

## **Common Grace: John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til**

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**Charles R. Biggs**

**Thesis: The aim, priority, main purpose and intent of the teaching of common grace in the theology of John Calvin (1509-1564), Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), and Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987).<sup>1</sup>**

While all three of these theologians agreed to a certain degree, each was used by God to address the biblical truth of common grace in different ways. John Calvin's primary intent and purpose was to lay a Biblical foundation during the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century to understand the knowledge of God and the knowledge of men.<sup>2</sup> Calvin's aim and priority was a theological foundation.

Abraham Kuyper's aim and priority was to make distinctions between common grace and special grace while seeking for the church to be an instrument of good in this world, shining light into the common grace realm. His aim and priority was to be consistently Biblical and Calvinian in a very practical way.

Cornelius Van Til's aim and priority was to be thoroughly biblically, consistently Calvinian, and confessional, stressing the antithesis that must precede thoughts and theological teaching concerning common grace. Van Til's aim and priority was primarily methodological.

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<sup>1</sup> The primary texts I used for this study were John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, French edition of 1541 (BTT, 2014), Abraham Kuyper: *A Centennial Reader...*, and *Common Grace and the Gospel*, P&R, Cornelius Van Til.

<sup>2</sup> See *Prefatory Letter to Francis I*, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, French edition of 1541 (BTT, 2014), xvii-xxxvi.

In this paper, we will seek biblical and theological definitions, seeking to understand the nature and purpose of common grace. Then we shall primarily look at three different Reformed theologians who agreed on much but placed different emphases on common grace that we ought to keep in mind. We shall conclude with an overview of a few things that we as Christians can practically keep in mind in our understanding of common grace.

### **Biblical Definition of Common Grace**

What is called “common grace” is an emphasis on the Fatherly care and kindness of God to all of His creation. Common grace is a theological term intended to stress God’s tender mercies, and kind faithfulness that God shows to the whole world. <sup>ESV</sup> Psalm 145:9 The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. Common grace ought to be appreciated as another important way that God reveals Himself to all of His creation. <sup>ESV</sup> Acts 14:16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. <sup>17</sup> Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

In fact, it is this revelation (what is often called “general revelation”) that ought to make all mankind worship and adore God as Father and king, but sin prevents this, and thus makes the sinner more culpable for their sins. Some scholars would prefer to speak of God’s kindness or mercies to all creation rather than use the term “common grace”. Some have even thought using grace in common grace seems wrong.<sup>3</sup> Richard Mouw concludes helpfully that “for lack of

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, 48-49.

a better term, the power that is at work in these situations deserves to be thought of as a kind of 'grace'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet common grace should be radically distinguished from saving grace only to God's dear elect children. Although there is a common way that God shows His fatherly kindness, nevertheless, our Lord still revealed an important distinction that we must keep in mind between the "evil and the good" or the "just and the unjust": <sup>ESV</sup> Matthew 5:45 For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. The Apostle Paul teaches that God's kindness and patience that he shows in his common grace should lead men to repentance, but it does not. It causes many to presume upon the riches of His kindness. This teaches us that although God does wonderful kindnesses to all men, not all men will therefore trust in Christ. <sup>ESV</sup> Romans 2:4 Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Mankind from the beginning at creation has depended upon God's revelation to him (Gen. 2:8-18). After the fall of man into sin, revelation continues but it changes in character and receives a different content. "Now revelation comes to guilty man, who merits death, as a revelation of *grace*...Life, work, food, clothing come to him no longer on the basis of an agreement (covenant) or right granted in the covenant of works but through grace alone. Grace has become the source and fountainhead of all life and every blessing for mankind." Grace is now differentiated into common and special grace.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mouw, He Shines in All That's Fair, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace', Calvin Theological Journal, 40.

From Scripture, we can see clearly that the Bible teaches that God is kind to all. He is like a Father to all of His creation. Although God is very kind and good to all of His creation, He is kind savingly only to His elect in Christ. The Bible makes a distinction between God kindness to all of His creatures, and His particular and saving kindness of “grace” to His elect.

### **Theological Definition of Common Grace**

While the teaching of common grace is a clear revelation of God both in general revelation and particularly the Scriptures, it is not always as clear theologically. Ironically, another aspect of our fallenness is that we can grasp these truths biblically by the Spirit, and see these things in all creation by the Spirit’s illumination, but we are not so clear on how to understand the idea of common grace and the rest of the teaching of Scripture. There is much mystery in understanding common grace.<sup>6</sup> For instance, founding Westminster Theological Seminary Professor John Murray (1898-1975) asked: “How is it that men who still lie under the wrath and curse of God and are heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God? How is it that men who are not savingly renewed by the Spirit of God nevertheless exhibit so many qualities, gifts and accomplishments that promote the preservation, temporal happiness, cultural progress, social and economic improvement of themselves and others...How is it that this sin-cursed world enjoys so much favor and kindness at the hand of its holy and ever-blessed Creator?”<sup>7</sup> How can a holy and wonderfully blessed God be so kind and good to those who oppose His awesome holiness and described biblically as the very enemies of God under His just

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, 13. Herman Bavinck wrote that mystery was the life-blood of all theology.

