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Steven R. Key

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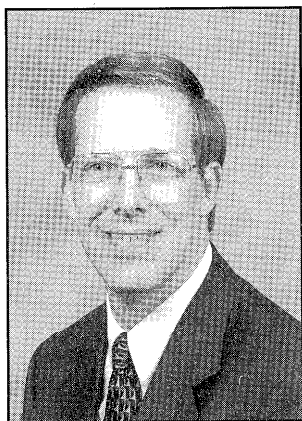
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***Editors Note:** The article below, written by Rev. Steven R. Key, Pastor of the Hull Protestant Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa, is the expanded and revised version of his response to Dr. Richard Mouw's presentation on common grace, September 9, 2002, at a public forum on Pastors' Day at Dordt College.

Culture, but not Common Grace



by Steven R. Key

In writing *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*,¹ Dr. Richard Mouw has done the church world a service in bringing to the fore—even in a small way—some very important doctrinal issues.

The subject of his book, especially the attention that he draws to the long-forgotten doctrine of common grace, is of particular interest to the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC), whose historical origin is rooted in the ouster of ministers and church members who stood opposed to the theory of common grace as it arose and was made a matter of

Rev. Steven R. Key is the pastor of the Hull Protestant Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa.

binding doctrine by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924.

Although the focus of his book is upon only one particular aspect of common grace,² Dr. Mouw treats at length the position of the PRC and of the leading light in this controversy, the Reverend Herman Hoeksema. In his book, his representation of the PRC is careful. Even while disagreeing with its theological stance on this issue, Dr. Mouw has shown Christian civility in his attempt to represent faithfully the Protestant Reformed position.

Dr. Mouw's primary interest, as summarized in the title of his book, is to establish a proper relationship between the Christian and culture, a relationship in fact modeled after the relationship in which God Himself stands to His creatures. He finds the matter of *commonness* and the question of *common grace* of "particular importance as we try to articulate a biblical perspective for Christian involvement in public life in our contemporary context."³

A Biblical Perspective

The articulation of a biblical perspective is not found in the book *He Shines in All That's Fair*. That is striking. It is striking especially when placed over against the position of those who deny common grace. The Protestant Reformed denial of common grace, or, to put it positively, the insistence that God's grace is always particular and even antithetical, is emphatically based upon biblical exegesis, the interpretation of Scripture.

This is not a philosophical subject. In order to understand anything theologically and for that

matter to gain a spiritual understanding not only of Scripture but of our whole life in this world, we must stand before God's authoritative Word.

To begin with our own perspective, experience, or feelings is immediately faulty, because it fails to take into account the effects of sin on a fallen human race and a fallen culture. To look at the concept love, for example, without defining it as *God* defines it and without finding its source *theologically*, in God Himself, Who was love before man was even created, is to end up with a faulty definition and expression of love. So it is also in defining what is *good* in the works of men. So it is also with the concept *grace*.

While Dr. Mouw strives to operate within certain biblical parameters, he fails to reach beyond personal experience or feelings when it comes to facing the urgent questions that he poses in his book. This is a fundamental flaw in his approach. Those who would study the relationship between the Christian and culture are compelled to do so from a biblical perspective. To recognize the authority of God's Word is to study these matters in the light of Scripture.

Commonness

There is a commonness—to use Dr. Mouw's word—that marks the relationship between all human beings. That commonness, however, is not to be found in grace.

It is a commonness established in creation, first of all, in that work of God by which "He gives to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of *one blood* all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:25-26 [KJV]). This biblical teaching immediately excludes all racist views, racism which has been fueled by the rejection of the biblical doctrine of creation and the adoption instead of the theory of evolution. We who hold to the teaching of God's sovereign work of creation "of one blood" may not look down upon people of different colors or backgrounds but see a commonness established by God Himself.

That commonness in creation means as well that we are *all* partakers of God's good gifts—not only rain and sunshine (Matthew 5:45) but gifts of intellect, the ability to reason, the ability to know right and wrong, all natural gifts, and so on. Our argument against common grace is not that God doesn't

give good gifts but only that grace is not in the gifts themselves or in God's giving of the gifts.

Our commonness, secondly, is established in Adam's fall into sin. The whole human race in common comes under the devastating effects of that Fall, effects that are clearly set forth in Scripture and our Reformed confessions. Together with all people, we stand in common under the guilt of Adam our head and the consequent pollution of sin, which follows as the just punishment of our guilt (Romans 3:9,10; 5:12).⁴ The Fall didn't change the essence of our humanness. Nor was it a common grace that upheld humanity after the Fall. But God's *providence* continues to uphold and sustain humanity and the creation to the end that is God's sovereign purpose—the salvation of His Church and creation.⁵

This commonness gives us a reason for humility, realizing that we ourselves are not any better than others. Indeed, this commonness calls us to what Dr. Mouw would refer to as Christian civility toward our fellow human being. Especially as Christians, we are called to express kindness, to do good even to those who hate us, to pray for those who persecute us. For we know of God's goodness to us while we were yet enemies.

This commonness also instills in us a deep sympathy for others in their sufferings, recognizing that we are in the same misery and, indeed, under the same condemnation, except for one thing—our justification which comes by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ through faith and establishes the legal basis for a covenant relationship with God.

Separateness

However, in considering our commonness with the whole human race, as Christians we may not forget our separateness in Christ Jesus. That separateness is established by *grace*—not common grace, but God's particular and saving grace.

This separation is the antithesis between light and dark, faith and unbelief, the righteous and the wicked, the church and the world of sin and death.

