapter one gives a bird's-eye

view of this development in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Muller examines Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, and Calvin in the earliest phase of the Reformation; Beza, Ursinus, Zanchi, and Perkins in the next phase; the formulation of Dort; and post-Dort developments. Each Reformer built on Augustine's foundation. None made predestination "a 'central dogma' or fundamental constructive principles in Reformed theology" (12). Nor did any of the early Reformers suggest an infralapsarian/supralapsarian distinction; this distinction was not faced before the late sixteenth century.

Chapter two observes where Reformed theologians have placed this doctrine in their writings. Some treated predestination in connection with God's providence, others with God's being (theology proper), and yet others with soteriology. There is no one right place to treat it; predestination relates to many points of Reformed doctrine. Muller's takeaway is that each Reformer treated it where he did because of the specific purpose of his document, rather than because he was highlighting predestination above other doctrines or making it foundational (78).

What did Calvin say about predestination? In chapter three, "Calvin on Predestination: A Developmental and Bibliographical Essay," Muller traces the development of Calvin's thought as indicated in his writings. Initially Calvin viewed predestination as a special work of divine providence directed toward the church. As he preached and wrote his commentaries and as he interacted with Albert Pighius, Jerome Bolsec, and Sebastian Costellio, Calvin more clearly set forth the cause of election, related election to covenant, opposed the idea that God has two wills, and distinguished between a general election of a corporate body (Israel and the church) and a specific election of individuals.

Chapter three is the fruit of Muller's careful study of many of Calvin's writings. Muller views his work as only a beginning; Reformed scholars must develop our understanding of Calvin's development of his understanding of predestination. Muller cautions that "what the world does not need is yet another decontextualized dogmatic study based primarily on the two chapters found in Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*" (105). This chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

The fourth and longest chapter surveys the development of supra-

lapsarianism. Muller traces its roots to Franciscus Junius (1545-1602) and others around him in Leiden. Because Jacob Arminus both studied and taught at Leiden, Muller notes that Arminius reacted against this supralapsarian construct, not by defending infralapsarianism, but by reconfiguring the doctrine of predestination entirely. Arminius himself noted that some Reformers presented the doctrine from an infralapsarian viewpoint and others from a supralapsarian, concluding that the Reformers were not agreed on the doctrine. Muller then turns not only to correspondence between Arminius and Junius regarding predestination, but also to the views of Gomarus, Trelcatius, Piscator, Twisse, Ames, Maccovius, Hoornbeeck, Mastricht, Gill, Brown, and Hill to trace the development of supralapsarianism. Contrary to Arminius' suggestion, many Reformers considered both supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism to be compatible with Reformed theology, and they were united in viewing the Arminian presentation of conditional predestination as incompatible with Reformed theology.

The fifth chapter is entitled "Defending Dort: John Robinson and the Separatist Predestinarian Controversy." Robinson (1575-1625) was an English pastor who did not conform to Elizabeth I's attempt to enforce Anglican church government. He moved to Leiden where he was further trained under Franciscus Gomarus soon after Arminius died. The very timing of his education in Leiden raises the intriguing question: would Robinson be Arminian in his doctrine?

To answer the question, Muller supplies a brief account of Robinson's life and education in Cambridge and Leiden. He then devotes a section to one controversy in which Robinson was involved: that regarding the role of free will in salvation. The chapter's third section treats Robinson's response to John Murton, who attacked the doctrinal decisions of the Synod of Dort. Robinson's response made clear that he was a student of Gomarus and a proponent of supralapsarianism.

The final chapter investigates the position of Joseph Hall, Anglican delegate to the Synod of Dort, who wrote a book entitled *The Way of Peace in the Five Busy Articles Commonly Known by the Name of Arminius*. What was this "way of peace," or middle way? Some have presented it as a middle way between *Rome* and the Reformed, and others between *Arminianism* and the Reformed. Muller demonstrates that Hall was not Arminian in his view of predestination. Rather,

he worked to state orthodox truths in a way with which Anglicans, Lutherans, and Reformed could all agree, and tried to restrain theologians from making extreme statements. As a case illustration, Muller refers to statements Hall made concerning predestination, in which Hall denied "absolute predestination." Hall's denial did not suggest that predestination was conditional, but rather that God used means to carry out His decree: He gave faith to those whom He elected and uses the unbelief and disobedience of reprobate humans as the ground to punish them.

Debunking wrong views

In the process of presenting these new insights, Muller debunks wrong ideas regarding the Reformed presentation of predestination. The above paragraph noted an instance of this in chapter six.

