

Grace Uncommon

A Protestant Reformed Look at the Doctrine of Common Grace

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Introduction

Three items should be treated by way of introduction.

First, the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) are not alone in their rejection of the doctrine of common grace. Increasing in number, there are others who agree with the PRC in their objections to this doctrine. There is a lengthy article written by a Presbyterian in *The Trinity Review* called "The Myth of Common Grace" (March/April, 1987). There is Dr. Henry Vander Goot, a professor of religion at Calvin College, and a champion, of sorts, of the conservative cause there, who has spoken of the fundamental error of common grace, even claiming that many of the problems in the CRC at present can be traced to the doctrine of common grace. There are others.

In the second place, supporters of the doctrine of common grace make quite a point of calling John Calvin to witness for their cause. This has been done before, and often. In fact, an entire book was written to try to show that (Herman Kuiper, *Calvin and Common Grace*, 1928). About 10 years ago, I went through that book and wrote an extensive paper to show that almost every reference from Calvin is either a grasping at straws or taken so badly out of context as to make the claim unsubstantiated (see Appendix III). In the fall of 1987, Dr. Vander Goot spoke to a minister's gathering ("Why Herman Hoeksema Was Right in 1924"), the burden of his speech being to show that Calvin, taken in context, does not teach common grace. I believe that he made a good case of it. My point is that the claim to have Calvin on one's side, a weighty advantage if it can be proved, does not come easily.

Third, the issue of common grace is not dead, but alive and well in the CRC. At times, the words *common* grace are not used. At other times, explicit reference has been made to common grace to promote heresy and unrighteousness in the churches.

Regarding doctrine: In 1962 Harold Dekker, a professor in Calvin Theological Seminary, began his public defense of universal atonement by using the teaching of the well-meant offer of the gospel, a teaching which was adopted by the CRC in 1924 with the teaching of common grace. (For Dekker's position, see *The Reformed Journal*, 1962 to 1964). In the 1970s, Dr. Harry Boer lodged a gravamen against two articles in the *Canons of Dordt*, using the doctrine of common grace to bolster his attack against the doctrine of reprobation taught there. More recently, in the late 1980s, God's Word in the first part of Genesis been interpreted as myth, almost if not completely bereft of historical fact. What is not so well known is that this troubling and heretical interpretation of Scripture appeals to the doctrine of common grace. (See "Hermeneutical Issues Then and Now: The Jansen Case Revisited" in *Calvin Theological Journal*, April, 1989). These are a few of the ways that the teaching of common grace has influenced faith.

Regarding practice: ever since the synodical decision of 1928 (see below on the *antithesis*) and through the 1950s and beyond, the churches have been appealing to common grace to sanctify the movie and

redeem the dance. This practice continues. Recently, one of the young women in my congregation expressed concern to me that, at the Reformed college she attended, there was frequent appeal to common grace to support behavior and fellowships that were contrary to historic Reformed principles.

Not only in the past, but also in the present, some have claimed that common grace is insignificant, that the controversy in the 1920s was unfortunate and unnecessary (see J. Tuininga in *Christian Renewal*, February 19, 1990, page 14). My prayer is that all will see that, whether one agrees or disagrees, common grace is an issue that is important and must be discussed.

A Clearing of Misunderstandings

I have heard that the Protestant Reformed Churches often misrepresent the CRC's position. Perhaps that has been the case. It is also the case that the PRC's position has not been fairly represented by the CRC in times past. Perhaps this has happened because sin and pride have stood in the way of a desire to be completely accurate, honest and fair. Because the Protestant Reformed position has been misrepresented or misunderstood, I want to make plain first what we do not mean in our rejection of common grace.

Regarding The First Point

The first point of common grace teaches *a favorable attitude of God towards all men in general*, and not only toward the elect (see Appendix I). The proof given for this point was the "rain and the sunshine" that the unbelievers receive from God. When the Protestant Reformed Churches reject the first point of common grace, our denial does not mean that we teach that the rain and sunshine the wicked receive are not good. They *are* good. The wicked must recognize them as good. And they are given to the wicked by God. Our problem with that first point of common grace is that it teaches that God gives those good things to unbelievers in His *love* for them or His *favor* towards them. The difficulty is there.

