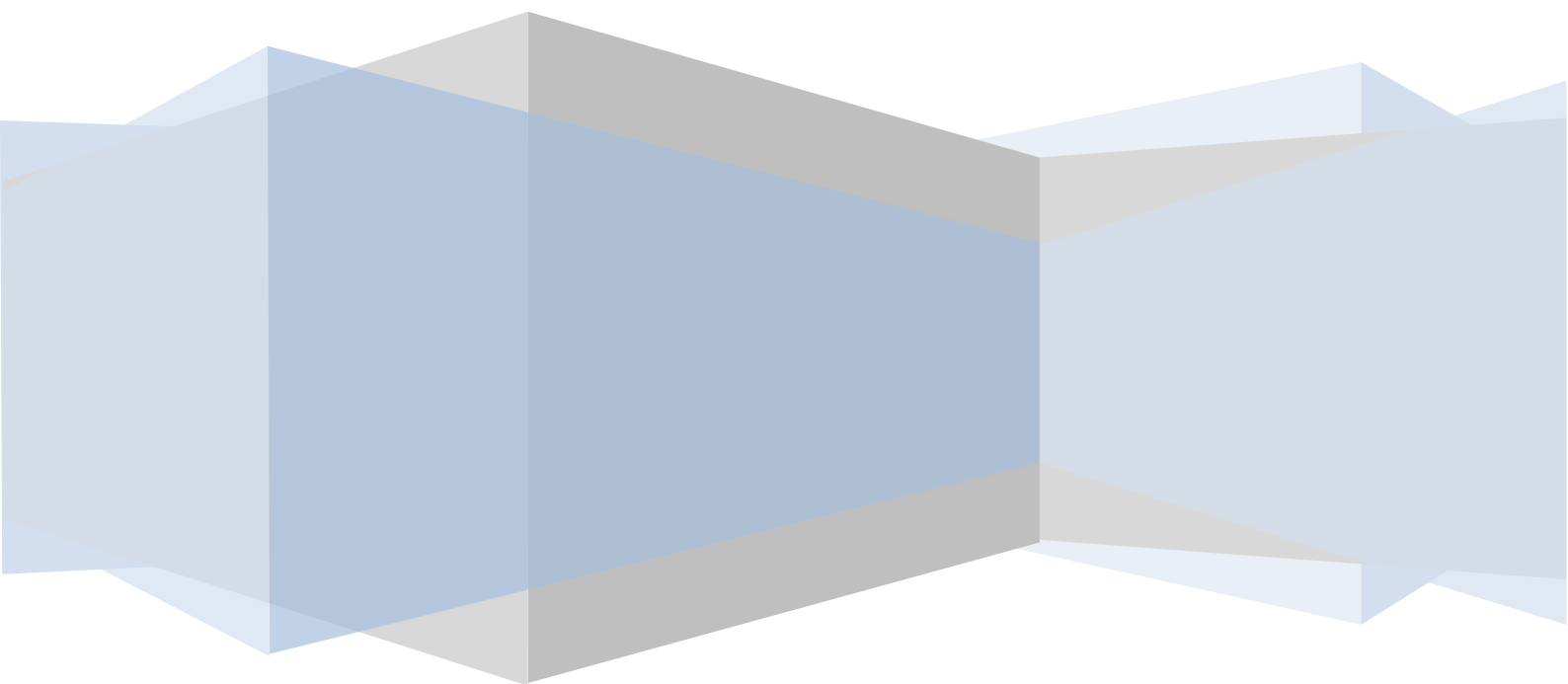


# Common Grace Considered

Rev. Herman Hanko



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## INTRODUCTION

At the last annual meeting of the British Reformed Fellowship in July, 2008 it was decided to continue the forum that Prof. Engelsma had led on the subject of justification by faith alone. Because Prof. Engelsma had nearly finished the material he wanted to include in his articles, it was decided to introduce a new subject: "Common Or Particular Grace." And it was decided to ask me to write for the forum on this subject. I accepted this appointment with some reluctance, for my work in Seminary was not in the field of theology. But the importance of the subject compelled me to accept.

I am hoping that the discussion of common grace versus particular grace will generate questions and/or comments. Such questions or comments will make the forum more lively and give me an opportunity to learn what problems others have with the subject. I think, however, that the best way to conduct a discussion on these questions or remarks is through me. If we open the forum to a general discussion, we run the risk of reducing the forum to a debating society, and subsequent progress would be slow at best. If questions or comments are sent to me, I will answer them in my own writings in the forum so that all can profit by them. So, please write.

As most of you know, I am a member of the Protestant Reformed Churches. That means that the controversy concerning common grace versus particular grace is at the starting point of our history as a denomination and was the immediate occasion for the coming into existence of the churches of which I am a member. My own personal life is closely bound up in the controversy, for my father was a member of Rev. Herman Hoeksema's church (Eastern Ave. Christian Reformed Church) at the time of Rev. Hoeksema's deposition from the ministry by the Christian Reformed Church. He was in the first graduating class from the Protestant Reformed Seminary and was a minister of the gospel in that denomination all his adult life. The events that led up to the formation of our churches and the doctrinal issues involved were a frequent subject of conversation in our home, and the milk of the truth of sovereign and particular grace was a significant part of the food on which we were nourished from childhood on. I myself studied in the Seminary under Rev. Hoeksema and his colleague, Rev. George

Ophoff, also deposed by the Christian Reformed Church, during the three years of Seminary training – although the work of both of them was nearing its end.

No Protestant Reformed Christian schools existed during the years of my schooling, and I attended “Christian Reformed” schools for approximately twenty-four years: grade schools, high schools, college and study for a master’s degree. During all those years I was given a steady diet of common grace and teaching in other subjects from the perspective of common grace. I had opportunity to learn, first hand, how common grace had wormed its way into every branch of knowledge, and what affect it had on every subject we were required to master. It was an eye-opening experience.

If I may cite but one example: Already in the sixth grade, in the years 1945 – 1946, I was taught the principles of evolutionism. Then already the grounds given for evolutionism as an explanation of the origin of the universe, was that scientists, because they were the recipients of common grace, could not be wrong in their scientific endeavors.

Common grace has, over the years and in different countries and churches, been defined in different ways. I myself have met and discussed the question with men who have meant nothing more by common grace than God’s providential control of His creation. Whether or not such providential control should be called “grace” is another question, but these men did not mean by the term what it so often means in the minds of people: a universal attitude of God’s favor and love upon all men without distinction. But we will wait with a brief discussion of terms till our next letter. Following a definition of terms, I hope to give a brief history of common grace as it has appeared in the church. My plan is to write every two weeks or so, but I intend to keep each individual entry short.

## **COMMON VS. PARTICULAR GRACE**

With this installment, we begin our discussion of common versus particular grace.

We ought, before entering into a discussion of the subject itself, deal with a couple of preliminary matters. The first is the meaning of the term “grace in Scripture.” In this connection it is well to note that the term “grace” itself is never used in Scripture in any way that suggests that grace is common, but is always used in connection with salvation. The concept “common grace” is a deduction from other passages that actually do not use the term.

The word “grace” in Scripture has several connotations. Herman Hoeksema in his *Reformed Dogmatics*<sup>1</sup> speaks of five uses of the word “grace” in Scripture. 1) It is used as an attribute of God and has the fundamental meaning of lovely or beautiful. As applied to God it refers especially to the beauty of His perfect holiness and goodness. 2) “Grace” can also mean God’s attitude of favor towards His creatures. 3) In connection with the second meaning, “grace” refers to God’s undeserved attitude of favor, undeserved because it is shown to sinners. 4) The term is used also as God’s power by which He saves those upon whom He looks with favor. 5) And, finally, it is used in the sense of giving thanks. This later use is found in I Corinthians 15:57: “Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Greek has “grace” instead of “thanks”: “Grace be to God . . . .”

All, whether they hold to or oppose common grace, are agreed, however, that grace implies other attributes of God such as goodness, love, mercy, longsuffering, kindness, etc. If God shows grace towards all, He shows love, mercy, kindness, etc., to all. If God shows grace only to His people, He shows mercy, love compassion, etc., to His people only. There is, so far as I know, no disagreement on this point. In speaking of God’s grace all are agreed that we speak of all God’s ethical attributes.