In chapter two Muller critically assesses Karl Barth's observations and conclusion regarding where Reformers treated the doctrine of predestination. Muller takes issue with Barth's methodology: Barth overlooked relevant points in his study of *some* Reformers and entirely overlooked *other* Reformers. Despite these omissions, later scholars have relied on Barth's conclusions. Muller returns to the sources, reexamines them, and draws new conclusions.

Also in chapter two Muller opposes the prevalent idea that Beza made the doctrine of predestination more foundational to theology than did Calvin. Muller notes that both Reformed and Arminian theologians considered Calvin's and Beza's views to be essentially the same.

In chapter three, Muller takes issue with the statement of one notable Calvin scholar who represented Calvin as teaching that God elected those whom He foresaw would believe (80). This is not Calvinism, was not the teaching of Calvin personally, and is in fact the very teaching that Calvin opposed!

In sum, the book is a classic illustration of how Richard Muller contributes profitably to historical theology, applied now to the doctrine of predestination. Four of the book's six chapters are edited versions of articles that Muller has previously written and published in other works, including the *Calvin Theological Journal*. Making them more accessible in book form is helpful.

Taught by God: Ancient Hermeneutics for the Modern Church, by Brandon D. Smith. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024. Softcover. Pp. xiv + 194. $22.99. ISBN 9781087752730. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

This book is about "retrieval," a term used often today to refer to a renewed study of the history, doctrine, and practices of the church in the past to correct problems that exist in the church today. Many books regarding retrieval are being published today, not only regarding hermeneutics (Bible interpretation), but also regarding doctrine, worship, or some other practice.

Brandon Smith defines retrieval as "the act of reading and understanding those who have come before us as a way to apply encouragement and/or correction for renewal in today's church" (112). In passing, by referring to modern attempts to discover a text's historical background or the writer's emotional state (110), he touches on what problem he is trying to correct: the sterile modern exegetical methods that are the fruit of the Enlightenment and are based on the assumptions of higher criticism. His thesis is "that modern Christians need to retrieve premodern interpretation by remembering the three sensibilities [see summary below, DJK] Christians have generally shared across the Christian tradition" (181).

Summary

The book's nine chapters are divided into two parts, the first of which is entitled "Retrieving Premodern Sensibilities." Chapter one is a brief survey of the history of Bible interpretation from AD 100–1600. Smith recognizes that the exegetical methods used during the ancient, medieval, and reformation eras were not uniform. His historical survey's goal, however, is to show that the church fathers always asked three questions of a text: What does it mean? How does it reveal Christ and the gospel and fit into the theological unity of Scripture? And how does it apply to us? Modern higher critical methods either do not ask these questions, or they rephrase them: What *did* the text mean to its original audience? And how *did* the text apply to them?

The next three chapters focus on the three "sensibilities," the fundamental component of the exegetical method of these church

fathers. Chapter two addresses their understanding of what the text *meant*: they sought to understand the text in light of its history and grammar. The next chapter notes their attention to what doctrines the text teaches, and how the text fits into the unified revelation of God in Scripture. Chapter four shows that the church fathers were concerned to use Scripture for doxology and life.

In each chapter Smith consciously illustrates the continuities between the three eras by examining the thought and writing of four church fathers: two in the ancient era, one in the medieval era, and one in the reformation era. He refers to Origen, John Chrysostom, Hugh of St. Victor, and Martin Luther (chapter two); Irenaeus, Athanasius, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin (chapter three); and Justin Martyr, Augustine, John of Damascus, and William Tyndale (chapter four). The use of Origen to illustrate the text's *literal* meaning is noteworthy. Origen is known as an allegorist, even at times a wild allegorist. But it would be wrong to conclude that Origen ignored the "letter" of the text. Smith also notes that Irenaeus and Athanasius located the text within the theological unity of Scripture, not just for theological precision, but as a means to rebut heresies.

Chapter five is the book's capstone. Smith explains what retrieval is and gives three reasons why we need to retrieve the early Christian hermeneutical tradition: to learn in humility (we are not the first to interpret the Bible), to anchor ourselves, and to worship with the church.

The book's second part is Smith's endeavor to interpret Bible passages in light of these three "sensibilities." Smith examines Numbers 16-17 in chapter six, Malachi 1-2 in chapter seven, John 7 in chapter eight, and Hebrews 2 in chapter nine. One need not agree with every detail of Smith's interpretations to appreciate that he does use sound methods to interpret these passages, find Christ and gospel themes in them, and apply them.

Evaluation

This book has many strengths. Formally, it is well written, well organized, and sticks to its purpose.

Its doctrinal presuppositions are a strength. Smith gives evidence of having a high view of Scripture as being God's inspired Word of divine revelation, and as having an inherent unity in revealing the

gospel of Christ (131-32). Smith holds several positions at the Oklahoma Baptist University, a Southern Baptist school; his work illustrates that in the Southern Baptist Convention are some who are working diligently to oppose modernism.