<sup>7</sup> John Murray, “Common Grace”, *Coll. Writings*, 2:93-119; pg. 93.

wrath (Rom. 5:6-10)? Murray sought to lay out a biblical-theological understanding of common grace by using three distinctions from Dr. Herman Kuiper (1889-1963): (1) Universal common grace, which means the kindness of God to all of His creatures; (2) General common grace which is God's common grace particularly to men in distinction from other creatures of God (animals and angels) ; and (3) Covenantal common grace which is a special kindness and grace shown to those who are privileged to be the covenant under God's special revelation, but fail to know the saving work of the Holy Spirit in salvation (cf. Heb. 6:4-6).

DeGraaf defined common grace as "...God in His patience gives good gifts, but withholds Himself (from non-elect)...while in His [special, saving] grace He gives Himself (to elect)."<sup>8</sup> John Murray defined common grace as "every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God."<sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology* defined common grace as "that influence of the Spirit, which in a greater or less measure, is granted to all who hear the truth...The Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth to Him good."<sup>10</sup>

Most theologians have agreed upon these basics, but one theologian, Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965) protested in the early Twentieth Century insisting that the only kind of true "grace" that God gives is particularly "saving grace" and no other. Hoeksema was concerned that Christians should not use the term common grace because what goodness and kindness

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, 96.

<sup>10</sup> From Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, pg. 654, quoted in Murray, 94-95.

God shows to the unbelieving and unrepentant is actually a curse for them (cf. Rom. 2:4). If God's goodness does not lead them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, then how can we call this a kind of "grace"? Hoeksema can be summarized as saying: "Grace as a word is reserved only for the elect. Any goodness that is given to the non-elect is only "fattening them for the slaughter".<sup>11</sup> Hoeksema asked how God could "hate the wicked" (Psa. 5) and yet show them grace. How can one not undermine total depravity and accentuate good in sinners when Romans 3:10-23 teach that all fall short of the glory of God, and that no one can do any good? How can one affirm common grace and not end up causing the holy church of Jesus to become worldly to some extent? It seems that common grace is opposed to one unified decree of God to save the elect and damn the non-elect. These were his concerns.<sup>12</sup> We will look at each of these later in our considering the Reformed tradition particularly in Kuyper and Van Til.

### **Nature of Common Grace**

For Reformed theologians who have taught it, what does common grace do? Theologians have primarily noted the nature of common grace as consisting of four primary effects: (1) Restraint of Sin<sup>13</sup> (we might recall Abimelech in Scripture was restrained by God from sinning against Abraham, Gen. 20:6). Men do not sin as flagrantly and blatantly as they would if God did not in some way restrain the sin in mankind. There are civic virtues and public accountabilities, and laws, and men's consciences that will prevent them from living as fully depraved as their hearts are. Although mankind is depraved and therefore radically in need of redemptive transformation, nevertheless, because of God's common grace man is not as bad as he could

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<sup>11</sup> Soteriology, PRTS, class notes, Dr. Beeke, date.

<sup>12</sup> Soteriology, class notes.

<sup>13</sup> Murray, 98-99; J. Calvin, Institutes, 2.3.3.

be. The church can even have a tremendous influence in our communities, and we should seek to do that. Richard Mouw wrote: “We ought to look for ways God can use us [the church] to restrain the power of sin in the larger human community and to perform our own works of civic good.”<sup>14</sup> (2) Restraint upon the divine manifestation of God’s wrath<sup>15</sup> (cf. Gen. 6:3; 1 Pet. 3:20; Acts 17:30). God is pleased in this “day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2) to be patient, not desiring any of His own to perish but all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). God is patient and kind, and this is an opportunity for sinners to repent (Rom. 2:4). (3) Bestowal of Divine Good<sup>16</sup> (Psa. 65:5-13; 104:13-23; 145:9, 15-16; Acts 14:16-17; 17:30; Matt. 44-45; Luke 6:35-36; 16:25). These are all the wonderful benefits of just being alive in God’s theater of glory, and enjoying life as an image-bearer, although fallen and unwilling to acknowledge Him as we should. Dr. Joel Beeke wrote that common grace or the “common goodness of God necessary for our society and world to function. Saving grace is the most important hope and reality. But in God’s common grace, God preserves society, and restrains evil in the world. (4) Restrain upon evil in this fallen world<sup>17</sup> (Gen. 3:17; 9:2, 5). According to Scripture, natural man has the “work of the law” written on their hearts. They are given consciences that can know right from wrong (Rom. 2:11, 14-16). As the Apostle Paul writes:

***ESV Romans 2:14-16: For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. <sup>15</sup> They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them <sup>16</sup> on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.***

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<sup>14</sup> Mouw, He Shines in All That’s Fair, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Murray, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Murray, 102-12.