The whole question of the Christian's relationship to culture presupposes this *separateness*. It is a separation sovereignly marked out by God Himself in divine election.⁶ God has called His Church *out* of the world yet leaving her *in* the world. Our separateness, therefore, or the antithetical calling

that marks our life in the midst of this world, is not a separateness that takes us out of this world and culture. To live antithetically is not a matter of world flight. The Reformed faith has never taught such—including the Protestant Reformed Churches. The question, therefore, ought not to be how close we can get to the world, but what is the proper application of the antithesis to the Christian life in the midst of the world.

An Important Concern

Dr. Mouw's concern—not only a legitimate but also an important concern—is the relationship between the Christian and culture. How one approaches this matter is critical.

That the theory of common grace has brought devastating effects to the antithesis between church and world is beyond dispute. Dr. Mouw, for all his desire to hold to a teaching of common grace, recognizes and even laments the loss of the antithesis that has come about in part by the embrace of common grace. But one cannot hold to common grace without losing the antithesis.

Yet another concern must be raised over Dr. Mouw's attempt to find in common grace the legitimate basis for the Christian's embrace of culture and of those who are not yet believers in Christ Jesus. He desires "active Christian involvement in common grace ministries" that, to his mind, can promote the evidences of common grace as an integrating and preserving power.⁷ We are compelled, however, to return to the question that he raises earlier: "To what degree has the commonness that we have embraced in the culture that we share with our non-Christian neighbors compromised our commitment to the gospel?"⁸

We are encouraged that Dr. Mouw raises the question. It is a critically important question. It is a critically important question even for those who reject the idea of common grace. But it is a question that goes unanswered in *He Shines In All That's Fair*.

As we face that question, we are convinced that the theory of common grace is devastating to the gospel. What good is my association with my unbelieving acquaintance and what good is my participation in "common grace ministries," if my focus is not on my neighbor's salvation? What good is it if I bring not the gospel? Then I do not show proper

Christian love to the neighbor. For love for the neighbor seeks his eternal welfare. Our aim, therefore, must be high—not merely working toward the advancement of a common grace kingdom here below, which will finally perish under the wrath of God. But our aim must be the proclamation of the only salvation, which is in and through Christ Jesus our Lord.

If one will rightly establish the biblical relationship between the Christian and culture, therefore, one must reject the idea of common grace and look in another direction.

...we are convinced that the theory of common grace is devastating to the gospel.

The Christian and Culture

On the basis of the commonness we have with all men by virtue of creation, the Fall, and God's upholding and governing work of providence, we have not only the right but also the calling to live within the various ordinances of creation⁹ in *association* with unbelieving people, while at the same time living antithetically from a spiritual point of view.

The Bible expressly approves our *association* with unbelievers (I Corinthians 5:9,10; 10:27; Matthew 5:13-16), while at the same time forbidding *friendships* with them (II Corinthians 6:14-18; James 4:4). This makes legitimate the Christian salesman taking his unbelieving client to dinner, or the businessman going golfing with the local television salesman who is trying to secure or maintain his advertising business. But in these associations, the Christian is going to show himself different in his conduct, being both salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) by his antithetical lifestyle.

We are called, very concretely and specifically in Scripture, with respect to all our life in the midst of this world, to seek the kingdom of heaven. From the marriage bed to the workplace, the classroom, and life within the church and within the community, we are to rule and to serve in the name of God and for His sake.

We may encourage our young people to pursue a higher education and to serve as doctors and nurses,

teachers and attorneys, business professionals and politicians. We may also honor those who occupy vocations that don't require a higher education, knowing that in all vocations the Christian occupies a high place—to serve the living God, seeking to glorify Him in all things and serving as His witnesses in the midst of a world out of which God is pleased to gather His elect Church.

Recognizing that “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof” (I Corinthians 10:26), while at the same time recognizing that grace is particular and antithetical, we can give proper place both to our calling in the midst of this world and to the antithesis established by God. Our calling is “not to wed Jerusalem to Athens, but to represent the cause of God’s covenant, the cause of the Son of God in the midst of the world.”¹⁰ That is how we believers are to live. And the church is to focus on its proper calling—not “common grace ministries” but a fervent call to repentance and faith—by faithful gospel preaching.¹¹

ENDNOTES

1. Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).
2. The doctrine of common grace as adopted by the Christian Reformed Church at the Synod of 1924 had three main points. For the complete text of the “Three Points” in the English language (the Acts of Synod

were in Dutch), see Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), pp. 423-424. This book also provides a basic history of the controversy and an evaluation of common grace from a Protestant Reformed perspective.

3. Mouw, *He Shines*, p. 6.
4. See also the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3-4; Belgic Confession, Articles 14-15; The Canons of Dordt, Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Articles 2-3.
5. Ephesians 1:9-11; Belgic Confession, Article 13. David J. Engelsma, in a series of editorials entitled “He Shines in All That's Fair” (and Curses All That's Foul)—The Standard Bearer, Grandville, Michigan, (beginning in the March 15, 2002 issue)—offers a lengthy refutation of the confusion between common grace and providence, especially in the eighth article of his series. This series of articles can be found online at prca.org.
6. John 15:16-19; 17:6,11; Ephesians 1:4-5; I Peter 2:9; Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 54; The Canons of Dordt, First Head of Doctrine.
7. Mouw, *He Shines*, p. 97.
8. Mouw, *He Shines*, p. 11.
9. Government and labor are two such ordinances mentioned specifically in I Peter 2:13ff.
10. Herman Hoeksema, *The Christian and Culture* (published by the Sunday School of First Protestant Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, 1946), p. 15.
11. Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 84.