The book's exegetical presuppositions are a strength. This comes out in two ways. First, Smith insists that any deeper meaning or significance in a text must flow from the text's literal meaning, from its words. In his explanation of John 7, he wrote: "So we do not need to make up an application or dig around for nuggets of moral principles; instead, the text readily provides the context for us" (152). "Context" here does not refer to the historical or literary context but refers to the ability of the words of a text to direct us toward proper doctrine and applications.

Another exegetical strength is his approach to typology. This reviewer's question, when reading a book like this, is: Does the author *conflate* allegory and typology? Smith does not; he stays in reasonable bounds when treating typology. Worthy of note is that every passage in the book's second part involves typology: Smith proves himself adept again and again. He also observes that both Chrysostom and Calvin viewed the incident recorded in Galatians 4:24 as typology, and did not use it to justify wild allegory (48, 83).

Smith's insistence that there are hermeneutical continuities throughout the first three main eras of church history is a strength. It would be easy to make the mistake, when teaching the various exegetical methods used during these eras, to ignore the continuities that Smith highlights.

More broadly, this reviewer appreciated that Smith finds continuities all the way through the reformation era. Some books regarding retrieval stop after the ancient or medieval eras, overlooking the reformation era. If that book's author specializes in ancient or medieval studies, one must not make too much of the lack of attention to the Reformers. But other books appear consciously to exclude the reformation era, as if it is embarrassing and cannot help to correct problems in the church today. Smith does not do this.

The book is highly recommended to those who see modern higher-critical methods as wrong and dangerous, and desire guidance on how properly to interpret the Scriptures.

One criticism is minor, in light of the book's many strengths. Preachers who understand Scripture to be God's authoritative revelation may boldly declare what God requires and commands of His people, and that the Holy Spirit empowers us to do as He commands. Using the language of "inviting" the audience to worship the true God and to forgive others, or "challenging" them to identify with sinners (133-136) seems to this reviewer to soften what need not be softened.

Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 4*: Redemption in Christ*, by Petrus Van Mastricht. Tr. Todd M. Rester. Ed. Joel R. Beeke. Grand Rapids, MI. Reformation Heritage Books, 2023. Pp 776. Hardcover. $50.00. ISBN: 9798886860320. Reviewed by Marco Barone.

We should recall Mastricht's excellent definition of theological science: "theology is the doctrine of living, and of living for God, and for God through Christ."[1] Mastricht says that "theology is *doctrine*,"[2] but it also is doctrine of *living*, and not just any living, but living for *God*.[3] Practice does not swallow up doctrine, nor vice-versa. Rather, Mastricht defines terms this way because theology "must be the kind of method in which theory and practice walk in step together…they must walk together in such a way that theory precedes and practice follows in every one of theology's articles."[4]

Among the four volumes of Mastricht's *Theoretical-Practical Theology* translated so far, the fourth volume is perhaps the one that best showcases Mastricht's beautiful definition of theology.

Contents

Chapter one is dedicated to the covenant of grace. This should not surprise: *Redemption in Christ* is about redemption in Christ *the Mediator of the covenant* between God and mankind. Since "the norm and pattern according to which God dispenses every saving grace is

1 Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* Vol. 1*: Prolegomena*, transl. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 101.

2 Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Vol. 1*, 100.

3 Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Vol. 1*, 101.

4 Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Vol. 1*, 67.

the covenant of grace (55)," what that covenant is must be expounded. Though the covenant of grace is defined in transactional terms (15), Mastricht is clear in saying that such a covenant is established with the elect alone, and, therefore, the promises are to them alone (7-8, 21, 39). Far from being a neglectable subject, "the contemplation of the covenant of grace…enraptures us in pious admiration of it, from so many, so great, and such excellent mysteries it reveals" (47).

Chapter two sets forth the *mediatorial* dignity of the Mediator of the covenant. "The one precisely in the middle in the Trinity" is our Mediator, the same one who "by participation of both natures" might "unite the disagreeing God and man" (79). If God is a covenant God, also the Mediator is a covenant mediator inasmuch as, not only in reconciling fallen mankind, but also and especially in Himself, He is the perfect reconciliation of humanity and God. In this sense, "he is the covenant" (80).

Chapter three discusses the many names that Christ has in Scripture. Since in Scripture "the intent of names is to represent the sum of all those things that are incumbent upon us to believe regarding the one named" (93), Mastricht expounds at some length the meaning of the names and titles of Christ "so that by their influence we may know the named Mediator more distinctly" (89).