Regarding the Second Point

The second point of common grace teaches that *God restrains the unimpeded (unhindered) breaking out of sin, by the general operation of the Holy Spirit* (Appendix I). He does that in their hearts *without regenerating them*. When we object to this second point, our objection is not with the truth that God restrains sin. (This has been said by some of our critics. Whether purposely or whether they just understood us to know that they meant otherwise, is a question. But they have said quite plainly that God does not restrain sin. But in the context of their writings, it becomes obvious that they say that God *does* restrain sin. If it has been said that God does not restrain sin, I make bold to say that it should not have been said, and ask that the writings be viewed in their context.)

Our objection to this second point is not that God restrains sin. God does restrain sinners from doing every conceivable wicked deed. If that were not the case, the world would be chaos. Our objection to the second point is that it teaches that God restrains sin by a *gracious* operation of His Spirit and *in an attitude of favor toward them*. If this is not the teaching of common grace, then I have no problem with the second point. All by itself, the second point can be true.

There are other explanations, though, (besides the operation of the Holy Spirit in their hearts) why men do not commit every sin imaginable. The church father Augustine gave one. He explained that the wicked were so busy pursuing one lust that they did not commit all of them. If they were lovers of money, for example, they would forgo all kinds of other sins (drunkenness, drug use, gluttony) in order

to pursue this one lust of theirs -- to get as much money as possible. Other explanations can be given why men do not commit every possible sin. An obvious reason is that men do not desire to suffer the evil consequences of evil. According to the *Canons of Dordt*, they still have regard for good order and decency in society. But they have regard for this because they see it is *profitable* for them. A man refrains from murder, but not because *God restrains* him; he refrains from sinning because he knows the miserable consequences if he murders; he wants to save his own hide. (This is Calvin's explanation; see his *Institutes*: II,3,3.) As the *Belgic Confession* teaches, God ordained the *magistrate*, "to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency. For this purpose he hath invested the magistracy with the sword...."

Regarding The Third Point

The third point teaches that unbelievers who are not regenerated can do good works, not saving good, but civil good (Appendix I). When we object to this third point, our objection should not be taken to mean that unbelievers cannot do anything *useful, profitable, or outwardly correct*. We do not say that because an unbeliever made pen, it is not a good pen and therefore I cannot use it; or that because he made this shirt, therefore it is not a good shirt and I cannot (may not) wear it. We do not ever say because an unbeliever wrote a book, that therefore it cannot be a useful book for the believer.

Our objection to the third point is simply this: The unbeliever cannot do anything for which God is pleased with him personally. There are no works that unbelievers perform which God approves, about which He says "good work," and upon which He puts His stamp of approval. All works of unbelievers are unrighteous.

Having shown what the Protestant Reformed do not believe in their denial of common grace, there are especially three vital tenets of the Reformed faith which the doctrine of common grace touches and to which the doctrine does damage.

Common Grace's Denial of Total Depravity

The Truth of Total Depravity

The Reformed doctrine of total depravity is that men who are not born again are dead in sin, unable to do any good, and inclined to all evil. The emphasis here must be this: they are spiritually dead. The cause of this spiritual death is the fall of our first parents in Paradise and their subsequent punishment by God with death: physical and spiritual. Natural man is unable to do any good.

Biblical proof for this is found throughout Scripture. In Genesis 2:16-17 the Lord says to Adam and Eve, "The day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die. That punishment was meted to them, according to Ephesians 2:1ff: "You... were dead in trespasses and sins.... But God, who is rich in mercy...hath quickened us together with Christ...." Many more passages speak of man's spiritual death.

Not only is natural man *dead*, he is *actively evil*. "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. So then *they that are in the flesh cannot please God*" (Romans 8:6-8). This is also the teaching of Romans 3:9-12, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no not one: There

is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are all together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no not one...." All that natural man does is sin.

Natural man is a slave to sin. His will is bound to doing nothing but evil. This is the thesis of Martin Luther's book, *The Bondage of the Will*, the only book, in his own opinion, that was worth saving. Christ said in John 5:15, "Without me ye can do nothing."

The above is not a careless appeal to a few isolated texts, but is the Reformed faith.

In the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 5, we learn that the natural man is "prone...to hate God and his neighbor"; in Q&A 6 that natural man is "so wicked and perverse..."; and in Q&A 8, "Are we then so corrupt that we are *wholly* incapable of doing *any* good, and inclined to *all* wickedness?" What is the answer? "Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the spirit of God." **Indeed we are.** The fathers say nothing here like, "Well, let us make some distinctions. What do you mean by good? What do you mean by corrupt?" But, "Indeed we are, except for regeneration by the Spirit of God."