The relationship between these various attributes of God and their fundamental unity is found in the fact that all God’s perfections are one in Him. Our distinctions only help us in understanding God’s infinitely perfect being. Hoeksema is correct, therefore, when he makes all God’s communicable

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<sup>1</sup>Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, second edition [Grand Rapids: RFP, 2004] 159, 160, 280, 281

attributes facets of His own infinite holiness<sup>2</sup> God is called in Scripture The Holy One; and in this name are included all his ethical perfections, including His grace.

In the various meanings of grace mentioned above, we are concerned in this forum with definitions under 2 through 4: Grace as an attitude of favor and grace as the power of God that brings salvation. We must be careful, however, that we make proper distinctions. Scripture clearly teaches, for example, that God has an attitude of favor towards the creation itself. Psalm 145:9 speaks of the fact that “The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.” God loves His own creation and it always favorably inclined towards the things that He has made. Although Satan, in alliance with wicked men, attempts to subvert the creation from its original purpose and use it for their own evil purposes, God will never allow man to steal His creation from Him. Even though, temporarily, it is under the curse because of man’s sin, God has mercy on it and is determined to save it. This salvation of the entire creation was explained to Noah early in the history of the world in Genesis 9:8-17, and it is further described in such passages as Romans 8:19-22 and Colossians 1:20.

But the additional question is: Does God have an attitude of favor towards all men? That must be determined, and the determination must be grounded on Scripture. It is that question that we will examine.

The word “grace” can also mean “the power to save.” Even when grace means the power to save God’s people, it also applies to the creation. Christ died for the world; not for every man, but for the whole of the creation as well as for those whose sins are paid for by His perfect sacrifice. Grace refers to the power to save in Ephesians 2:8 “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.” It is also used in the sense of the power to save in Romans 11:6: “And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.”

Because grace is an attribute of God, it already ought to strike our attention that the two main ideas of grace, that it is an attitude of favor, and that it is the power to save, cannot be separated. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine how God can be gracious in the sense of being favorably inclined to someone while he is not also gracious towards someone in saving him. A common grace considered as an attitude of favor towards all men is powerless and some different kind of grace; it lacks the power of grace that saves.

But we intend, God willing, to examine the question more in detail some later time.

Almost throughout the entire history of the development of the error of common grace, common grace has come to mean two separate works of God, though both are related to each other. On the one hand, God’s attitude of favor towards the creation and all men is a key element in the whole idea of common grace; but on the other hand, the so-called well-meant offer of the gospel is also an element of common grace, which has become the predominant idea in our day.

The relation between the two is clear. God’s attitude of favor that he shows to all men is expressed in His desire to save all men. Quite obviously, if God loves them, is merciful to them and is filled with lovingkindness in his thoughts of them, it is also God’s desire to save them. This desire to save them comes to expression in the gospel. The gospel then becomes a means of conveying to men God’s desire and intention with respect to them.

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<sup>2</sup>Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 94-98, 131-143.

But there is another relation between God's attitude of favor and the well-meant gospel offer that is included in common grace. God's attitude of favor is not only expressed in His desire to save all – a desire He also makes known through the gospel, but this attitude of favor actually bestows upon man a very gracious gift: the power of grace, not to save, but rather to enable one to decide himself whether he will accept the gospel offer or reject it. God's attitude of favor does something to man. It changes him in a significant way deep down in his heart. It does not save him, but it does give him the necessary spiritual strength to take to himself the gift of salvation freely offered.

It is true, in the view of those holding to common grace that the grace bestowed through the gospel to everyone that hears falls short of actual salvation; but it nevertheless does give man the power to choose for or against salvation. This is quite significant and something, in itself, very powerful. If the totally depraved sinner is totally unable to do anything right, including choose for salvation, he has to undergo some sort of radical change. That change must alter his total depravity to such an extent that he now possesses the spiritual ability to do at least this much good: choose for the salvation freely offered in the gospel.

Doctor Abraham Kuyper added yet another idea in his development of common grace. He wrote a three-volume treatise on the subject and gave it the title, *Gemeene Gratie*. He meant by this term to distinguish his version of common grace from the common grace of a gracious well-meant gospel offer, which he repudiated. And so, while the common grace that included an offer of salvation to all was called *Algemeene Genade* (common grace), Kuyper called his grace *Gemeene Gratie* (general grace).

Although Kuyper attempted to appeal to Calvin in support of this notion, he himself admitted that his ideas with respect to common grace were a novelty and consisted of ideas never before taught in the Reformed tradition from Calvin to the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries when Kuyper did his work.

Kuyper's ideas of common grace consisted of a grace that prevented man at the time of the fall from becoming a beast, preserved him as a rational and moral creature, and that through the abiding power of common grace, enabled man to do good works that were pleasing to God, able to be of use and benefit for the church, and were of abiding value in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, established at our Savior's second coming.

This idea of common grace has captivated the attention of thousands who carry out his views and speak of the calling of the church to conquer the world for Christ. It seems as if no one today remembers the Kuyper of particular grace (powerfully defended in his book, *Particular Grace*<sup>3</sup>).

But this idea as well we will examine at a later date.

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<sup>3</sup>Kuyper, Abraham, *Particular Grace: A Defense of God's Sovereignty in Salvation*, tr. by Marvin Kamps from the Dutch: *Dat Gods Genade Particulier Is* [Grand Rapids: RFP, 2001]. Many hold to Kuyper's General Grace – even if in most instances they have never read his work on it.



## **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ORIGINS OF THE TEACHING**

I intend to spend a little time at the outset of these discussions of common grace on a brief survey of the history of this doctrine. While surely it would be of little profit to enter into this history in detail, some important matters are to be learned from a study of the subject as it has been discussed in the history of the church of Christ. The old adage is true: "He who will not learn from history's mistakes is doomed to repeat them."

The fact of the matter is that the whole subject of common grace was not on the agenda of the church prior to the Reformation of the 16th century. The term "common grace" was not used and the idea of common grace as it is maintained today in so many circles was strange to the thinking of theologians. This was true of common grace as God's universal attitude of kindness towards all men, but it was also true of the term "well-meant gospel offer."

Nevertheless, similar ideas as those found on the lips of present defenders of common grace were expressed very early. And it is well to take a brief look at some of them. I intend to write in this installment a bit about the ancient church father Augustine. He and Athanasius, the great defender of Christ's divinity at the Council of Nicea, are my own favorite church fathers from the time of the close of the New Testament canon to the supremacy of papal rule in Europe and the medieval church.

Augustine lived in the last part of the 4th century and the first part of the 5th century. He died in 430 A.D., the same day the barbarians were storming the gates of the city of Hippo where he was bishop. He was born from a Christian mother and a pagan father, and in his early years he himself was a wicked man. He continued a dissolute life until he was, under the power of the grace of God, converted from his sinful ways and brought to faith in Christ. Augustine's early life and conversion, however, were used by God to underscore, in his own experience, the truth that grace is sovereign, irresistible and the sole power of salvation – much like Luther's monastery experiences and his search for God. Augustine knew from his own experience that he was helpless to break the shackles of sin that had bound him. Augustine became, what the Roman Catholic Church later called him: Doctor of Grace. With supreme irony, Rome gave him the honorable title of "Doctor of Grace," while rejecting his doctrines of grace.

Augustine knew that sovereign grace alone could and did save him from the slavery of his lusts. God, whose ways are always wise, used these experiences to prepare Augustine for his calling to defend the sovereign grace of God.

Augustine was an extremely brilliant man and, prior to his conversion, dabbled in all the philosophies current during his lifetime. But when God brought him out of his unbelief, God set his thinking on theology rather than on vain philosophy. While he was unable to shake completely free from his philosophical meanderings for some years after his conversion, Augustine was compelled to be devoted more deeply to the study of the truths of Scripture by the rise in Italy of a horrible theology known as Pelagianism. And when the church condemned blatant Pelagianism, a modification of Pelagianism arose, especially in southern France, which Augustine also fought bitterly. It became known as Semi-pelagianism.

It was in his wars against these heresies that Augustine developed his own views on sovereign grace. Knowing that he himself was a sinner saved only by the power of grace, he saw also that these truths were the clear teachings of the Word of God. And he spent the remainder of his life defending them. Augustine, in his writings against Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism, taught the doctrines that we today call the five points of Calvinism. He taught sovereign, double predestination, the total depravity of the natural man, an atonement that was limited to the elect, a work of God's grace that man could not resist, and a perseverance of the saints throughout their life. It is really no wonder that Calvin quoted Augustine's writings more than the writings of any other church father of the first four centuries.

