
Pro Rege

Volume 31 | Number 3

Article 2

March 2003

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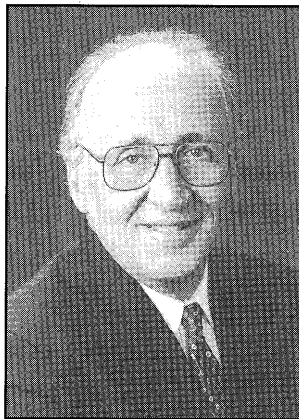
Recommended Citation

Mouw, Richard J. (2003) "Reflections on Common Grace," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 31: No. 3, 13 - 18.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol31/iss3/2

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***Editors Note:** Dr. Richard Mouw gave a presentation for the Dordt College annual Pastors' Day, September 9, 2002. His article below, given as a lecture for students, faculty, and guests in a public forum, deals with the issue of common grace. Respondents included Rev. Steven Key, Pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa, and Dr. John Kok, Professor of Philosophy at Dordt College.

Reflections on Common Grace



by **Richard J. Mouw**

In my early days of teaching at Calvin College, I often heard comments about Quirinus Breen from several of my older colleagues. Breen had been, in my colleagues' version of the story, expelled from the Christian Reformed subculture for following the dictates of his conscience. Having been forced to make his way in the larger world beyond the borders of Dutch-American Calvinism, he had managed to turn his early misfortune into eventual triumph.

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Again, that was the story as I heard it on many occasions. Here are the basic facts of the case. Quirinus Breen was a native of Orange City, Iowa, born there into a Christian Reformed pastor's home in 1896. He followed in his father's footsteps, pursuing a ministerial calling, and after graduation from Calvin Theological Seminary, he was ordained in 1921 as pastor of the Twelfth Street Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. During his seminary studies, he was influenced much by Professor Ralph Janssen, an Old Testament professor who stirred up considerable controversy in the Christian Reformed denomination because of his apparent openness to a "higher criticism" methodology in his class lectures. When Professor Janssen was tried for heresy and subsequently deposed from his office in 1922, Quirinus Breen protested on behalf of his mentor. When his efforts failed, Breen resigned from the Christian Reformed ministry, spending time as a salesman for a stationery firm and then for the Standard Oil Company. After a few years in this occupational wilderness, he successfully sought ordination as a Presbyterian minister. Eventually, he earned a doctorate in Reformation history and went on to a long and distinguished scholarly career, most of it spent at the University of Oregon.¹

Since I had no firsthand knowledge of Breen's views when I first heard the faculty coffee cup conversation about him, I simply accepted my trusted colleagues' version of the story—the narrative of Breen as a tragic Calvinist hero who, having been rejected by his own community, went on to win high honors in broader American culture. A few years

ago, however, I had the opportunity to look more closely at Breen's theological outlook. I came across a used copy of a book of Breen's collected essays, and I gave the book a careful reading.

I wasn't surprised to find out that Breen was a strong advocate for the idea of common grace. During the years that he was active in the Christian Reformed denomination, common grace was a much debated topic, and it would have shocked me to find out that he had any serious sympathies with the opponents of common-grace teachings. But I was surprised—indeed, I was alarmed—by the lengths to which he was willing to go in his use of the idea of common grace. He claimed to find in John Calvin's writings an understanding of common grace that "is one of the distinguished accomplishments in the often anxious struggle of Renaissance Christians to win firm religious ground for secular learning" so that Calvin left "no doubt that secular learning is in its kind sacred."² Of course, Breen was aware of the many places in Calvin's writings where Calvin spoke very critically of secular thought as such. But Breen simply dismissed all of these comments as evidence of some unfortunate "contradictions" in Calvin's thought.³

Having in his own mind disposed of any obligation to follow carefully Calvin's thought in its theological details, Breen proceeded to work with very fluid theological categories. For example, in his own attempts to define who is to be included in the believing community, he wrote that he strongly preferred an account that is "as inclusive as the generosity of divine charity could make it"; to justify this approach Breen relied heavily on the formula that "[t]hose who are not against us are for us." His inclusive impulses led him to encourage the church to think of the likes of the beatnik poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the artist Picasso as "the church's sons," as prophetic voices who serve the Christian community faithfully as they "devote themselves to knowing the truth about man and his actual attitudes to himself, to other men, to nature, [and] to the mysterious forces beyond man's control."⁴

I will be blunt here: I find this to be very disturbing theologically. In my mind, seeing the direction in which Breen took the common grace teaching lends considerable credence to the views of Herman Hoeksema and others who, in the Christian Reformed disputes over common grace in the early

part of the twentieth century, insisted that the espousal of any notion of common grace was in itself a denial of the basic tenets of Reformed theology. I must quickly add, however, that I do not agree with them that the idea of common grace *as such* is destructive of Reformed orthodoxy. I am convinced that the risks are worth taking, as long as we are careful to use the idea with discernment.