The *Belgic Confession* has, in Article 14, that man is "become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in *all his ways*.... Therefore we reject all that is taught repugnant to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin.... For who may presume to boast, that he of himself can do *any good*...for there is no will or understanding conformable to the divine will or understanding but what Christ has wrought in man; which he teaches us when he says, without me ye can do nothing." In Article 15 of this same creed, original sin is said to be "a corruption of the whole nature...which produces in man all sorts of sin as a root thereof."

What is made so plain in these two confessions is explained further in the *Canons*, III-IV,1, "Man was originally formed after the image of God...but revolting from God...he forfeited these excellent gifts; and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections."

The doctrine of total depravity is confessed by all Reformed Christians.

Common Grace Denies This Reformed Truth

The third point of common grace does not teach that man can do *saving* good. By that I take the CRC to mean activities such as repentance, faith, or anything that would bring him closer to God. But the third point *does* teach that unbelieving, unregenerated man does something of which God approves, with which God is pleased, and which is conformable to God's will. He is able to do civil good.

I believe that common grace undermines the Reformed Confession of total depravity. (It possibly undermines this truth also in the second point, which teaches, if I do not misunderstand it, that the Holy Spirit restrains sin in the heart of natural man, so that there is still a remnant of God in him. The Holy Spirit's common grace preserved man after the fall so that he did not become completely wicked.) But common grace undermines this teaching in the third point, which teaches that natural man is able to do *civil* good.

Scripture and the Reformed confessions teach that man is *totally* depraved, unable to do any good, and inclined to *all* evil. The *Heidelberg Catechism* makes that plain. The only exception to this truth is regeneration. The *Belgic Confession* is clear: "He is *corrupt in all his ways*...." "There is no will or

understanding conformable to the divine will or understanding but what Christ has wrought in man." The *Canons of Dordt* (III-IV:11) spell out plainly that all good works a man performs come by regeneration and regeneration alone.

Our Defense of our Denial of Common Grace

Certainly, there are texts that seem to teach that natural man can do good. Yet this question must be considered: what is the prevailing teaching of Scripture? These texts must be explained in light of the prevailing teaching of Scriptures and the Confessions, which show that natural man cannot do good in God's eyes.

No more do the Protestant Reformed "explain away" the texts which are presented to support the teaching of common grace, than all Reformed believers are "explaining away" the texts in the Bible which Arminians bring to us to support the false doctrines of universal atonement and resistible grace. The old Dutch saying is, "*Elke ketter heeft zijn letter*" (Every heretic has his text).

There is claim that the confessions teach this ability of natural man to do good. Reference is made to Canons III-IV:4. It must be pointed out that very plainly the confession does not teach this ability. The first half of the article says, "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 a good, external deportment." That is all the farther that article is quoted in the 1924 synod's study report. But the last half is the key: "But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is *incapable* of using it 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, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God." Whatever our fathers meant when they said that natural man is unable to use the light of nature aright in things natural and civil, it is clear that they mean here that natural man does not do good.

The Free-Offer's Denial of Predestination

The "free offer of the gospel" is the teaching that God offers salvation to all men when the gospel is preached promiscuously to all. The free offer teaches that God graciously and sincerely offers salvation to all who hear the preaching, and honestly and sincerely desires to save all of them.

The adoption of the first point of common grace in 1924 was an official adoption (albeit in a backhanded way) of the teaching of the "free offer of the gospel."

Sometimes it is said that the Protestant Reformed put this teaching into the CRC's mouth. It is said that the teaching of the "free offer" was only part of the study committee's report. But the free offer was more than that. It was part of the official decision of Synod (see Appendix I). Besides, the defenders of common grace never tire of defending the free offer. Thus, this paper, an analysis of the three points of common grace, takes up a defense of the Reformed faith against the "free offer of the gospel" taught in the first point.

We believe that the "free offer" must lead to a denial of the Reformed teaching of predestination.

The Reformed Truth of Predestination

The Reformed truth of predestination is that God has decreed, willed, and intended that some be saved and others not be saved. God determines to save a certain, definite number of people in Christ, whose names are written in His book of life from eternity. This is the Reformed doctrine of election. At the same time, God determines not to save a certain, definite number of people, all those who are not in Christ. This is the Reformed doctrine of reprobation.