Chapter four is on the person of the Mediator in the union of the divine and human natures in the one person of the "God-man" (7). The chapter is an orthodox exposition with many insightful, heartwarming applications. Chapter five expounds on the truth, necessity, and sufficiency of Christ's threefold office, and chapters six through eight treat Christ as prophet, priest, and king respectively. Besides beautifully extolling Christ's office, these chapters expound on the saints' calling to view themselves as and to be under-prophets, -priests, and -kings of Christ. How often do we encourage ourselves and each other with the truth of our God-given threefold office?

Chapter nine discusses "the indescribable grace of the Mediator" (285) in condescending to us in His humiliation. Chapter ten is about the incarnation *per se*. The Word was incarnated "in an altogether extraordinary and wonderful way" (295). The chapter truly magnifies the majesty of the miracle of miracles and of the wonder of wonder: The timeless Holy One was conceived (294) and the eternal Son of

God was born (295). The chapter is somewhat tainted by Mastricht's speculation that Mary was "godly, surpassing all other women" (297), as well as by Mastricht's grandiose praises of the otherwise godly Mary (321).

Chapter eleven sets forth the holiness and beauty of Jesus' life and our calling to be His imitators.

Chapter twelve discusses the death of Christ. For Mastricht, Christ's "death in itself could have been sufficient to deliver each and every person (for the infinite dignity of his person, it is of infinite value…) if only, from the Father's will, he had willed to destine it to all." However, in fact Christ "did not endure death for each and every sinner head by head," but only for the elect (416-417, see also 427). Mastricht is both detailed and vivid in his descriptions of the unique agonies of Christ, with the purpose of nourishing our gratitude and strengthening the saints' resolution to go outside the camp to bear the reproach of Christ's sufferings. Chapter thirteen, on Christ's descent, has similar aims. Christ's descent consisted in the descent of His body into the grave, of His soul into the infernal state of His expiatory sufferings, and "the whole Christ, into the power and dominion of death" (459). To be conformed to Christ is "a Christian's chief perfection" (472), which is why also the saints often experience trials that they describe as hellish. But whenever "our souls descend into the horrors of hell…what then is more effective than to think that Christ also descended, and that not for himself, but for his own, and just as God did not leave him in hell, so also, on account of him, he will not abandon them" (469-470). Into whatever great trial the saints may fall, Christ has been there and even more so, but—God be praised!—"the deeper their descent has been, the higher their ascent will be, when God has raised them together with Christ, and set them with Him in the heavenly places" (476).

As a natural follow-up, chapter fourteen expounds the glory of Christ's exaltation and the beauty of the saints' exaltation for His sake. Chapters fifteen to seventeen discuss three stages of Christ's exaltation: resurrection, ascension, and sitting, respectively. Mastricht's pen cannot contain his awe: "Oh good God, how great and how indescribable a comfort there is in all these things!" (520). In an age where vain distractions are countless, we benefit from hearing Mastricht's admo-

nition to meditate upon Christ's glories lest we "most cruelly abuse ourselves and our wretched souls, by depriving ourselves of all those benefits which rebound to true believers from Christ's ascension and its efficacy [and, by extension, by the other glories of Christ]" (555).

The book closes with chapter eighteen, "The Mediator's Redemption Itself," which gives us an introduction and foretaste of what will be the fifth volume of Mastricht's manual, *The Application of Redemption and the Church*. The chapter describes the nature, acts, objects, and fruits of Christ's redemption. Mastricht maintains both the passive and active obedience and righteousness of Christ (594-595, 623), as well as that Christ's satisfaction is limited to the elect (626-631). Though Mastricht is adamant that "God decreed from eternity that certain persons chosen by him would more certainly than certain at some point be justified and adopted" (614), Mastricht denies that the "elect sinners, before regeneration, faith, and repentance, are justified children of God in actuality" (614). Mastricht's scriptural proofs are convincing, his arguments are stringent, and the whole section (611-616) deserves careful study. This final chapter ends with a practical part that extols how the "incomparable and indescribable act of redemption commends the immeasurable glory of God" which is "the ultimate goal of the entirety of this so illustrious undertaking" (633). More specifically, the ultimate end of redemption is the "glorification of the Father in the Son as Mediator" (635). But "God's infinite goodness…[is] naturally communicative of itself" (637), and, therefore, redemption also shines in its subordinate end: the salvation of the elect whereby God, "in utterly astounding kindness toward mankind…and love…expends not only what he has, but himself, in all that he is (Eph. 5:2)" (636).

Conclusion

Any reader (depending on one's Christian denominational affiliations, convictions, and preferences) will inevitably disagree here and there with a work so lengthy and detailed as *Redemption in Christ*. That said, with its fourth installment *Theoretical-Practical Theology* has again proved itself to be a must-have and destined to become a Reformed classic. Highly recommended.

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