I wrote my recent book on the subject⁵ because I am convinced that the debates of the early twentieth century were never adequately resolved. Furthermore, I am convinced that the topic takes on a new urgency in our own day. Those older debates were waged in a cultural context where most people took it for granted that human beings shared common values and had access to a universal rationality. Today—in a time when, for example, the teachings of the Enlightenment are under much attack in the broad intellectual culture, and when ancient tribal conflicts are being waged anew in many parts of the world—the question of what believers and unbelievers have in common has to be explored against a cultural backdrop in which more and more people seem to be positing deep and irreconcilable differences that will inevitably fragment the human race. This is an important time for all of us to be thinking as Christians about what we can say, based on sound theology, about what it is that human beings have in common.

In the 1920s, the question of commonness was debated intensely—indeed angrily, and with very divisive results—within the Christian Reformed denomination. By that time most of the intellectual establishment in that Dutch-American Calvinist denomination had been strongly influenced by the idea, developed at length by several theologians in the Netherlands, that there is, in addition to the saving grace that is imparted only to the elect, a *common* grace, an attitude of divine favor that is extended to humankind in general. This view was challenged, however, by Herman Hoeksema, a prominent pastor-theologian in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Hoeksema made his case forcefully, and in much detail, but his views were not welcomed by the majority. In 1924, the church's synod issued an official declaration on the subject, insisting that there is indeed a kind of non-salvific attitude of divine favor toward all human beings that manifests itself in these three ways: (1) the bestowal of natural gifts,

such as rain and sunshine, upon creatures in general, (2) the restraining of sin in human affairs, so that the unredeemed do not produce all of the evil that their depraved natures might otherwise bring about, and (3) the ability of unbelievers to perform acts of civic good.⁶ Hoeksema's refusal to submit to these teachings resulted in his departure, along with several congregations and pastors who supported his cause, from the Christian Reformed denomination. In 1925, he and his fellow dissenters formed the Protestant Reformed Churches.

As I reported in my book, I have much sympathy with the assessment of Professor Foppe Ten Hoor, who was an elder statesman in the Christian Reformed Church during the common grace controversy of the 1920s. Ten Hoor refused to join the battle over common grace, observing, according to Herman Hoeksema's report of what Ten Hoor said, "that he had studied the problem for forty years, that he felt quite sure that there was such a thing as common grace, but that he did not know what it was!"⁷ Like Ten Hoor, I am convinced that in thinking about common grace we stand before a great mystery. But this mystery does not mean that we simply retreat into silence. We should try to clarify at least some of our thoughts on the subject—which is what I have been trying to do in my own wrestlings about the topic.

John Calvin himself obviously found it difficult to state a clear position on the subject. On the one hand, his own studies in classical thought had given him a sense of his intellectual debt to several pagan thinkers, especially Seneca. This debt led him to point to "a universal apprehension of reason and understanding [that] is by nature implanted in men," which, "because it is bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious,... is rightly counted among natural gifts"; indeed, he insists, every human being ought to recognize this implanted rational nature as a "peculiar grace of God."⁸ Moreover, when we observe this gift at work in "secular writers," Calvin advises, we should

let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it where it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.... Those men whom Scripture [I Cor. 2: 14]

calls "natural men" were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.⁹

In spite of such praise, Calvin could also speak very negatively about the products of the unregenerate mind. When Calvin credits the unredeemed with some grasp of the principles of civic fairness, for example, he quickly adds that even when the human mind follows after truth, "it limps and staggers" in doing so.¹⁰ In the lives of unbelievers, he says, the civic "virtues are so sullied that before God they lose all favor," so that anything in them "that

Both sides of the common grace argument, then, can find Calvin saying things that support their positions....

appears praiseworthy must be considered worthless."¹¹ And while he acknowledges that "some sparks still gleam" in the unfallen mind, that light is nonetheless "choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively."¹²

Both sides of the common grace argument, then, can find Calvin saying things that support their positions on the subject. As I see things, this is a good reason for Calvinists to take seriously both sides of the argument.