Pelagius was a superficial thinker, but, as so often happens in the church, a very congenial man and one well-liked. He taught that Adam was created neither good nor bad, with a sort of morally neutral nature, but with the potential for doing both. When Adam chose to disobey God and brought about the fall into sin, Adam experienced no serious and important consequences of the fall, but remained capable of choosing for the good or for the bad. Nor did the fall have any consequences for his posterity. Sin itself, a matter of bad choices, was only a bad habit, like smoking. The longer one committed a sin, the more habitual it became. But, by force of the will, one could break the habit, repent of the sin, and make this fundamental alteration in his life. In other words, man was saved by his own efforts to overcome habits of sin he had probably learned from other people.

It stands to reason that such a blatant distortion of Biblical doctrine could not be tolerated in the church, and Pelagius was condemned. But a modified form took its place. This modification became known as Semi-pelagianism. Those who promoted this view claimed that the fall resulted in a certain depravity of man's nature, but this depravity was more a matter of a grave and potentially deadly sickness than an actual spiritual death. And so, while grace was certainly necessary, the help and assistance of grace could only be acquired through man's own desire to attain salvation. He was sick, but no doctor would come to heal him unless he summoned the divine doctor to his bedside.

Thus, salvation was possible for all men. This led inevitably to another position to which these Semi-pelagians held: the idea of a universal atonement rooted in God's desire to save all men. And here is where, while not speaking in terms of a well-meant gospel offer, the Semi-pelagians taught something almost identical to today's "well-meant offer of the gospel" rooted in God's love for men.

I am going to give a few quotes from Augustine's writings to demonstrate his commitment to a repudiation of this underlying error of the well-meant gospel offer. Although as I said,

Augustine taught clearly all the doctrines of grace, I cannot offer in this forum quotes from Augustine's writings to prove these points. But I offer two pertinent quotes to demonstrate Augustine's position on the idea of a gracious gospel offer.

In defense of total depravity, Augustine argued that the will was a slave to sin and not free. "So, when man by his own free will sinned, then sin being victorious over him, the freedom of his will was lost" (Enchiridion, 30).<sup>4</sup> "And hence he will not be free to do right, until, being freed from sin, he shall begin to be the servant of righteousness" (Enchiridion, 30).

Not surprisingly, the Semi-pelagians quoted the same Scriptures as are quoted today in support of the well-meant gospel offer. I Timothy 2:4 is one such text: "Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." Augustine wrote: ". . . but that we are to understand by 'all men' the human race in all its varieties of rank and circumstances, -- kings, subjects; noble, plebian, high, low, learned, and unlearned, the sound in body, the feeble, the clever, the dull, the foolish, the rich, the poor, and those of middling circumstances; males, females, infants, boys, youths; young, middle-aged, and old men; of every tongue, of every fashion, of all arts, of all professions, with all the innumerable differences of will and conscience, and whatever else there is that makes a distinction among men. . . We are not compelled to believe that the omnipotent God has willed anything to be done which was not done: for setting aside all ambiguities, if 'He hath done all that He pleased in heaven and in earth,' as the Psalmists sings of Him, He certainly did not will to do anything that He hath not done" (Enchiridion, 103). This interpretation is the same as Calvin gives to this passage.

Matthew 23:37 is another text to which appeal is made by defenders of the well-meant gospel, and reads: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but ye would not!" Augustine, in his answer to those who appealed to this text, said: "But even though she (Jerusalem) was unwilling, He gathered together as many of her children as He wished: for He does not will some things and do them, and will others and do them not, but He hath done all that He pleased in heaven and on earth" (Enchiridion, 97).

Passages such as these could be multiplied, as well as countless passages in support of the other doctrines of grace. Augustine wanted no part of any universal intent or desire of God to save all men. Nor would Augustine speak of two wills in God, one will to save all and another will to save only His people. He was opposed to the doctrine. An early form of the well-meant offer was rejected.

There were also those among the Semi-pelagians who appealed to the wonderful deeds of the pagans, including the marvelous systems of philosophy developed by the Greeks, especially Plato and Aristotle, as proof of man's natural ability to do good. In fact, in my own Greek courses in college my Greek professor did not cease to extol the works of Plato; they were, he said, works that brought Plato to the next to the top rung of the ladder to heaven, and he bemoaned the fact that Plato did not climb that last rung. Augustine dismissed these works of the philosophers as being good in the sight of God (even though he had been ensnared by philosophy in his pre-conversion days). Rather disdainfully, he dismissed them as "splendid vices."

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<sup>4</sup> All the quotes I give are from Augustine's writings as found in Schaff, Philip, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1-8 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1980-1986]. From henceforth I will give only the work quoted.

## **JOHN CALVIN AND THE SUBJECT OF COMMON GRACE**

In our last installment, we discussed Augustine's repudiation of ideas, which have, since the Reformation, become known as the well-meant gospel offer. I included three decisive quotes from Augustine's writings to show that he did not hold to the ideas expressed by this doctrine. I used quotes that refer to texts to which defenders of the well-meant offer appeal to support of their view; the same passages to which the Semi-pelagians appealed in support of their heresies. In condemning the interpretation of these passages given by the Semi-pelagians, Augustine condemned the interpretation of the defenders of the well-meant gospel offer as well.

One would think that the church of Augustine's day would have accepted his views, but such was not the case. There is a kind of irony in the fact that Rome bestowed on Augustine sainthood and gave him the name, Doctor of Grace, but repudiated his views of grace. Rome condemned blatant Pelagianism, but adopted a Semi-pelagian position. Rome became Semi-pelagian in all its teachings, and particularly in its doctrine of justification. Rome taught justification by faith and works, a Semi-pelagian heresy.

There was something inevitable about this rejection by Rome of Augustine's position. Early in the history of the new dispensational church, monasticism arose and soon began to flourish. But monasticism was based on a two-tiered morality – one level for the common members of the church and another level for the monks and nuns. The latter level was a higher level, because those who lived on this level lived more holy lives than the ordinary people of God: they repudiated, as part of their monastic vows, marriage in order to live celibate lives, possession of earthly goods to live in poverty, and the enjoyment of God's good gifts in the creation. Because, repudiating these things, they lived a more perfect life; they also merited with God and earned a higher place in heaven by their extraordinary good works – so the church taught.

This idea of merit, as tacitly approved by Rome's encouragement of monasticism even before the Pelagian controversies, committed Rome to a Semi-pelagian position. If a man's good works truly merit with God, it can only be because he originates these good works; they are

not gifts of grace, sovereignly worked in man's heart. Having committed itself to the doctrine of the merit of good works, it was impossible for Rome to adopt Augustine's position, and Rome became completely Semi-pelagian. Not only did Rome deny sovereign grace, but it began, in its determination to hold to its heretical position on grace, to persecute those who taught and believed in sovereign and irresistible grace. In the Ninth century, Gottschalk rotted in prison after severe torture because he insisted on teaching the views of Augustine. And the people who came out from Rome under the leadership of the reformers were in constant danger of becoming the objects of Rome's fury.

It was not till the time of the Reformation that God delivered His people from Rome's bondage.

In giving the history of the idea of common grace, we must remember that the term itself, whether as referring to a general and well-meant offer or God's attitude of favor toward all men, was unknown prior to the Reformation, and was even unknown at the time of the Reformation. Nor were the concepts generally discussed and debated. The reformers hated Rome's Semi-pelagianism, but Rome had made no dogma that was called "common grace." The reformers without exception, therefore, restored to the church the truths of sovereign and particular grace without any specific reference to a grace common to all men.

Because the term common grace was unknown in the century of the Reformation, we would look in vain for some reference to it. Luther does not, so far as I know, use the term, not even in his development of justification by faith alone through grace against Rome's teachings of justification by faith and works. This does not mean, however, that Luther is of no value to us in our discussion of the issues of common grace. It is especially in his major work, *The Bondage of the Will*, written against the humanist Erasmus (left) and his detestable doctrine of free will, that Luther developed the truths of sovereign and particular grace. The book is almost "must reading" for anyone who wants to know what the Reformer of Wittenburg taught on the subject of grace. And anyone who reads the book will see clearly that to try to introduce into the book any doctrine of common grace is an exercise in futility.

Calvin, however, dealt with the concept, even though he too did not specifically refer to the term. Defenders of common grace are frequently wont to appeal to Calvin in support of their position. Nevertheless, their appeal is unwarranted and a perversion of Calvin's teachings.