Predestination is *unconditional*. God determines to save this specific number of people, not because He saw ahead of time that they were *going* to believe or would be "save-able." God chose His friends *unconditionally*. To illustrate, our choosing of friends is *conditional*. It must be, most often. A Christian girl or boy who wants to date must be selective and say, "I will date on one condition--that (among other things) you are a Christian." God's choosing of *His* friends was *not* conditional. He did not choose them because of what they were or would become. Also, God determined to *pass by* others in this decree of election, not because He saw that they were going to reject Him. God rejected them unconditionally.

There is so much Biblical proof for this that the difficulty is choosing the few texts that are clearest. In Ephesians 1:4 Paul says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ; according as *he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: *having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will*" (see also Deut. 7:6; Romans 9:11; Eph. 1:11; etc.).

That predestination is *unconditional* is seen in a number of passages, especially Deuteronomy 7:7-8, "The Lord did not set his love upon you nor choose you, (that's electing love!) because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers...." (If ever I loved a *petitio principii* [circular reasoning] it is this! The Lord loves you because He loves you!)

This comes out especially in Ephesians 1. God chose a people, not because they *would be* holy, but He chose them *in order that they might be* holy. His election *brings* holiness. Good works are the fruits, not the roots, of election. What standard was used by God for His election of us? "According to the *holiness* of the people?" "According to the *faith* of the people?" "According to their *good works*?" Never. "According to the *good pleasure of his own will*" He chose a people.

That *reprobation is unconditional* is seen in more than one place. John 10:26 is a key text, "Ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you." They are unbelievers because God did not choose them. I Peter 2:8 brings that out as well. Jesus Christ is "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto *also they were appointed*." Then it goes on, "But ye are a *chosen generation*..."

A reminder is in place here that predestination, election and reprobation, is a fundamental truth of the reformed faith, a non-negotiable of the Reformed standards, the first of the five points of Calvinism: Unconditional election (predestination).

This is confessionally Reformed.

The *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 52 says that God "shall translate me and all his *chosen* ones to himself into heavenly joys and glory." Question 54, on the church, has: "The Son of God gathers,

defends, and preserves...a church *chosen* to everlasting life." The *Belgic Confession* becomes more clear, especially regarding the unconditionality of election, in Article 16: "God...delivers...all whom he...hath elected in Christ...without any respect to their works...." The *Canons of Dordt*, I:7 claim: "Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby...he hath chosen...a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ...." And in I:9: "This election was not founded upon foreseen faith...or any...good quality...in man...." In II:8: "This was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God...that the...efficacy of the...death of his Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith.... That is, it was the will of God that Christ...should effectually redeem...all those and those only who were from eternity chosen to salvation...."

The "Free Offer of the Gospel" Must Deny This Truth

The free offer either explicitly or implicitly denies predestination. The first point and the offer teach that God's love is for *all* who hear the preaching of the Gospel. But election is that the love of God in Christ is eternally directed toward *some*, definite, particular men, willing their salvation and effectually accomplishing it (see Deut. 7:6-8 and Romans 8:28-39).

The free offer of the gospel (explicitly or implicitly) either makes election universal, or conditional, or both. If God wills the salvation of all men, then He must will the salvation of those whom he has not chosen. How can that be? Then God must have chosen all those to whom He offers salvation; or salvation must be conditioned by man's believing -- both of which we have seen are not biblical and not confessional. How can God sincerely offer salvation to all men when He has decreed (in predestination) not to save them? Can He be sincere in that, His "expression of love?"

Another way, out of the horns of the "free offer's" dilemma -- besides to deny predestination -- is to say that this is a contradiction in the Bible that we cannot fathom. Friends, the Bible is not contradictory. "God *wills* to save them; God *does not* will to save them?" The Bible is mysterious and unfathomable, but it is not contradictory.

Not only does the free offer undermine the truth of unconditional predestination, it undermines other of the five points of Calvinism. If God's grace is extended in the preaching to all men, then God's grace is not irresistible, as all Calvinists and Reformed teach, but resistible, as the Arminian teaches, for not all are saved by it. If God's grace in the preaching is for all, from where did this grace come? (And the grace in the preaching is certainly not common, but a saving, special grace.) All grace is from the cross of Christ. But if this grace in the "offer" came from the cross of Christ, then the atonement is not limited, but universal. Or, if God offers salvation to all men in the preaching, His offer is not sincere, since His Son did not die for all men. And if God's desire in the preaching is to save all, then our Almighty, sovereign God is frustrated in His desires.

In our defense of our denial of the free offer, we ask a question.