There is much here that needs continued exploration. The issues certainly did not get settled in the Christian Reformed debates of the 1920s. The critics of common grace had some quite reasonable responses to the so-called Three Points of 1924. While rain and sunshine come to both the redeemed and unredeemed, they argued, it is not so obvious that these things are genuine "gifts" from God to those who are living in rebellion against him—any more, as Herman Hoeksema argued, than we could rightly use the word "blessing" to describe the experience of someone who is enjoying "a nice sleigh-ride on a beautifully smooth and slippery road that ends in a deep precipice." How, Hoeksema asks, can we attribute to "grace" something that is leading to the recipient's "inevitable destruction"?¹³ And the other two items, the restraint of sin that keeps evil

people from doing all of the bad things of which they are capable, and the ability of unbelievers to perform acts of civic good—can't we explain such things in terms of divine providence, without getting into theories about God's working in a "gracious" manner in the "inner" lives of unredeemed individuals?

Again, I think that these are important issues to keep exploring. However, in my own probings I have concentrated primarily on what I see as some dimensions of common-grace theology that received almost no attention in those early twentieth-century debates, and that is what I want to look at briefly.

The basic question about the legitimacy of a common-grace doctrine is whether there is any kind of attitude of divine favor that God has toward people who are not recipients of saving grace. A basic assumption made by the folks who deny common grace is that God's favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward human beings has to do exclusively with their redemptive status. God thinks in positive terms about the redeemed, but not—for any reason at all—about the unredeemed.

I think that this assumption fails to do justice to the full scope of God's interest in his creation. The God of the Bible certainly cares about more things than the issue of salvation. Even before human beings were created, God took satisfaction as he contemplated the swarms of non-human living things that he had called into being, and the psalmist tells us that the Lord continues to take delight in the workings of his creation. Why should we doubt that God takes pleasure when a good poem is written, or when a no-hitter is pitched, or when a string quartet performs a Mozart piece with splendid artistry—whether or not such things are accomplished by believers or unbelievers?

This issue of the more-than-redemptive scope of God's positive purposes in the world has important practical implications, especially in connection with what I have called *common-grace ministries*. For example, a Calvinist involved in ministering to people in a hospital-sponsored alcoholism recovery program once described his situation to me very poignantly: "I regularly see people move from a rather desperate kind of bondage to new dimensions of freedom in their lives. The change is often very dramatic. Yet it isn't at all obvious that in experi-

encing this release from addiction they have been regenerated in the classic sense. Their lives have been transformed, but they have not come to know Jesus. I do want them to become Christians. Yet I also want to celebrate what looks for all the world to me like a 'grace' occurrence in their lives. My Reformed theology seems to lack the appropriate categories for all of this."

Here is another case that I use in my book to make my point. A Christian therapist counsels a non-Christian couple. Their marriage has been seriously wounded by the husband's adulterous affair. The therapist helps them to be honest about the hurts, fears, and angers that have surrounded this episode. Finally, a moment comes when the husband tearfully acknowledges the pain he has caused and asks his wife to forgive him. She reaches out with a newfound tenderness toward him. They embrace, both of them sobbing. It is clear that they intend to build a new life together. They have not been "saved" in the process, but the therapist is convinced that she has witnessed—and has been privileged to be a human instrument in—a powerful display of healing grace. She senses that she has reinforced the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that God wants for human beings.

I am intentional in wanting to focus on specific cases. What would a theologian who denies common grace say of the case I have just posed? Was the Christian therapist simply being carried away by misleading emotions when she shed tears of happiness upon witnessing these gestures of reconciliation? Was she wrong in thinking that the tears she shed when witnessing this reconciliation were *godly* tears? Was she theologically confused in her strong sense that the Lord himself was involved in the joy of this reconciliation?

But here is an even more poignant case in point, given recent events in the United States. Not too long after the destruction of the World Trade Center by Muslim terrorists, three Michigan congregations of the Protestant Reformed Churches co-sponsored a service in response to the tragic events that had occurred in New York City. According to the brief report on this service in the Protestant Reformed magazine *The Standard Bearer*, the pastors who led the service reflected on these three central questions for Christians:

How do we show concern for God's people who may

have suffered directly from the tragedy? How do Christians put those events into the broad picture of our Lord's return? And how do we deal with the feelings of fear we see in ourselves as well as in our children?¹⁴

What is obviously absent in this list of concerns is anything having to do with the *non*-Christians whose lives were profoundly affected by the terrible events that had occurred. To be sure, this is a brief news report, and it may not tell us all the subjects that were addressed in this service. And it may well be that other Protestant Reformed gatherings dealt with other sorts of concerns related to the September 11 tragedy. If so, though, these other matters were not reported in *The Standard Bearer*, and my own perusal of several issues of that magazine in the September 11 aftermath did not reveal any other significant references to the events in New York and Washington. It is not mere quibbling, then, at least to point out that in this brief news report the sole emphasis is on the concerns of believers: those elect persons who suffered because of these events; the ways in which God's people should interpret these events in relation to the end-times; and the fearfulness of Christian families who viewed the destruction from a distance.