It might be worthwhile, in passing, to point out that Calvin repeatedly used the word "offer" in his writings. And this use of the word "offer" is one reason why Calvin is said to support the idea of the gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel. I once knew a man, now in glory, who so desperately hated the word "offer" that, meaning well, he went through all Calvin's writings and blotted out the word "offer" wherever he found it. This man made a serious mistake and should never have done this. The word is, after all, found in the Canons of Dordt, a confession of the Reformed Churches. It is a good word. But he misunderstood the Latin use of it.

The word "offer" comes from the Latin *offere*, which means, "to present, set forth, and hold before someone." And the idea of the frequently used term "offer" is, therefore, to underscore the fact that in the gospel, Christ is presented or set forth as the One whom God has ordained to be the means of salvation; and that all who hear the gospel are commanded to repent of their sin and believe in Christ. The word is used by Calvin in the sense in which Paul uses it in Galatians 3:1: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?"

A few quotations from Calvin will lay to rest the erroneous supposition that Calvin taught a well-meant gospel offer. (This quotation and the following quotes are taken from Calvin's

Calvinism: Treatises on the Eternal Predestination of God & the Secret Providence of God [Grand Rapids: RPPA, no date.] The book is a reprint of the edition first translated into English in 1859 by Henry Cole. The treatise, *The Eternal Predestination of God* was originally written and published in Geneva in 1552. It is sometimes known as the *Consensus Genevensis*, because it was written by Calvin when the doctrine of predestination was attacked by Pighius and Bolsec, and a consensus was sought with all the reformers in Switzerland. It makes specific mention of Pighius, a bitter opponent of Calvin, especially Calvin's doctrine of predestination.)

On page 50, 51 of Calvin's *Calvinism*, Calvin writes: "Pighius will himself confess that there is need of illumination to bring to Christ those who were adversaries to God; but he, at the same time, holds fast the fiction that grace is offered equally to all, but that it is ultimately rendered effectual by the will of man, just as each one is willing to receive it." And Pighius was an enemy of the gospel, against whom Calvin's *Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God* was written.

In the second document included in Calvin's *Calvinism*, a document entitled *A Defense of the Secret Providence of God*, Calvin writes: "But with reference to His (God's, HH) hardening of men's hearts, that is a different way of God's working, as I have just observed. Because God does not govern the reprobate by His regenerating Spirit (to work salvation, HH); but He gives them over to the devil, and leaves them to be his slaves; and He so overrules their depraved wills by His secret judgment and counsel, that they can do nothing but what He has decreed" (319).

A rather lengthy quote from pages 81, 82 is important, for it refers to Scriptural passages that deal with the question brought up by the defenders of the well-meant gospel offer. "Now let us listen to the Evangelist John. He will be no ambiguous interpreter of this same passage of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53:1 & 6:9, 10, HH) . 'But (says John) Jesus had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on Him, that the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart,' etc. Now most certainly John does not here give us to understand that the Jews were prevented from believing by their sinfulness. For though this be quite true in one sense, yet the cause of their not believing must be traced to a far higher source. The secret and eternal purpose and counsel of God must be viewed as the original cause of their blindness and unbelief. It perplexed, in no small degree, the ignorant and the weak, when they heard that there was no place for Christ among the people of God (for the Jews were such). John explains the reason by showing that none believe save those to whom it is given, and that there are few to whom God reveals His arm. This other prophecy concerning 'the arm of the Lord,' the Evangelist weaves into his argument to prove the same great truth. And his words have a momentous weight. He says, 'Therefore they could not believe.' Wherefore, let men torture themselves as long as they will with reasoning, the cause of the difference made – why God does not reveal His arm equally to all—lies hidden in His own eternal decree. The whole of the Evangelist's argument amounts evidently to this: that faith is a special gift, and that the wisdom of Christ is too high and too deep to come within the compass of man's understanding. The unbelief of the world, therefore, ought not to astonish us, if even the wisest and most acute of men fail to believe. Hence, unless we would elude the plain and confessed meaning of the Evangelists, that few receive the Gospel, we must fully conclude that the cause is the will of God; and that the outward sound of the Gospel strikes the ear in vain until God is pleased to touch by it the heart within." (The reference to John's gospel is to John 12:37-41.)

These passages could be multiplied from this important book as well as from other writings of

the reformer of Geneva. But the interested reader may, with profit, read more of the same teachings in these treatises of Calvin as well as his Institutes of the Christian Religion. If Calvin found the final cause of men's rejection of the gospel in God's will, then it is impossible to conceive of the fact that God wills the salvation of these men.

The other aspect of common grace, God's attitude of favor towards all men, is also said to be a doctrine taught by Calvin. It is not necessary to go into this aspect of the question. We submit five reasons for this. 1) It is admitted by all students of Calvin that passages can be found in his writings, especially his Institutes, which suggest this. But to understand properly these writings of Calvin, we must not forget that Calvin was writing in a time when the issue of God's favor towards all men was not a topic of debate and was not even consciously thought of as an important doctrine. We must not become guilty of the sin of anachronism (putting back into Calvin's time our own debates and teachings), and appeal to Calvin on questions, of which he was not even aware, as proof for our position. 2) When Calvin repudiated the idea of an attitude of favor toward all men as it was expressed in the preaching of the gospel (as the above quotes show) he basically repudiated also the idea of an attitude of favor on God's part towards all men, manifested in the good things of God's creation. The well-meant gospel offer is said, by its defenders, to be one evidence among others that God has an attitude of favor towards all men. His attitude of favor is shown in His expressed desire to save them. 3) Calvin's repudiation of the well-meant gospel offer is rooted in God's sovereign decree of election and reprobation, and reprobation means that God hates the wicked, a doctrine emphatically taught by Calvin. 4) Calvin spoke frequently of the fact that God reveals His goodness in all the gifts He bestows on man; but Calvin held to Asaph's position in Psalm 73:18, that God puts the wicked on slippery places by means of these good gifts. 5) Finally, although Calvin may have made some statements that in the light of later controversies are not totally satisfactory, when Calvin came to the heart of this theology, the core of all he taught, the center of the truths of sovereign and particular grace, he was Biblical and beyond criticism. We may safely conclude that, whether we hold to a general, gracious, well-meant offer or repudiate it, Calvin did not teach it. We ought not to be surprised by the fact that Calvin sometimes said things that, in later years and in the light of later controversies, proved to be unfortunate statements. We ought rather to be surprised that Calvin, so recently escaped from Rome, was as solidly Biblical as he was. This is amazing and reason for gratitude to God.

## **THE "CANONS OF DORDT" AND COMMON GRACE**

The period after the reformation was a time of writing creeds. In all the history of the church there has never been such a rich period of doctrinal advance and creedal formulation. All the major creeds of the reformation were written in the first 125 years that followed the work of Luther, Calvin and Knox. The last two creeds of importance, omitting for the moment the Helvetic Confession, were the Canons of Dordt and the Westminster Confession of Faith, both written in the 17th century.

The Canons of Dordt and the events leading up to the Synod of Dordt, are our concern in this installment. The Canons was unique among all the creeds of the reformation because it was occasioned by a fierce attack against the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace. That attack was launched by a man named Jacobus Arminius, and his followers became known as Arminians.

The Canons of Dordt was written in five chapters, each chapter devoted to a refutation of one point of the teachings of the Arminians. The five chapters are: Sovereign and eternal predestination, including election and reprobation – over against the Arminian teaching of conditional predestination; Particular redemption – over against the Arminian doctrine of universal atonement; Total depravity – over against the Arminian doctrine of the free will of man; Irresistible grace – over against the Arminian teaching that the grace of the Holy Spirit could be resisted; and the Preservation of the saints – over against the teaching of the Arminians that a man, although once saved, could lose his salvation and ultimately perish in hell.

It is somewhat ironic that some 20th century supporters of the well-meant gospel offer, especially in Reformed circles, appeal to the Canons in support of their position. This appeal is ironic because the Canons were actually written against the position of the Arminians that grace is offered and available to all, and that the actual reception of it depends on the choice of man's will.

The two articles in the Canons, to which supporters of the well-meant offer have appealed, are Canons 2.5 and Canons 3/4. 8, 9. Canons 2.5 reads: "Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This



promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel."

This is a very beautiful and important article. It clearly defines the contents of the preaching of the gospel and it raises a bar against all Hyper-calvinism. Hyper-calvinism is a charge frequently leveled against all opponents of the well-meant gospel offer, but is really only a red herring that makes use of careless name-calling. It is intended to brand those who deny the well-meant offer with evil. The article itself prevents one from teaching the main error of the Hyper-calvinists. They deny that all men who hear the gospel are, by the gospel, called to repent and to believe in Christ. They teach that the command, proclaimed in the gospel, that all who hear are called to repentance and faith in Christ is wrong; God calls to faith and repentance only his elect. But I intend to discuss this aspect of the question of the well-meant offer in a later installment.