In the view of the free offer, why are some saved in the preaching and others not? The answer cannot be *the grace of God*, because the grace of God comes to all in the preaching. The answer cannot be the *will* of God in the preaching, because the will of God is to save all alike. There are two alternatives: Either it is due to the free will of the sinner (clearly Arminian), or it is a paradox. But the Bible is not contradictory, flatly contradictory.

There is a defense of the free offer in a number of texts that supposedly refer to God's desire and will to save all men. But the Reformed man must be careful in his interpretation of them. The Arminians at

Dordt had a basketfull of proof texts. It is striking that most of the texts appealed to in support of the free offer of the gospel are the same texts used by the Arminians at Dordt. The Reformed believer will consider seriously the interpretation of these texts by John Owen, Francis Turretin and John Calvin, before he says that the interpretation which denies the "free offer" is a ruthless, arbitrary distortion of the texts. Our defense is that Scripture interprets Scripture, and that one text does not contradict another. This is a fundamental principle of Reformed hermeneutics.

The testimony of the *Canons*, the expression of the faith of every Reformed believer, speaks loudly and clearly on the question of the will of God to save: "*This was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God...that the...efficacy of the...death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of...faith....*" (emphasis mine: B.G.).

Clarification of Our Denial of the Free Offer

There always has been a misunderstanding of the Protestant Reformed denial of the free offer of the gospel, which should be cleared up. The PRC's denial of the free offer does not mean that the preacher must not preach to all promiscuously. He must! It does not mean that he does not call all men to repent and believe. He does! It does not imply that God does not promise salvation to all who will believe. God most certainly does!

The PRC's denial of the free offer means this: that we deny that there is *grace* in the preaching to all men, that we deny that the preaching expresses God's *desire* and *purpose* and *intent* to save all men. He most certainly does not. Else they would be saved, because He is a sovereign, powerful God.

Common Grace's Destruction of the Antithesis

What The Antithesis Is

God calls His people to live in opposition to the world. They are called to say "Yes" to everything of God, and to say "No" to everything of the world. They are called to live in spiritual separation from worldliness. This is the antithesis.

When the Reformed believer maintains the antithesis, it does not mean that he wants to be an Anabaptist, fleeing from the world, taking no part in the life of this world. He does not go, as the Dutch used to say, mocking, "*met e'n boekje in e'n hoekje*" (with a little book in a corner). He lives in the world and takes part in all the activities of labor and government and society. The antithesis means that he has nothing in common with the world *spiritually*, that he is called to "come out from among them" and be separate.

The reason it is his calling to live the antithesis is that Christians are a different people. The life of the regenerated child of God in the world has its source in the new life of Christ and is directed by the power of God's grace in Christ. It is a living and walking in the Holy Spirit. It is exactly the struggle of the child of God, day in and day out, to live, to think, to will, to feel, to speak, and to act *out of* Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The life of the unregenerated *unbeliever*, in contrast, has its source in the flesh, that is, in depraved human nature, and is directed by the power of sin. It is a living and walking in sin. Therefore the life of the believer and the unbeliever are in opposition.

The antithesis must *show itself*, and show itself in all of life. First, the life of the believer is subject to the Word of God, whereas the unbeliever's life is independent of the Word and in rebellion against it. Second, the goal of life is different. The believer directs his life toward God. His life is God-centered; the goal: God's glory. The unbeliever leaves God out; his life is man-centered.

Proof that the Antithesis is Reformed

Confessional proof is not as explicit as the former two fundamentals of the Reformed faith. But this does not mean that the antithesis is not a biblical and Reformed idea. Although the concept was developed more clearly by our Reformed fathers in the 19th century, it certainly is confessional. The *Heidelberg Catechism* says that the "Son of God gathers...*out of the whole human race*, a church chosen to everlasting life." The *Belgic Confession* brings out the idea of the antithesis when, explaining the doctrine of baptism and taking the cue from the significance of circumcision, it says that by the sacrament of baptism "we are *received into* the Church of God, and *separated from* all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to him, whose ensign and banner we bear...." The sacrament of baptism, then, is a great banner which proclaims to the world, "Antithesis!"

There is biblical proof. The nation of Israel was a prime example of the antithesis. They were a separate people, called not to mix with the nations around them, punished every time they intermarried and mingled with them. Time and again God called them to be a *separate* people. This comes out in the New Testament, generally, when God's people are called "foreigners, pilgrims, strangers" in the world; and specifically in II Corinthians 6, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial?" And in James 4:4, "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?"