<sup>17</sup> Murray, 101.

John Murray notes these truths and implications about common grace from Romans 2: The Gentiles are the subjects of the work of the law (even though they do not have the tablets of stone/special revelation: "...They are not entirely removed from the operation of the law. The law has another way of making its demand and influence felt, and the law makes its impact upon these Gentiles *in that way*".<sup>18</sup> Murray wrote summarily that the Gentiles are the subject of this work because the law is written in their hearts. As a result, they do by nature the things of the law to a certain degree. Their consciences bear joint witness. "The work of the law pushes itself into their consciousness and registers itself there in the attestations of conscience".<sup>19</sup> Some unregenerate men enjoy some experience of the beauty and power of the Gospel administration without receiving special, saving, effectual grace" (cf. Parable of the Sower, Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-29).<sup>20</sup> Civil Government restrains sin and evil- Romans 13 (Murray, 111).

### **The Purpose of Common Grace**

John Murray describes three important purposes of common grace that are also common to other theological writers.<sup>21</sup> (1) God's glory in His Most Holy, Wise, and Powerful Preserving and Governing all His creatures and their Actions. (2) "The redemptive purpose of God lies at the center of this world's history". Common grace provides the sphere out of which God grants special grace to His elect. As Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1: "All things...are subservient to my salvation". (3) "...Common grace provides the sphere of operation of special grace and special grace therefore provides a rationale of common grace". As Romans 11:36 teaches "From God,

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<sup>18</sup> John Murray, Coll. Writings, 2:93-119; pg. 110.

<sup>19</sup> John Murray, Coll. Writings, 2:93-119; pg. 108-109.

<sup>20</sup> Murray, 109.

<sup>21</sup> Murray, 112-116.

and to God and through God are all things, to Him be the glory alone!” God is glorified in His giving common gifts to all of His creatures. This glorifies God as a kind king of creation. Common grace provides an arena in history whereby He specially and progressively reveals His purpose and salvation for mankind in Jesus Christ (cf. Eph. 3:9-10; Heb. 1:1-2).

### **John Calvin’s Legacy and Common Grace**

John Calvin has been described by John Murray as opening up a new vista and a new era in theological formulation concerning the theological concept of common grace.<sup>22</sup> Calvin begins his legendary theological manual with these words: “The whole sum of our wisdom—wisdom, that is, which deserves to be called true and assured—broadly consists of two parts, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.”<sup>23</sup> Calvin teaches that the knowledge of God is clear to all men and this knowledge shows “not only that there is one God whom all must worship and honor, but also that He is the fount of all truth, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, judgment, mercy, power and holiness...for in Him is found all that is good and of which we ourselves are empty and deprived.”<sup>24</sup> Calvin teaches us the important knowledge of God and ourselves that we all have because we are image-bearers created by the triune God for His glory and our enjoyment. It takes humility to understand human nature. All human endowments...gifts of the Spirit in common grace, such as the liberal arts, distinct from regenerate, special grace and gifts.<sup>25</sup> Revelation is necessary because of the sinful effects on the human mind.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Murray, 94.

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, (BTT), pgs. 1-17.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, BTT, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, BTT, 50-70.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, BTT, 52.

Calvin writes that there are two spheres, earthly and heavenly.<sup>27</sup> These are essentially what we distinguish in theology today as special grace and common grace.<sup>28</sup> The heavenly sphere is the special revelation or knowledge of God and of His will that we find in Holy Scripture.<sup>29</sup> The earthly sphere, or what we would term common grace, we recognize that since man is sociable by nature, he has a natural tendency to want to maintain and preserve society. Thus we see stamped in the minds of all men common ideas concerning decency and social order”.<sup>30</sup> Calvin wrote that men are by nature learners; their mental endowments are gifts from God.<sup>31</sup> We see this revealed in the arts, sciences, and political order specifically. Calvin taught that although mankind is corrupt because of sin, nevertheless, there were natural endowments that had been given to him by the Spirit of God.