The article, does not, however, teach an offer. Those who claim that it does maintain, I would suppose, that "the command to repent and believe" is, in fact, an offer. They seem to be oblivious to the fact that there is a considerable difference between a command and an offer. I may offer a man fifty dollars if he will cut my lawn; it is then up to him whether he does it or not. But that is quite different than saying to a man: "I order you to cut my lawn and you will be punished if you refuse." So God does not offer salvation to all men; but He does command all men to repent of their sin and believe in Christ.

He is God and has the right to issue such a command. And man, creature that he is, must obey or be destroyed. He does not say to a man: "I love you and want you to be saved; please believe in Christ and I will save you;" no, He says to man: "Repent or go to hell."

It is impossible to find an offer anywhere in this article.

Canons 3/4, 8, 9 reads: "As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God has most earnestly and truly shown in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to Him and believe on Him" (Article 8). "It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves, some of whom when called, regardless of their danger, reject the Word of life; others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their heart, therefore their joy, arising only from a temporary faith, soon vanishes and they fall away; while others choke the seed of the Word by perplexing cares and the pleasures of the world, and produce no fruit. This our Savior teaches in the parable of the sower (Matt.13)" (Article 9).

It is my understanding of the appeal of common grace supporters to this article as proof of a well-meant offer is because they assume that the word "offer" in Article 9 refers to the well-meant offer with its idea that God loves all and offers salvation to all who hear the gospel. However, as we noticed in an earlier article, the Latin word *offere* (the Canons were written in Latin) means "to present, to set forth, to set before the face of one."

The article teaches the following truths, at least as far as the question of the well-meant gospel offer is concerned. God's calling to those who hear the gospel is serious and means what it says, and that it is well-pleasing to Him that men do what He commands. He is not playing games with men when he commands them to repent and believe in Christ. He is not

commanding them to do something to which He is indifferent. He does not say to men that they must repent and believe in Christ, but does not really mean what He says, and does not care whether they obey or not. God never has any pleasure in sin, nor delights in disobedience. Presumably, the defenders of the gospel offer, because, so they say, God is well-pleased with the repentance and faith of those who hear the gospel, must also desire that all be saved. And this desire that all be saved implies that God loves all and that Christ died for all.

This is indeed a problem that requires our investigation. It is not a new problem. It was already addressed by Francis Turretin, an ardent opponent of the well-meant offer. Whether his explanation is adequate is another matter, and we intend, God willing, to discuss this problem somewhat later – as well as Turretin’s answer to this objection. It is sufficient to say now that the command of God to repent from sin and believe in Christ is a command rooted in the creation ordinance. God created man good and upright and able to keep God’s law. Man’s fall is his own fault, and for it he is culpable before God. All men are responsible for Adam’s sin, for Adam was the federal head of the entire human race. But all men are responsible also for obedience to God, even after they fell. God does not, as it were, say to fallen man: “I am so sorry that you fell into sin. I see your sad plight and your inability to do what I originally commanded you to do. I will not, therefore, require obedience of you any longer.” Such a position would be contrary to God’s own infinite holiness and justice. God still insists that man obey Him. An inability that is man’s own fault is no excuse for disobedience. And God is very serious about this.

Article 9 teaches that the fault for man’s disobedience, therefore, does not rest with the gospel – as if the gospel is insufficient to point the way to salvation. The gospel is clear and concise. Man must obey God and believe in Christ. Man’s unbelief is his own fault and responsibility, and he may not, as the rich man in hell did, blame the gospel (Luke 16:29-31).

But a more detailed examination of this question will have to wait.

## **THE "FREE OFFER" OF THE GOSPEL**

In the last installment I described briefly the error of the Arminians, and the Canons of Dordt that was written against their errors. While the views of the Arminians did not include the error of a well-meant offer of the gospel as such, their general teachings were very much like those of well-meant offer defenders. The defenders of the well-meant gospel offer in the Reformed tradition appeal to the Canons in support of their view with an irony that cannot be overlooked.

The Arminians taught that fallen man's will is free. The defenders of the well-meant offer also teach the free will of man. They do this by saying that God desires the salvation of all men and has done all that is necessary for man to be saved; but it now remains up to man whether he will accept the offered salvation.

Many who hold to the well-meant gospel offer deny that they teach that man possesses a free will. Nevertheless, their denial is spurious. (I will demonstrate this at a later date.)

The Canons teach total depravity. In Canons 3/4. B 3, 4 the fathers at Dordt reject the error of those "who teach that in spiritual death the spiritual gifts are not separate from the will of man, since the will in itself has never been corrupted, but only hindered through the darkness of the understanding and the irregularity of the affections; and that, these hindrances having been removed, the will can then bring into operation its native powers, that is, that the will of itself is able to will and to choose, or not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be present to it" (Article 3). "Who teach that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God" (Article 4). Defenders of common grace teach that, although man is totally depraved, he is not absolutely depraved. This is an inexcusable playing with words, used only to deny an important point of the Canons, the truth of total depravity.

The Arminians taught a "common grace," that is a grace of God common to all. The Arminians meant by common grace those gifts which man did not lose when he fell. Those who hold to

common grace teach much the same thing. Man is the object of the grace of God, which enables him to make a choice either for or against the gospel offer. The Canons say that Synod rejects the errors of those “who teach that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (this is the only place in all the Reformed creeds where the term “common grace” is used – and its mention is in order to reject it. HH) (by which they understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, namely, the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself. And that in this way God on His part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since He applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion” (Canons, 3/4, B, 5, emphasis is mine, HH).

The Arminians reduced the gospel to overtures of love, opportunities to be saved, expressions of God’s willingness to deliver from evil, and various pleadings and beggings to “close with Christ,” as the Marrow men were wont to put it. The common grace people say much the same. But the Canons say that the Synod rejects the errors of those “who teach that the grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising, or (as others explain it) that this manner of working, which consists in advising, is more in harmony with man’s nature; and that there is no reason why this advising grace alone should not be sufficient to make the natural man spiritual, indeed, that God does not produce the consent of the will except through this manner of advising (emphasis is mine, HH); and that the power of the divine working, whereby it surpasses the working of Satan, consists in this, that God promises eternal, while Satan promises only temporal good” (Canons 3/4, B 7). Nor do the Canons hesitate to call this view “altogether Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture” (idem.).

Finally, the Canons emphatically teach a limited atonement, or, as the doctrine is better called, a particular redemption. The Arminians taught a universal atoning sacrifice of Christ, which made salvation possible for all men. The common grace proponents are also compelled by their position to speak of an atonement of Christ that was for all men – at least in some important respects. The Canons reject that idea. In Canons 2. 8 the fathers state with all the emphasis of which they are capable: “For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation; that is, it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language all those and those only (emphasis is mine, HH) who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father . . . .”

It is difficult to imagine how anyone can appeal to the Canons of Dordt in support of a well-meant offer of salvation.

May the indispensable blessings of our sovereign God be with you in the year that lies ahead of us. We take joy in knowing that, although the future is hid from us, God will guide us by His counsel, and afterwards receive us to glory.

## **AMYRALDIANISM**

Shortly after the Synod of Dordt adopted the Canons, an error arose in France that greatly influenced subsequent theology. I speak of the error of Amyraldianism. The error owes its name to its most influential defender, Moise Amyraut. It was claimed to be Calvinism, but was in fact a repudiation of the Calvinism of Calvin and the teachings of the Synod of Dordt.

The heresy that it taught was called “hypothetical universalism”. It taught that “hypothetically” God loves all men; Christ died for all men; in His goodness towards all men, God made salvation available to all men; gave all men the promise of salvation on condition of faith; and actually bestowed an objective grace on all men. However, in fact, God saves only the elect and confers on them the grace of salvation.

The system of theology promoted by Amyraut was a strong foundation for the gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel. The ideas are almost identical.

The doctrine became sheer Arminianism – as one would expect that it would. It was based on the “two-will” idea in God: one will that wills the salvation of all men, and another will that wills the salvation of the elect. These two wills are sometimes called “the will of God’s decree” and “the will of His command;” or: “the secret will of God” and “the revealed will of God.” It is a distinction dear to the hearts of well-meant offer defenders. It is an idea repudiated by Calvin in his Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God, a book I referred to in any earlier installment. It is a distinction with which we shall have to deal in a subsequent article.