Recent history shows that the antithesis is a Reformed concept. The book by James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in America*, points out that the early Reformed settlers in America desired to maintain the antithesis in their life here. Their attempts went to extremes, even to the extreme claim that the preservation of their mother tongue -- the Dutch language -- would bolster their antithetical life. But it points out that God's people were concerned about being a *separate* people, spiritually, about living the antithesis.

That the antithesis is our Reformed heritage was brought out clearly in the warning that the Christian Reformed Church's Synod gave to the churches in the decision of common grace in 1924. "If we observe the spiritual tendencies of the present time, we cannot deny that there exists much more danger of world conformity than of world flight. The liberal theology of the present time actually wishes to eradicate the boundary between the church and the world.... The idea of a spiritual-moral *antithesis* is weakening in large measure in the consciousness of many, and gives way to a vague feeling of general brotherhood.... The doctrine of special grace in Christ is more and more driven to the background.... Through the press and through all sorts of inventions and discoveries, that in themselves should be valued as gifts of God, a great part of the sinful world is intruding into our Christian homes. Against all these and more pernicious influences, which press upon us from all sides, there is a crying necessity that the church mount a guard on principle; that she...also fight tooth and nail for the spiritual-moral antithesis.... Without ceasing may she hold fast to the principle that God's people is a special people, living from its own root, the root of faith.... And with holy seriousness may she call...her people and especially her youth not to be conformed to the world." (Bratt, page 115, and the CRC *Acta der Synode*, 1924, pp 146-147.)

Common Grace's Undermining of the Antithesis

The doctrine of common grace undermines the antithesis in two ways, first, in that it teaches a love and favor of God toward all men in common. If it is true that God has a favor towards all men, that God loves all men, that *God* is friend of all men, even those whom He wills to send to hell, even those who are fighting tooth and nail against His kingdom (and they all are!), *there is no reason that the child of God should not be friends with the world.* In fact, given the doctrine of common grace, there is good warrant to call God's people to be friends with unbelievers, to fellowship with worldly men and women.

Second, common grace teaches that unbelievers are involved in works in this world with which God is pleased. If God gives unbelievers an ability to work a work that pleases Him, as a fruit of His grace (even though it is not "special grace"), the logical conclusion is that, in all endeavors, the believer is able to work side by side with the unbeliever in those endeavors -- in the work of a labor union, the work of social matters, the work of politics, even in the education of their children. But according to the Biblical truth of the antithesis, this is impossible because the goals of each are different.

Common grace undermines the truth that there is that "spiritual-moral antithesis" between believers and unbelievers, and denies that there is no common ground between Christ and Belial, between righteousness and unrighteousness. Common grace implies, if it does not teach, that God's people are no longer called to come out from them, but to go in among them.

Historically, the antithesis has been rejected on the basis of common grace.

In his book *Dutch Calvinism...*, James Bratt says that "over against the antithesis, the *Journal* raised the idea of common grace...." (page 101).

Henry R. Van Til, himself a proponent of common grace, in his book *The Calvinist Concept of Culture* (1959, Baker), warns against what he would call "abusing" the doctrine of common grace. He speaks of "a certain level of existence at which the army of the Lord is immobilized, where it does not function as an army, but suddenly takes on the appearance of crowds of vacationers, or the motley multitude at a fair and pushing one another for a better position to see. Thus there is established between the church and the world a gray, colorless area, a kind of no-man's land, where an armistice obtains and one can hobnob with the enemy with impunity in a relaxed Christmas spirit, smoking the common weed."

A CRC synodical declaration already in 1928 says, "The question arises, what basis of fellowship there can be between the child of God and the man of this world. What have they in common which makes a degree of communion possible and legitimate?... The solution is found in the doctrine of common grace.... The basis of our fellowship with unbelievers should be...the grace, common, which they have in common with us." "The *basis* of our *fellowship* with *unbelievers*" (emphasis mine, BLG)

And in an issue of *The Banner* (December 12, 1988), an issue devoted almost entirely to the question of the antithesis, there is a subtle mockery of the historical teaching of the antithesis. The Reformed believer grieves over the ridicule of the faith of our fathers, the faith of Holy Scripture. The Reformed believer prays that God will show His people the truth because, in the generations to come there will be no calling to live in spiritual separation from the world.