Calvin taught that truth was true wherever it was found, whether in the elect or non-elect. This was an important revelation of God’s kindness to all mankind. “If we recognize the Spirit of God as the unique source of truth, we will not despise truth wherever it appears, unless we wish to offend God’s Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> For Calvin, God had specially gifted the church of Jesus Christ with special revelation and gifts to nurture and grow believers, nevertheless, God had also given common

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<sup>27</sup> Calvin, BTT, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Although Calvin teaches what we term “common grace”, he never formally uses this term according to Susan E. Schreiner except in His commentaries on Amos, Colossians, Hebrews, and Romans. “The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin” (Ph.D. diss., Duke Univ., 1983), p. xi n 3. Quoted in “Herman Bavinck’s ‘Common Grace’, translated by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, Calvin Theological Journal, 24 (April 1989) 25-65.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, BTT, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, BTT, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, BTT, 54.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, BTT, 55.

gifts to all men. Both the earthly sphere and heavenly sphere had been blessed by God for the glory of God and the good of mankind.<sup>33</sup>

Yet although man is gifted by the Holy Spirit in a common way, man is fallen and spiritually blind. This work of the Spirit is never necessarily a saving work of the Spirit of God, but a common one, thus why the designation “earthly” by Calvin or more popularly by “common”. These gifts are not saving acts and gifts of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless, they are acts and gifts of the Spirit of God. For instance, there is natural law where man knows right from wrong to a certain degree,<sup>34</sup> and possess a conscience that God has graciously and kindly given to mankind (Rom. 2:12, 14-15). Theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) wrote that an orderly civil society is possible and arts and sciences develop because of common grace. “For these should be considered gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is true the Holy Spirit as Spirit of Sanctification dwells in believers only, but as a spirit of life, of wisdom and of power, He works also in those who do not believe.”<sup>35</sup>

Man is spiritually blind and these acts and graces of God’s Spirit does not lead mankind to the knowledge of God and themselves as it should in a perfect world not submerged in frustrating sin.<sup>36</sup> Calvin memorably explained how mankind could be the recipients of the common operations of the Spirit of God, and yet not be able to see spiritual things because of blindness (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10-14). He wrote: “When there is thunder about, and someone by night is in the middle of a field, lightning will allow him to see far and wide around him, but only for a second.

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<sup>33</sup> Calvin, BTT, 55-56.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, BTT, 59-60.

<sup>35</sup> Herman Bavinck, Calvin and Common Grace, Kindle Edition, Loc. 258.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, BTT, 57-58.

It will not help him find his way, for once its brightness is past, before he sets eyes on the path, he is again plunged into darkness, with no change of getting home...Thus human reason can never come close to, or strive for, or aim at understanding the truth of who God really is, and what he wants us to be.”<sup>37</sup> Michael Horton wrote: “Sin has corrupted the whole person...yet man can still glorify God to an extent...Sensus divinitatis remains but fallen man exploits it for idolatry, self-justification, and superstition.”<sup>38</sup> “...Although we are swimming in revelation, our minds are drowning in self-imposed ignorance and vanity. Not until God speaks in the Scriptures is there a proper knowledge of God.”<sup>39</sup> Calvin taught that common grace should be taught alongside the truth of the universal condition of human depravity. You might say that because of the fall of man, there needs to be emphasized both a common grace and a common curse.

Herman Bavinck wrote on Calvin and Common Grace that “If God had not spared man, his fall would have involved the whole nature in ruin. As it was, God immediately after the fall interposed, in order by His common grace to curb sin...There is no part of the world in which some spark of the divine glory does not glimmer.”<sup>40</sup> Calvin saw the whole of life steeped in the light of the divine glory to some degree!<sup>41</sup>

## **Abraham Kuyper<sup>42</sup>**

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<sup>37</sup> Calvin, BTT, 57.

<sup>38</sup> A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes, ed. Hall and Lillback, Horton, pgs. 160-61.

<sup>39</sup> A Theological Guide, ed. Hall and Lillback, Horton, pg. 163, cf. Institutes 1.6.1.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Bavinck, Calvin and Common Grace, Kindle, Loc. 239.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, Calvin and Common Grace, Kindle Edition, Loc. 321.

<sup>42</sup> I used selections from Abraham Kuyper, A Reader, Bratt, 165-204 for this paper rather than the massive three-volume *De Gemeene Gratie* (1902-1904).

Kuyper desired for the church to practically live out the sovereignty of God in Christ over all of life. He wrote: "...The doctrine of common grace proceeds directly from the Sovereignty of the Lord...If God is sovereign, then His Lordship must remain over all life and cannot be closed up within church walls or Christian circles."<sup>43</sup>

Themes in Kuyper's writings related to common grace are history and eschatology, particularly the consummation of history as it is under the sovereign Lordship of God the Creator and Redeemer of mankind. For Kuyper, history is the arena of common grace, and the special context for God's redemptive-history, or special grace to unfold for God's elect. He wrote, "Common grace is the arena of history in which the world is developed to the consummation."<sup>44</sup> The realm (context) of common grace is where God is working out His holy decree in history for Christ and history."<sup>45</sup> God is working out His perfect purposes in history in all nations. "...It all has meaning. None of it can be spared because it pleases God."<sup>46</sup> Common grace is the realm into which the incarnation took place. It was in real history that God became man to fulfill all righteousness and die under the curse of God's wrath for the elect. Common grace is the historical context in which all of the elect are born and made partakers of the mercies and benefits of Christ through effectual calling and union with Christ. Common grace makes possible God's redemption and the application of that redemption for the elect. Kuyper wrote, "Without common grace, the elect would not have been born....Special grace presupposes common grace."<sup>47</sup> For Kuyper as well as for Calvin, common grace was particularly

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<sup>43</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *A Reader*, Bratt, 166.