Further, the system of Amyraut is based on a distinction in God’s grace between objective grace and subjective grace. Objective grace is God’s universal promise of salvation through a universal atonement on condition of faith. Subjective grace is the actual working of God in the heart of man to save him. The objective grace is a “common” grace, given to all who hear the gospel; subjective grace is given only to the elect.

We ought to notice that the terms “objective” and “subjective”, especially the former, can be confusing. By objective grace is not meant a grace that is purely objective to the one hearing the preacher preach, so that he only hears about grace towards all men, and does not actually receive grace in his heart. The Amyraldians taught that the grace that comes to all men who hear the preaching includes a subjective grace applied to the heart, but this grace is not a

saving grace, for saving grace depends on the fulfillment of the condition of faith. The “common grace” to which the well-meant offer refers, also includes a subjective grace that enables the hearer to decide either for or against the gospel. But we shall wait for further discussion of this subject in a later installment.

This view of the Amyraldians sounds like the conditional theology of those who hold to a conditional covenant. God’s promise is to all baptized members of believers objectively, but is subjectively given only on condition of faith. I do not hesitate a moment to state that conditional salvation, in whatever form it appears, is Arminian and Amyraldian.

The views of Amyraut are peculiar and one wonders why any theologian could possibly give them credence. And yet they became popular in the British Isles. Several Amyraldians were present at the Westminster Assembly and argued vehemently their position. Richard Baxter was an Amyraldian and, at first, refused to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith – although later he did sign it, evidently persuaded that the Westminster Confession allowed room for his views. Edward Fisher, in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, also held to the teachings of Amyraut; his book had considerable influence at the time of the Marrow Controversy in the beginning of the 18th century.

The easiest way to learn what the Amyraldians taught is to consult the *Formula Consensus Helvetica*. The introduction of this confession, as it appears in A. A. Hodge’s “*Outlines of Theology*,” reads: “Composed in Zurich, A. D. 1675, by John Henry Heidegger, of Zurich, assisted by Francis Turretin, of Geneva, and Luke Gernler, of Basle, and designed to condemn and exclude that modified form of Calvinism, which, in the seventeenth century, emanated from the Theological School at Saumur, represented by Amyraut, Placaeus, and Daille; entitled ‘Form of Agreement of the Helvetic Reformed Churches respecting the doctrine of universal grace, the doctrines connected therewith, and some other points.’” (A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* [New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1878] 656-663.)

After emphatically defining and defending sovereign and eternal election in Articles 4 and 5, the confession goes on to say in Article 6: “Wherefore we can not give suffrage to the opinion of those who teach:--(1) that God, moved by philanthropy, or a sort of special love for the fallen human race ... did, in a kind of conditioned willing—willingness—first moving of pity, as they call it—inefficacious desire—purpose the salvation of all and each, at least, conditionally, i.e., if they would believe; (2) that He appointed Christ Mediator for all and each of the fallen ....”

This article is a specific reference to the teachings of Amyraut. It is a bit complicated in this form, but means that God loved the fallen human race in a special way. Further, God willed and purposed to save all men, although His desire and purpose to save all men was conditional and without the efficacy to save. That willingness to save all men arose out of pity for all men.

Again, after emphatically asserting, against the Amyraldians, that Adams’s sin, imputed to the whole human race, includes both the imputed guilt of Adam’s sin to the human race, and its inherent hereditary sin, the Confession goes on to say, “Accordingly we can not, without harm to Divine truth, give assent to those who deny that Adam represented his posterity by appointment of God, and that his sin is imputed, therefore, immediately, to his posterity ...” (Article 12).

This article makes clear that those of the school of Amyraut denied original sin, both in the sense of original guilt and original pollution.

Concerning the death of Christ and the extent of his atoning work, the creed says: "... He encountered dreadful death instead of (in the place of, HH) the elect alone, restored only these into the bosom of the Father's grace ..." (Article 12). The Amyraldians were not hesitant to speak of a certain "hypothetical" universalism in the suffering of our Savior on the cross.

After turning to the subject of the calling of God, the confession says, "Although these 'all' (in John 6:40, HH) are elect alone, and God formed no plan of universal salvation without any selection of persons, and Christ therefore died not for every one but for the elect only who were given to Him ..." (Article 19). John 6:40 reads: "And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day." The Amyraldians interpreted that text to mean that God willed the salvation of all, but actually bestowed it on those who saw the Son and believed. This interpretation is rejected by the Consensus Helvetica.

Article 20 follows with this strong language: "Accordingly we have no doubt that they err who [hold] the absolute universality of grace ..." (Article 20).

The defenders of the well-meant gospel offer teach exactly what the Helvetic Consensus repudiated, that is that God is gracious to all who hear the gospel.

While the Consensus Helvetica did not attain credal status in any Reformed or Presbyterian Church, it was held in high esteem in the Swiss Churches and was the consensus of the Swiss theologians who worked in the major cities of Switzerland over one hundred years after the death of Calvin.

There can be little doubt about it that the teachings of the well-meant gospel offer closely parallel those of Amyraldianism. These views were emphatically rejected by the Swiss churches.

## **THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION AND THE "WELL-MEANT GOSPEL OFFER"**

In our discussion of the history of common grace, we have come to the Westminster Assembly and the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith on the subject of the gracious, well-meant gospel offer. On the question of common grace in general, the Westminster Confession of Faith (henceforth, WC) has nothing to say. We may limit ourselves, therefore, to the one question of whether Westminster teaches a gracious, well-meant gospel offer.

We must discuss two aspects of the question, both of which are treated in the WC. The two belong together. These two are: Is God gracious to all men in the preaching of the gospel, when He expresses His desire and intention to save all men? And, secondly, is the atonement of Christ a sacrifice for the elect only, or is it also, in some sense, a sacrifice for all men? The two belong together, for, if the gospel is a proclamation of God's desire to save all men, and if therefore, salvation is freely and graciously offered to all men on the condition of faith, then a universal atonement must of necessity stand behind this general expression of God's love for all. God cannot, without making a mockery of the gospel, offer to all men a salvation that Christ has not earned by His suffering and death on the cross. Nor can God love all men without there being a judicial basis for that love in the cross of Jesus Christ.

History has also shown that the two are inseparably connected. The Marrow Men, who emphatically taught a gracious gospel offer, were forced to hold to the position that "Christ is dead for all," although they attempted by a verbal slight of hand to distinguish between a Christ who died for all and a Christ who is dead for all.

The Amyraldians, as we have seen, attempted to escape the inevitable connection between the two by speaking of a hypothetical universal atonement, which was to be distinguished from a particular atonement actually accomplished by Christ 2000 years ago when He died on Calvary.

The same issue was really the downfall of a strong Calvinism in Wales after the work of George Whitefield and the establishment of a Presbyterian Church there. Some wanted an approach to preaching that was warmer and more expressive of the desire of the church to bring sinners to repentance than what they considered to be the cold, dispassionate approach of Calvinism.



In order to satisfy such clamoring for more compassionate preaching, these men introduced the idea of a gracious, well-meant gospel offer. But shortly after its general acceptance, the question of the extent of the atonement came up and the church was compelled, by the logic of its position, to introduce the general notion of a certain universality to the atonement. (See Hanks & Engelsma, *The Five Points of Calvinism* [The British Reformed Fellowship, 2008] p. 54).

The same was true of the history of the doctrine of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). In 1924 the CRC adopted a theory of common grace that included a gracious well-meant gospel offer. Although the Synod that adopted this theory did not address the question of the extent of the atonement, the church was forced to consider the question in the mid-'60s. The Synod that made the final decision clearly approved of the extent of the atonement as being universal, although it was careful to limit the universality of the atonement so as to exclude efficacy. The universality of the atonement was said to be universal only in sufficiency, availability and as an expression of God's intention. It is interesting that on the floor of the Synod, during the debate, opposition to a universal atonement, even in the limited sense of sufficiency, availability and intention, was expressed, but this opposition was quickly silenced by a reminder that, after all, the CRC had officially adopted the gracious offer of the gospel, and that, therefore, the atonement had to be universal.

This same relationship between the extent of the atonement and the approval of a gracious, well-meant gospel offer was a source of tension at the Westminster Assembly.