Let there be made an appeal to the experience of Reformed Christians. How often is it heard that the children of God must be a separate people? How often is reference made to II Corinthians 6? When is it heard that friendship with the world is enmity against God? If this is lacking, one explanation may be

that the doctrine of common grace is alive and working, and that the common grace of the "three points" and the antithesis are at odds.

Our defense of the antithesis is to deny common grace, is to deny that there is a favor of God common to all men, to deny that there is a common life that we share because of common grace, and to deny therefore that we are to have fellowship with the world. This is the practical aspect of the doctrine of common grace.

Conclusion

A teaching that ended in the deposition of three ministers from the church of Jesus Christ is a vitally important teaching, a teaching that must be examined, a teaching that does not lie dormant in the archives of the church.

Common grace is still appealed to today. Outside of the Dutch Reformed tradition, appeal is being made to common grace, so that the church and the world are yoked together. Within the Dutch Reformed tradition, common grace becomes the unconscious (and sometimes conscious) basis for unreformed teaching and practices.

Our prayer is that God will use this paper to show that we are still interested -- for our neighbor's sakes - - in these important issues, interested to sharpen our spiritual senses for appreciation for the Reformed faith, so that we might stand shoulder to shoulder in the maintenance of god's truth of total depravity, unconditional election, and the antithesis which God's people are called to live.

Appendix I

I. The First Point:

"Relative to the first point which concerns the favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect, Synod declares it to be established according to Scripture and the Confessions 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:8,9, 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.

Scriptural proof: Psalm 145:9; Matt. 5:44, 45; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:16-17; I Tim. 4:10; Rom. 2:4; Ezekiel 33:11; Ezekiel 18:23."

II. The Second Point:

"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. This is evident from the citations from Scripture and from the Netherlands Confession, Arts. 13 and 36, which teach that God by the general operations of His Spirit, without renewing the heart of man, restrains the unimpeded breaking out of sin, by which human life in society remains possible; while it is also evident from the quotations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology, that from ancient times our Reformed fathers were of the same opinion.

Scriptural proof: Ps. 81:11-12; Gen. 6:3; Acts 7:42; Rom. 1:24; Rom. 1:26, 28; II Thess. 2:6-7."

III. The Third Point:

"Relative to the third point, which is concerned with the question of civil righteousness as performed by the unregenerate, Synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confessions the unregenerate, though incapable of doing any saving good, can do civil good. This is evident from the quotations from Scripture and from the Canons of Dordrecht, III-IV:4, and from the Netherlands Confession, Art. 36, which teach that God, without renewing the heart, so influences man that he is able to perform civil good; while it also appears from the citations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology that our Reformed fathers from ancient times were of the same opinion.

Scriptural proof: II Kings 10:29-30; II Kings 12:2;14:3; Luke 6:33; Rom. 2:14. "

Appendix II

"For the record..."

Since this study of common grace is made for the last part of the 20th century, whereas the controversy occurred in the first part of the century (1924), it may be helpful that a few notes of an historical nature be inserted for those who are unfamiliar with the history. For a study of the history, the book *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, by Herman Hoeksema (long out of print, but available from some libraries) may be obtained. A more popular study (also out of print, but more readily available) is the 50th anniversary commemorative study of the PRC, *God's Covenant Faithfulness*, edited by Gertrude Hoeksema.

1. The three points of common grace did not originate with the PRC, but were statements drawn up by the Christian Reformed Church.
 2. The ministers involved in the debate (which climaxed at the 1924 Synod of Kalamazoo) were required to subscribe to Synod's three statements. Because three of them refused, they were deposed from the ministry of the CRC.
 3. These three men, Reverends H. Danhof, H. Hoeksema, and G. Ophoff were the founders of the Protestant Reformed Churches.
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Appendix III

Calvin On Common Grace

Since Calvin carries considerable weight with those in the Reformed camp, it is worthwhile to hear what Calvin says about the subject. The following is two sections of the author's paper entitled, "Calvin and Common Grace," a paper analyzing Herman Kuiper's *Calvin on Common Grace* and presented at a Student Club meeting at the Protestant Reformed seminary in 1980:

On page 29, Kuiper says that Calvin (II-2-11,12) implies, though not expressly, that those who possess miraculous faith are recipients of divine grace, of a non-saving character. This does seem to be the case, and Calvin uses language that sounds like common grace. He speaks of "present mercy...a present perception of His grace which afterwards vanishes away... God enlightens the reprobate with some beams of His grace which afterwards vanishes away.... God so far enlightens the mind that they discover His grace." To understand these statements, we must read farther, as this proponent of common grace does not do.