<sup>44</sup> Kuyper, 176.

<sup>45</sup> Kuyper, 176.

<sup>46</sup> Kuyper, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Kuyper, 169.

an aspect of the outworking of God's most sovereign, holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all creatures and their actions (cf. Westminster Shorter Catechism, ). God maintains human life and culture for His purposes, for His glory, for creation's good.

Civilization and the Social Bond. There is a natural social bond between image-bearers created by God. "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). There is a social bond between people that we ought to recognize in culture.<sup>48</sup> What makes us desire to build and to please others aesthetically with the things our hands have made? God is the Supreme "Artisan and Architect"<sup>49</sup> and this is how He has designed His creatures to be as well. This is a very important common grace way of doing what pleases God without being the saving recipients of His saving work in Christ Jesus. The development of humanity, civilization brings glory to God, but this is separate from the church.<sup>50</sup>

While civilization glorifies God in its "exterior development", the church and the Eternal Kingdom of Christ will be the realization of an "exterior" and "interior" development in mankind (both holiness and integrity).<sup>51</sup> Common grace will thereby achieve a purpose of its own. It will bring about the human race, the full number of the elect, decrease human suffering and sin, and bring about "what God had in mind" when He created."<sup>52</sup> In this way, Satan will be opposed and some dominion (cf. Gen. 1:26-28) over this world can be achieved by the nations after the fall because of common grace.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Kuyper, 178.

<sup>49</sup> Kuyper, 178-79.

<sup>50</sup> Kuyper, 178-79.

<sup>51</sup> Kuyper, 179.

<sup>52</sup> Kuyper, 179.

<sup>53</sup> Kuyper, 179.

What did Kuyper mean by his distinction between “exterior” grace and “interior” grace?

Interior grace would benefit mankind in civic virtue, improvement of public conscience and loyalty in community. The exterior will mean advancements in science, technology, the arts, conveniences will multiply to make lives easier and more fulfilling and liveable, such as health programs.<sup>54</sup> Kuyper asserted that Jesus Christ is the Lord of both creation and redemption, thus also “common” and “special” grace both belong to His Lordship. He wrote: “It is the same ‘I’ of whom it is written that by His all things exist, and elsewhere that by Him every soul must be saved...So also it is one and the same person who enjoys God’s ‘common grace’ in the life of society and enjoys God’s ‘special grace’ on holy ground...It is one and the same world in which God causes His common grace to sparkle and glorifies His divine compassion in bringing people to salvation.<sup>55</sup> We cannot separate the two, although we must make important distinctions. Kuyper affirmed human responsibility for culture and creation in the context of the Creator’s ultimate sovereignty over the world, and Christ’s redemption of all things. “Science and scholarship, art and politics, domestic and public life all have their basis in common grace. Such grace sustains the creation order while all things await renewal by God’s salvific grace in Christ.”<sup>56</sup>

Common Grace and the Church. The Church of Jesus Christ is both an institution (organization) and a living thing (organism).<sup>57</sup> With these two distinctions “both the sanctity of the covenant among those who confess Christ and the influence that should impinge upon the world outside this circle.” As organization (institution) the Church exists apart from yet in the midst of the

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<sup>54</sup> Kuyper, 184-86.

<sup>55</sup> Kuyper, 185.

<sup>56</sup> Herman Bavinck’s ‘Common Grace’, Calvin Theological Journal, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Kuyper, 188ff.

world. As an organism (a living thing) it grows into the world, and like leaven working its way through dough (cf. Matt 13:33), can have a tremendous effect upon culture.<sup>58</sup> Think of three concentric circles and in the center is the holy, set apart, consecrated church unto God as a living organism in union with Christ by His Spirit. This center is in heaven, seated with Christ in the Heavenly Places (cf. Col. 3:1-3). In the next circle there is the organization, or the visible church existing as a kind of priestly mediator to the world. At the outer rim is the church coming into contact day after day in ordinary vocations and enjoying this creation that can have a “sanctifying and purifying influence” to some degree upon the culture. This is what Kuyper referred to as a “common grace effect”.<sup>59</sup> He notes how the church has exerted a strong formative influence on common grace that there is even a very high attainment of it that is revealed such as in the abolition of slavery, improved work conditions for women, public virtues, respect for Sabbath, and compassion for the poor.<sup>60</sup>

He speaks of four terrains where common grace and special grace can be distinguished and the effects of God’s Spirit be seen.