One could characterize the Westminster Assembly as being divided into two camps with respect to the truths of Calvinism. (On the question of church polity, three camps were present: Presbyterians, Erastians, and Independents.) Staunchly orthodox defenders of the system of Calvinism developed by John Calvin himself and made explicit at the Synod of Dort were led by such men as Rutherford and Gillespie, while a "moderate" group of men defended a milder form of Calvinism. ("Moderate" is really a generous assessment of these so-called Calvinists, for in fact, they were Amyraldian in their thinking, and they defended a position on the Synod that was only a slight modification of the Amyraldian heresy.) The position of Amyraut was defended on the floor of the Assembly especially by Seaman, Vines, Marshall and Calamy.

We may say, without hesitation, that the orthodox view prevailed in the entire confession and the Amyraldian view was rejected.

I am aware of the fact that many in the past and today claim to be within the teachings of the WC even though they hold to a gracious and well-meant gospel offer. Perhaps their defense is that the WC itself uses the term "offer" (as does the Canons of Dort). Perhaps they are more honest and claim, as the Amyraldian Richard Baxter claimed, that there was room in the confession for his Amyraldian views. He wrote: "Chap III, sec. 6, and chap. VIII, sec 8 (of the WC, HH) which speak against universal redemption, I understand not of all redemption, and particularly not of the mere bearing the punishment of man's sin, and satisfying God's justice, but of that special redemption proper to the elect, what was accompanied with an intention of actual application of the saving benefits in time. If I may not be allowed this interpretation, I must herein dissent." (Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith* [Philadelphia, 1847] p. 71.)

In other words, Richard Baxter refused to sign the WC unless he was permitted to make a distinction between a special redemption that included the application of Christ's benefits to

the elect, and a more general redemption that was a “mere bearing the punishment of man’s sin, and satisfying God’s justice.” Baxter admitted that the latter was not taught in the WC, but that it was permissible to make the distinction because the WC did not condemn it. Baxter argued his case from the silence of the WC, not from its teachings. (We may note that Baxter later did sign the WC.) It would help matters considerably if present day defenders who hold to a gracious well-meant gospel offer and claim faithfulness to the WC would tell us whether their claim to be faithful to the WC is based on the mere use of the word “offer” in the confession, or whether they argue from silence, as Richard Baxter did; or, whether perhaps they have some other argument.)

We will discuss the actual teachings of the WC in our next installment.

## **DID THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY TEACH A GRACIOUS AND WELL-MEANT OFFER**

In this installment, we return to the Westminster Assembly and the question whether the WC teaches a gracious and well-meant gospel offer.

The Westminster Assembly was not only an important convocation of the leading divines in the British Isles in the 17th century, but it also produced an extremely influential creed, called the Westminster Confession of Faith. The creed continues to have influence in Presbyterian churches throughout the world.

Many theologians in the Presbyterian tradition and sworn defenders of the teachings of the creed also claim to hold to the well-meant offer of the gospel, an aspect of common grace and the subject of our discussion in this brief historical survey. The question, therefore, becomes: Does the Westminster Confession (henceforth, WC) teach the well-meant and gracious offer of the gospel?

Some supporters of common grace have admitted that the doctrine of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer is not taught in the Confession, but that the wording of key articles can be so interpreted as to allow room for this teaching. Richard Baxter argued this point, although he was an Amyraldian and was unhappy with the WC for not explicitly including Amyraldian doctrines concerning the gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel and a certain universality of the atonement of Christ. Richard Baxter's case rests on tenuous grounds. His argument is that the error would have to be specifically rejected if it is to be excluded from the WC, and that, therefore, the silence of the Confession allows for it to be taught. But the WC, unlike the Canons, does not deal with specific errors, which it takes the time to refute. The fact is, that the case for Amyraldian views was strenuously argued on the floor of the Assembly, and was rejected by the majority of the delegates. Philip Schaff writes: "The difference [in viewpoint between the delegates] is made more clear from the debates in the 'Minutes.' Several prominent members, as Calamy, Arrowsmith, Vines, Seaman, who took part in the preparation of the doctrinal standards, sympathized with the hypothetical universalism of the Saumur School (Cameron and Amyrauld) and with the moderate position of Davenant and the English delegates to the Synod of Dordt. They expressed this sympathy on the floor of the Assembly, as well as on other occasions. They believed in a special effective election and final

perseverance of the elect (as a necessary means to a certain end), but they held at the same time that God sincerely intends to save all men; that Christ intended to die and actually died, for all men; and that the difference is not in the intention and offer on the part of God, but in the acceptance and appropriation on the part of men.” (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [New York: Harper & Brothers, Sixth Edition] 770).

One of the arguments offered as proof that the WC teaches a gracious and well-meant gospel offer is the creed’s own use of the word “offer.” As a matter of fact, I have been able to find only two places in the WC where the word “offer” appears as a description of the preaching. In one place we read: “Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant (the first covenant with Adam, HH), the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe” (Chapter 7, paragraph 3). The word for “offer” that is used here is in the Latin, offer from *offere*.

The second place where the word is also used is Chapter 10, paragraph 2, in the expression, “[Man] renewed by the Holy Spirit ... is enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.” While the Latin version of the WC is not decisive (the creed was originally written in English) the Latin surely helps us understand what the translators considered the mind of the Assembly. The Latin version of this article has: “... gratiamque inibi oblatam et exhibitam amplexari,” for “and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed by it.” *Oblatam* can mean “offered,” but has the primary meaning of referring to something brought to the attention of another; while *exhibitam* is correctly translated by our English word “exhibit”. The Latin word *offere* is not used here in the Latin translation.

The word “offer” does appear in the Shorter Catechism in Q. & A. 86: “What is faith in Jesus Christ? Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered (*offertur*) to us in the gospel.”

It is my contention that these scattered uses of the word “offer” cannot refer to the gracious and well-meant gospel offer as it is taught today. My reasons are the following.

The Amyraldian position on the well-meant gospel offer was argued on the floor of the Assembly, but the Amyraldian position appears nowhere in the confession itself. It was rejected by the Assembly. The rejection of Amyraldianism means that the Amyraldian view of the well-meant gospel offer was also rejected.

Richard Baxter’s original reluctance to sign the WC would seem to indicate that this notable Amyraldian doubted whether the WC taught the well-meant gracious offer of the gospel. In fact, he would not sign the WC until he could be assured that, although the confession did not include the Amyraldian position, the wording of the confession left room for it.

Article 3 of chapter 7 uses language that precludes the interpretation sometime given to the word “offer”: In speaking of the covenant of grace the article goes on to say about this covenant: “wherein [God] freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.” This wording sounds more like Canons 2.5 than a statement defending the proposition that God desires the salvation of all who hear the gospel, although it is even somewhat stronger. 7/3 of the WC does not say that faith is a condition to the reception of Christ offered to all in the gospel, but it says rather that the promise of the gospel includes also the promise to give faith

to the elect (“to all those that are ordained unto life”) and that faith is worked by the Holy Spirit. Although faith is required for salvation, it is sovereignly given and given only to those who are God’s own elect. That is strong language.

This interpretation is strengthened by what I wrote some years ago in a paper entitled “A Comparison of the Westminster Confession and the Reformed Confessions”. “There is evidence that the meaning given to ‘offer’ by the Davenant men (also Amyraldians, HH) was not the meaning of many on the Assembly.” According to Warfield (B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* [Mack Publishing, 1972] 141.) Rutherford, a prominent member of the Assembly, seems to have used the term only in the sense of the preaching of the gospel. Warfield also claims (*ibid.*, 142) that Gillespie, another gifted divine, spoke of ‘offer’ in the sense of preaching or in the sense of command when he claimed, during the debate, that command does not always imply intention. That is, when God commands all men to repent of sin and believe in Christ, this does not necessarily imply that it is God’s intention to save those whom he commands. Shaw argues the same point and claims that the Assembly used the term ‘offer’ only in the sense of “present” (Shaw, p. 104).

Schaff inadvertently supports my conviction that the WC does not teach a well-meant gracious gospel offer when he suggests that the Westminster divines contradicted themselves when they taught, on the one hand, an offer of salvation, but insisted, on the other hand, that the atonement was limited to the elect (Schaff, vol. 1, 772). Schaff’s assumptions are 1) the well-meant gospel offer requires a universal atonement; 2) the word “offer” in the WC means the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. His first assumption is right. His second assumption is indeed nothing but an assumption. The fact is that the Westminster divines were far too astute theologically to support such an obvious contradiction. Further, the defenders of Amyraldianism on the Assembly argued especially for a universal atonement, and did so on the grounds of a gracious offer of the gospel, but were over-ruled by a majority of the assembly.