I must confess that when I witnessed the horrors of human suffering that occurred on September 11, 2001, I experienced a deep sadness on behalf of the victims and their families—and furthermore, my feelings had nothing to do with *whether those victims were Christian or not*. And when I witnessed the bravery of firefighters, police, military, and ordinary citizens, in their efforts to rescue the wounded and the dying in situations of that sort, I admired those efforts and thanked God for these displays of human goodness, *without knowing whether those performing the heroic acts were Christians or not*.

What should I make theologically of these responses that occurred in the deep places of my soul? Am I simply confused when I experience sadness and admiration for what happens in the lives of non-redeemed people? Does God *disapprove* of what I experience? I believe that these are extremely important questions. They have to do with the kinds of character traits—the spiritual dispositions, if you wish—that we should cultivate as people who are called to be holy in our thoughts, conduct, and desires (see I Peter 1: 13-16).

One of the few Calvinist writers on common grace who does address the more intimate empathy-invoking cases that I am thinking about here is Abraham Kuyper. He acknowledges the need to account for these kinds of situations when he distinguishes between what he labels the “interior” and “exterior” operations of common grace. The latter label covers collective sorts of achievements, such as advances in scientific knowledge and the flourishing of the arts. The former, however, “is operative,” says Kuyper, “wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a

*Calvin's view of the authority
of scripture was directive
rather than regulative.*

feeling for piety leaven life.”¹⁵

In these comments, Kuyper is rightly pointing to the connections between the theology of common grace and questions of Christian character. All of us who deal with these issues must be clear about what kind of *people* we believe God wants us to be in our interactions with unbelievers. Are we as Calvinist Christians called by the Lord to minister to the larger human community, especially in times of crisis, in ways that go beyond evangelistic activity—even as we recognize the crucial importance of pointing people to the one heaven-sent Savior who alone is mighty to save? For Reformed Christians who take seriously the reality of the antithesis between belief and unbelief, the theological rationale for positive and holy feelings toward the larger human community does not come easily. Yet many of us experience these feelings stirring in our souls, even as we acknowledge the reality of the radical antithesis between belief and unbelief.

The Apostle Peter certainly believed in the reality of that antithesis. “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,” he tells us, “but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” He then urges all who have experienced the marvelous power of saving grace to be ready at any time to give an explanation of the basis for our hope to anyone who asks it of us.

But he immediately adds a mandate that speaks to the “character” dimension of our relationships with other human beings: we must always make our witness, he says, “with gentleness and reverence” (I Peter 3: 13-16). I believe that this kind of holiness—a holiness that inevitably takes the shape of gentle and reverent ministries to an unbelieving world—is a pattern of life that can draw much strength from a discerning theology of common grace.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more detailed account of Breen’s life and works, see Nelson Peter Ross’s “Curriculum vitae,” in the prefatory materials to *Quirinus Breen, Christianity and Humanity and Humanism: Studies in the History of Ideas* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), xi-xvi.
2. Breen, *Christianity and Humanism*, 254-255.
3. Breen, *Christianity and Humanism*, 255.
4. Breen, *Christianity and Humanism*, 257.
5. Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).
6. For the complete text of the “Three Points” of 1924, see Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: First Protestant Reformed Church, 1936), 84-85. Hoeksema’s book also provides the texts of other relevant documents and gives the most detailed account of the events surrounding the official proceedings, as well as his interpretation of the ecclesiastical and theological issues at stake.
7. Herman Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 67.
8. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II: 2,14, 273.
9. Calvin II: 2, 15, 273-275.
10. Calvin II: 2, 13, 272-273.
11. Calvin II: 3, 4, 294.
12. Calvin II: 2,12, 270-271.
13. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 314.
14. <http://www.prc.org/standardbearer/2001oct15.html#NewsChurches>
15. Abraham Kuiper, “Common Grace,” in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuiper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 181.