1. Common grace with no influence of special, saving grace. This is like in China (during Kuyper’s time), in places very dark with paganism, witchcraft and mythology (cf. 1 John 5:19).
2. Institutional church arises totally and exclusively from special grace (such as in Acts, or with the selection and ordination of church officers, Acts 1-3, 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 3:1-14).
3. Common grace is illumined by the light emitted by lamp of special grace like in Europe and North America (Matt. 5:14: “Let your light so shine...”).
4. Special grace that has utilized data of common grace

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<sup>58</sup> Kuyper, 196-97.

<sup>59</sup> Kuyper, 195.

<sup>60</sup> Kuyper, 199.

without becoming effected by it in a worldly way that has produced Christian art, schools, scholarship, etc. In other words, special grace is informed by general revelation, specifically common grace, but the Gospel has leavened the larger culture, and then the church has also benefited while remaining set apart and holy unto God (Matt. 13:33).<sup>61</sup> Kuyper rightly offers a caution about the relationship of the church and the world: "...The world does not climb up to the city ("upon the hill", Matt. 5:14-16), nor does the city descend into the world."<sup>62</sup> The two must remain distinct, but never completely separated so that there can be true light that shines and influences in the larger culture.

Kuyper's theology of common grace was imminently practical, while building upon the theological foundation of John Calvin. Later in the Twentieth Century, founding professor of Westminster Theological Seminary would seek to build upon Calvin and Kuyper, while particularly making some healthy theological criticisms of Kuyper's position.

For Kuyper, there is no good flight from the world for the church; this is contrary to the church's calling. To remove oneself from culture in a medieval way into monasteries, or through a kind of fortress mentality that worries about sinful contamination, is to disrespect the culture and history that God has providentially provided for us to live in, whether we are elect or non-elect. But this common culture that we inhabit must be done wisely. As Christians, though we aren't called to literally remove ourselves from the culture, we are necessarily called to be holy and wise, and so we must seek to have consecrated hearts, while being involved in our culture and time.

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<sup>61</sup> Kuyper, 200.

<sup>62</sup> Kuyper, 200.

### **Cornelius Van Til<sup>63</sup>**

If Kuyper's concern was to employ the teaching of common grace for the common good and the good living and welfare of mankind, Cornelius Van Til desired to focus on the methodology of how we interact with the culture in a consistently biblical, Calvinian, and confessional way.<sup>64</sup>

Van Til's concern was primarily methodological. In other words, how do we understand common grace, and biblically stress both the common curse and grace of mankind.

It is important for understanding Van Til to remember that his methodology concerning common grace was clearly revealed in a quotation: "Metaphysically [both believer and unbeliever] have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common."<sup>65</sup>

Interpretation of reality matters significantly when we consider common grace. "The Reformed believer knows that he himself has been taken out of the world of misinterpretation and placed in the world of truth by the initiative of God."<sup>66</sup>

While Van Til stressed consistency in understanding common grace, he was sympathetic to others, such as Herman Hoeksema who had concerns with the teaching. "Only those who are seriously concerned with interpreting the whole of history in terms of the counsel of God can be puzzled by the question of that which is 'common' between believer and unbeliever...No one

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<sup>63</sup> My primary research was from the essays in *Common Grace and the Gospel*, revised edition, edited by Scott Oliphint.

<sup>64</sup> In Van Til's writings, he pleads for more consistency with John Calvin, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, pg. 83.

<sup>65</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Van Til, 13.

can be seriously concerned with the question of common grace unless he seeks to be truly Reformed in his interpretation of life.”<sup>67</sup>

Van Til wrote that common grace’s ultimate foundation is the mercy of God. He defined common grace as an omnipresent operation of divine mercy.<sup>68</sup>

Van Til is sympathetic to those who would be concerned about common grace, but he is not so sympathetic with those like Herman Hoeksema that submits God’s revelation in scripture to a basic logical syllogism. Van Til believed it was essentially a neutral logic that led Hoeksema to deny common grace.<sup>69</sup> “...The syllogistic process must be followed in frank subordination to the notion of a self-sufficient God...We must think His thoughts after Him We must think analogically. He calls this thinking “fearless anthropomorphism” because....”<sup>70</sup> In other words, although there seems to be tension between God’s decree and God’s being kind and merciful to His non-elect, we must embrace both of these truths in submission to Holy Scripture and speak where Scriptures speaks. Van Til warns of the dangers of “abstract thinking” or the disease of abstraction confusing our thinking about common grace.<sup>71</sup> For Van Til, we are revelation-receivers are human beings, and we must submit our thoughts to God’s revealed thoughts. This is called “concrete thinking” in Van Til’s estimation.<sup>72</sup> In other words, “concrete thinking” is Van Til’s way of describing how to be consistently biblical in our understanding, even if two teachings of the Bible (like the eternal decree of God and common grace) seem to be in some

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<sup>67</sup> Van Til, 18.