Calvin explains it in this way: To some reprobate, God gives a seed of faith, (in this case, miraculous faith) but he "infuses no life into that seed which he drops into their hearts" (*Institutes*, III,2,12). "Not that they truly perceive the energy of spiritual grace and clear light of faith, but because the Lord, to render their guilt more manifest and inexcusable, insinuates Himself into their minds" (III,2,11). The reprobate are similar to the elect, "only in their opinion" but not in the eyes of God.

Strikingly, Calvin says that any grace or faith attributed to the reprobate is only "by **catechesis**, a tropical or improper form of expression; only because they...exhibit some *appearance* of obedience to it" (III,2,9). He says that this faith and grace are only a shadow or image of faith and grace, and are of no importance, unworthy even of the name. He calls it *common* only "because there is a great similitude and affinity between temporary faith and that which is living and perpetual." He calls their grace common only "because they appear, under the disguise of hypocrisy, to have the principle of faith in common with them" (III,2,11). to the elect, true faith and, therefore, *true* grace is given.

Had this controversy over common grace been an issue in his day, we can be sure that Calvin would have emphasized more often that, when he spoke of common grace, it was only by *catechesis*: an *improper form of expression*."

Those who appeal to Calvin for support of common grace look to the three points of 1924 as the basis for their definition of common grace. But Calvin's common grace has nothing to do with that of the present day. Concerning the first point, that God has a favorable attitude toward all mankind, especially in the offer of the gospel, Calvin has much to say. In connection with the good gifts of God as a "favorable attitude," Calvin says:

How comes it then that God not only makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, but as far as the advantages of this present life are concerned, His inestimable liberality is constantly flowing forth in rich abundance? Hence we certainly perceive that the things which really belong to Christ and His members, abound to the wicked also...in order that they may be rendered more inexcusable (III,25,9).

Concerning the "offer of the gospel" Calvin has something to say. But first, it must be noted that Calvin wrote his *Institutes* in the Latin language. The word translated "offer" in English is, not surprisingly, *offere* in the Latin. But this word did not necessarily have the same connotations than as it does in English today. The word *offere* primarily means "to present, to bring towards, to thrust forward, to show, to exhibit." Our word *offer* has broader connotations and implies the ability to accept or reject, as well as a desire on God's part that the offer be accepted. Calvin says this (which is omitted by Dr. Kuiper):

His sole design in thus promising, is to offer His mercy to all who desire and seek it, which none do but those whom he has enlightened, and He enlightens all whom He has predestined to salvation (III,24,17). That is, God's mercy is offered in the preaching only to those whom He has predestined to salvation!

What purpose then is served by exhortations? It is this: As the wicked, with obstinate heart, despise them, they will be a testimony against them when they stand at the judgment seat of God; may they (the exhortations of the word: BG) even now strike and lash their consciences (II,5,10).

When the mercy of God is offered by the gospel (remember, "offered" is "*offere*," to present, to set forth; BG), it is faith, that is, the illumination of God, which distinguishes between the pious and the impious; so that the former experience the efficacy of the gospel, but the latter derive no benefit from it (III,24,17).

God wills the salvation only of His elect, and never does Calvin teach that any favor goes out to the wicked in the preaching.

Calvin writes very little concerning the second point. He writes only that God restrains the outward deeds of the wicked, but never says that God does this in His favor towards them, nor that He restricts the corruption of the heart so that the good in natural man can come out.

The third point, that by the work of the Spirit the unregenerate is able to do civil good, is in violent contrast to what Calvin says. First, Calvin claims that we have nothing of the spirit except by regeneration (III,3,1). This stands in contradiction to what the third point states.

Second, Calvin says that we may as well try to draw oil from a stone than expect good works from a sinner (III,15,7).

Concerning the works of wicked men which are *apparently* good, Calvin also has something to say. Commenting on a passage by Augustine, Calvin writes: "Here he avows, without *any obscurity*, that for which we so strenuously contend --that the righteousness of good works depends on their acceptance by the Divine mercy" (III,18,5).

Finally, Calvin says:

This being admitted will place it beyond all doubt, that man is not possessed of free will for good works, unless he be assisted by grace, and that special grace which is bestowed upon the elect alone in regeneration. For I stop not to notice those fanatics, who pretend that grace is offered equally and promiscuously to all (II,2,6; see also II,2:13 & 18; and III,15,7).