<sup>68</sup> Van Til, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Van Til, 39.

<sup>70</sup> Van Til, 38.

<sup>71</sup> Van Til, 44.

<sup>72</sup> Van Til, 79.

kind of tension in our minds. As Van Til wrote, “faith abhors the really contradictory; to maintain the really contradictory is to deny God. Faith adores the apparently contradictory...[this is] to adore God as one’s Creator and final interpreter.”<sup>73</sup> In Van Til’s effort to be consistent, he reminds us that to do theology is to delve in deep, yet revealed mystery. He quotes Herman Bavinck: “Mystery is the life of dogmatics.”<sup>74</sup> Van Til wrote that “all the truths of the Christian religion have of necessity the appearance of being contradictory.”<sup>75</sup>

For Van Til, while he did embrace the biblical teaching of common grace, he nevertheless denied that there was any “Common ground” or neutrality of reason between the believer and the unbeliever.<sup>76</sup> Van Til protested against the methodology of Kuyper primarily, criticizing him for not making a sufficient enough distinction between the believer and the unbeliever. While Kuyper did indeed speak of an “antithesis” between the believer and unbeliever, he did not go far enough in his distinction according to Van Til. Van Til urged theologians to make a distinction between “common notions” psychologically [or metaphysically] speaking (as image-bearers who know God) and “common notions” epistemologically (as sinners suppressing the truth as Romans 1:18-32 teaches). Van Til meant that Kuyper was inconsistent in his methodology and thus his teaching on common grace because he said he did not make a “clear-cut, ringing distinction between that which is psychologically [metaphysical] revelation [to all image-bearers] and that which is epistemologically interpretive.”<sup>77</sup> This means that for Van Til...

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<sup>73</sup> Van Til, 83. Van Til pleads for more consistency with Calvin.

<sup>74</sup> Van Til, 58.

<sup>75</sup> Van Til, 189.

<sup>76</sup> Van Til, 62.

<sup>77</sup> Van Til, 72. Van Til also makes this same criticism of theologian Herman Bavinck.

To show the stark difference between the knowledge that is gained by human beings, believers and unbelievers do not just disagree with every school of philosophy and science in our conclusions, but the starting point and method are different.<sup>78</sup>

Van Til affirms the teaching of common grace, but asks the important question: “What do entities which will one day be wholly different from one another have in common before that final state of separation is reached?”<sup>79</sup> God has plainly spoken to man in the “Book of Nature” and the “Book of Conscience” revealing Himself clearly so that man is without excuse (cf. Rom. 1:19ff; 2:14-16). Before the fall, man was placed before God’s presence as a covenant personality who was to receive God’s revelation. This teaches us that we should never separate natural revelation from supernatural revelation. God walked and talked with man in the garden, and man was by nature a revelation receiver of all that God showed to him and taught to him. Man was to interpret God’s world through God’s Word.<sup>80</sup> This teaches us importantly that every manipulation of any created fact can be both a covenant-affirming activity that reveals obedience to the Creator, but also a covenant-breaking activity if man fails to interpret properly and correctly.<sup>81</sup> “There is no single territory or dimension in which believers and non-believers have all things wholly in common” (contra Kuyper)...to ignore God anywhere (even in math, or weighing and counting) is to insult the God who told us...” to do all or His glory.<sup>82</sup>

Van Til pleads that Christian theologians must be balanced, neither going off ‘the road’ on the right denying common grace or to the left affirming a theory of common grace patterned after

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<sup>78</sup> Van Til, 79.

<sup>79</sup> Van Til, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Van Til, 85.

<sup>81</sup> Van Til, 85.

<sup>82</sup> Van Til 102.

the natural theology of Rome.<sup>83</sup> To avoid this, and to keep ourselves on the road, Van Til teaches theologians to think analogically, building all of our thinking on the ontological trinity, and His revelation in Scripture.<sup>84</sup> Thus as “pilgrims on the way” submitting ourselves to Holy Scripture, learning from God, receiving His truth, even when it seems contradictory, we should have an “analogical understanding” of common grace.<sup>85</sup>

We should speak of common grace, but when we speak of a common humanity, let us make the important distinction between man as image-bearer and man as either covenant-keeper (in Christ by faith alone), and man as covenant-breaker (in Adam). Van Til’s starting point is always man made in God’s image in an “exhaustively revelational and covenantal context”.<sup>86</sup> God confronts man made in His image everywhere.<sup>87</sup> Can we have common grace? Yes, Van Til says, but we must start again with Calvin. He cautioned: “Only if common grace is Christ-centered and biblically constructed” can we properly speak of common grace that is biblical.<sup>88</sup>

### **Practical Lessons/Insights for Today**

As Richard Mouw wrote: “If God’s deep love for humanity persists even despite the effects of sin, then the theology of common grace is an important resource for our efforts as Christians to respect and reflect that love.”<sup>89</sup> Understanding common grace should cause us to look for all of the ways of God’s revealing Himself in and through His creation and all image-bearers. Common

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<sup>83</sup> Van Til, 168.

<sup>84</sup> Van Til, 189.

<sup>85</sup> Van Til, 190.

<sup>86</sup> Van Til, 193.

<sup>87</sup> Van Til, 203.

<sup>88</sup> Van Til, 264-65.

<sup>89</sup> Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, 101.

grace is after all still “God’s grace”. As we learn in James 1:17 “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” We should look for opportunities to praise God for His goodness and kindness, and to commend fallen men who at times let their gifts be used for the good of others.

Yet while we acknowledge God’s truth wherever we find it; though we seek to see the Spirit at work in a common way throughout mankind, let us never forget the important distinction between the work of God’s Spirit to all mankind and the special working of His Spirit for the elect only in Christ alone. John Murray reminds us as Christians: “Let us not “obliterate the distinction between nature and grace”<sup>90</sup>. Let us jealously guard the distinction between the grace that is common and the grace that is saving.

Murray wrote that “special grace does not “annihilate but rather brings its redemptive, regenerative, and sanctifying influence to bear upon every natural or common gift...it brings every good gift into the service of the kingdom of God. Christianity is not a flight from nature; it is the renewal and sanctification of nature. It not flight from this world; it is the evangelization o the world”.<sup>91</sup>

\* Let Scripture be our guide in how we define common grace and God’s kindness to all of His creatures. Although there can be apparent contradictions according to man’s reason, such as the eternal decree of God to elect some to salvation and to pass over the non-elect, and yet the kindness and common grace that God shows to the non-elect. This can be a bit hard to

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<sup>90</sup> Murray, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Murray, 117

understand because it is God being kind ultimately to His enemies, and showing favor to a certain degree to those who are “drunk with the blood of the saints...the martyrs of Jesus (cf. Rev. 17;6). Yet this is what Scripture teaches, and we must submit to God’s revelation and receive it with humility. As Dr. Van Til encourages us, let us adore apparent contradiction, but abhor real contradiction. Let us engage in “fearless anthropomorphism” as Dr. Van Til described being willing to live with God’s revelation, although we can only receive humbly in an analogical fashion.

\* As John Calvin has taught us, let us acknowledge truth from the Holy Spirit wherever we find it. As we read good books, study philosophy, hear music performed, let us always remember that this is because of image-bearers who are reflecting the glory of God in their createdness to a certain degree. This is an opportunity to acknowledge truth wherever we find it, and as the Apostle Paul teaches us to do in Acts 17:24-31 to find truths through which we can use that are recognized by all that give us an opportunity of calling sinners to repentance.

\* As Kuyper and Van Til have taught us, let us put the proper antithesis of Romans 1 before common grace, stressing both the common curse and the common grace.

\* As Van Til emphasized, let us sympathize humbly with image-bearers, learning when we can, but calling the unrepentant to repentance and salvation in Christ.

\* As Kuyper emphasized, let our lights shine out of the church to the world as a beautiful and holy “city on the hill” (Matt. 5:14-16). Let us be mindful of the culture and community around us, and seek to be a beacon of light that shines out the windows of our congregations, working for the Lord in our community to bring about justice, change, help, kindness, mercy,

compassion, as well as the presentation of the gospel. Let us as the church use our diaconate resources to meet many physical needs, befriending those around us, seeking God to give us opportunities to invite them to worship, and to hear the truth of Christ as He is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

\* Let us go forward acknowledging some important truths from Jeremiah 29. In Jeremiah, there was an acknowledgement that the folks were exiles or pilgrims in a foreign land, yet they were to know God's promises of what He good He would eventually do for His people (Jer. 29:11). And what were the people to do? They were to do good to those around them, working side by side, building homes, planting gardens, getting married, working hard in their callings, until the return of the LORD and the end of exile. They were to continue to walk by faith, seeing Him who is invisible (Heb. 11:27), and waiting on the Eternal City to be fully revealed at the coming of Christ (Heb. 11:13-16). Let us, too, know that God is preparing for us an Eternal City where there will no longer be any sin, and no longer any need for common grace. For the special grace of God will fully be realized, and we shall see the Lord face to face!

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