Schaff is correct that the WC emphatically teaches a limited atonement. And a limited atonement is the death-knell to all teachings with regard to a gracious and well-meant gospel offer. While the truth of a particular redemption is woven into the warp and woof of the WC, it is specifically taught in III. 6 and VIII, 5, 6, 8. I see no need to quote them here, for it is universally acknowledged that the WC is emphatic in its teaching concerned the truth of particular redemption.

I consider these arguments convincing proof that the well-meant gospel offer is not taught in the Westminster Confession.

One more point needs to be made before we leave Westminster. The debate on the floor of the Assembly over the extent of the atonement was crucial for an understanding of the relation between the atonement and the well-meant gospel offer. The debate on the Assembly hinged on the question whether the intention of God with respect to the salvation of men rested on the sufficiency of the atonement or its efficacy. The Amyraldians argued that God’s intention rested on the sufficiency of the atonement, while the orthodox argued that God’s intention in the atonement was determined by its efficacy. That is, while all the divines on the Assembly were agreed that Christ’s atonement was sufficient for all, and while this was expressly stated in Canons 2.3, 6, (of which creed the delegates were aware) though it is not in the WC, the Amyraldians argued that this universal sufficiency also implies that the intention of God is to save all men: intention is determined by sufficiency. The orthodox insisted, however, that God’s intention with respect to the extent of the atonement was limited by its efficacy: The cross was efficacious to save only the elect; this was God’s intention with the atonement; hence the extent of the atonement was determined by its efficacy. Nevertheless,

this question became an issue in the debate in subsequent years, and is an issue we will discuss at a later point.

The orthodox view prevailed on the Assembly. The WC is solid in its rejection of a well-meant gospel offer.

## **THE "MARROW CONTROVERSY"**

We must turn now, in our historical treatment of the error of common grace in general and the gracious and well-meant gospel offer in particular, to the Marrow Controversy, which troubled the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in the first half of the 18th century. Before we do this, however, I must make a few remarks about theological developments in the British Isles, after the Westminster Assembly that relate to our subject.

The Presbyterian Church never became the state church in England. After the Cromwell interregnum, England was once again under a monarchy with the Stuarts from Scotland on the throne. The State Church again became the Anglican Church. Only in Scotland did Presbyterianism become a vital part of the life of the nation. A struggle in Scotland over the question of whether the Presbyterian Church of Scotland or the Anglican Church would be the state church resulted in a victory for the Presbyterian Church.

There were many who opposed some of the doctrines of the Westminster Confession. John Davenant, a delegate from England to the Synod of Dort, defended a modified Amyraldian position. The same was true of Richard Baxter. Amyraldianism continued to have its supporters.

Many throughout the British Isles, known as Puritans objected to the formal orthodoxy of the State Church in England (Anglican) and the worldliness of its members, as well as its retention of Romish rites and ceremonies. Further, they charged the Church with the error of Antinomism. While I cannot go into this aberration in these articles, we may notice in passing that this error first appeared in Germany in the Lutheran churches of the Reformation. The chief defender of Antinomianism was John Agricola, but the error was (and is) always a threat to the church. In general, Antinomism taught that the redeemed and justified child of God did not have the obligation to keep the law of God. Antinomism denied the "must" of the law of God, for, so it argued, the justified sinner is righteous in Christ wholly apart from works. The charge was often leveled against the Presbyterian Church in Scotland because, the church held firmly to the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and opponents of that doctrine often accused the orthodox of teaching Antinomianism although the charge was false. That is, enemies of justification by faith alone attempted to thwart the doctrine by leveling against it a

charge of Antinomianism. While the charge itself was not true, it was true that, because the Presbyterian Church was the State Church, all the citizens of the nation were technically members and the responsibility of the church. Among these were countless people who were thoroughly irreligious, hardly ever came to church and lived completely worldly lives.

This objection was brought against the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in the latter part of the 17th century and the early part of the 18th century by those who were later called the Marrow men, and who, while also charging the Presbyterian Church with antinomism, found fault with the worldliness and spiritual carelessness of so many in the church, and ascribed it to a lack in the preaching of the gospel. They charged the church with producing preachers who were cold and abstract and who lacked the passion for souls that ought to characterize the preaching. They wanted preaching that was conducive to leading people to Christ and thus produce genuine conversion.

The origin of the name “Marrow Men” is found in a book by Edward Fisher, written in 1645, which appeared under the title, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Swengel: Reinar Publications, 1975). In this book Fisher, in a dialogue between three fictional characters (Nomista [representing the law of God], Neophytus [representing a new convert] and Evangelista [representing the gospel]) discuss the problems in the church and find many of them to be rooted in a wrong conception of preaching. As, in his book, he analyzed the problems in the church, Fisher, through his fictional characters and attempting to alter the character of the preaching, made and defended statements such as these: “Christ hath taken upon Him the sins of all men;” “[In Christ] the Father hath made a deed of gift and grant unto all mankind;” “Whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, He did it for you;” “Go and tell every man without exception, that here is good news for him, Christ is dead for him.” This warmer approach to preaching, so he argued, would make it attractive to people and make the gospel more acceptable to those to whom it was preached.

In the early part of the 18th century the book came to the attention of some of the men in the church in connection with a controversy over what was called “The Auchterader Creed”. The Auchterader Creed was a statement drawn up by the Auchterader Presbytery, which the presbytery required a candidate to the ministry to sign in order to be licensed to preach. The statement read: “It is unsound to teach that a man must forsake sin in order to come to Christ.” In the course of the debate reference was made to Fisher’s book as containing the solution to the problem presented by the Auchterader Creed. The book of Fisher was republished and became itself an issue on the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. After due consideration, Fisher’s book was condemned by the Assembly on the following grounds.

1) The book taught that assurance was of the essence of faith. (While there is no point in entering into this controversy, we should notice that the Westminster Confession, in 18.3, wrongly, denies that assurance is of the essence of faith: “This infallible assurance [of faith] doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it”.

2) It taught a universal atonement and pardon in the cross. (This was especially evident from the statement in the book that Christ was dead for all. While the distinction was attempted between Christ dying for all and Christ dead for all, this was a mere play on words and a subtle effort to defend a universal atonement.)

3) The book taught that holiness was not necessary to salvation. (From this teaching and that of point 5 below, arose the charge that Edward Fisher (and the Marrow Men who rejoiced at



his teachings), were antinomian. So the charge of Antinomianism was made by the Marrow Men against the church, and by the church against the Marrow Men.)

4) It taught that the fear of punishment and the hope of reward are not allowed to be used as incentives to obedience.

5) It held that the believer is not under the law as a rule of life.

Because the whole issue was related to the preaching of the gospel, the General Assembly interpreted the book to be a defense of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. And so it was. It was a bold attempt to introduce into the church the errors of Amyraldianism by means of altering the preaching. Because Christ's atonement was for all men, preachers were to assure every hearer that God loved him, that it was God's desire and intention to save everyone who heard the gospel, and that God earnestly and tenderly, through the gospel, wooed sinners to "close with Christ." There was no need to reject the overtures of the gospel, because each man had a deed or grant that gave him the right to be saved, but the actual bestowal of salvation was conditioned on faith and acceptance of the overtures of the gospel.

Thus, although the Presbyterian Church of Scotland officially condemned these views, eventually they entered the church through the teaching of the Marrow men, and committed subsequent theology to this pernicious error.

Subsequent Presbyterianism has been influenced by the Marrow men and one finds that a gracious and well-meant gospel offer has infiltrated the thinking and preaching of many, if not most, of the Presbyterian Churches around the world.

The question we now face is this: how did the idea of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer enter into Dutch thinking? From the time of the Synod of Dordt to the end of the 18th century it was not present in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands.

There are several ways in which the gracious offer of the gospel was introduced into the Dutch Reformed Churches.

1) Because of the persecution of Protestants in France, many refugees found a sanctuary in the Netherlands. But many of these refugees were influenced by Amyraldianism, which had originated in France. D. H. Kromminga writes, "Before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes various heterodox opinions had made their appearance among the Reformed churches of France. At Saumur, professor Moses Amyraud had taught a double decree of predestination, an anterior decree determining that Christ should make atonement for sinners and that sinners should be called to salvation, and a further particular decree of the election of some and the preterition of others ... These tendencies which were at work among the Huguenot refugees soon made their appearance also in the Netherlands and affected the course of scientific theology so that it began to lose its Reformed character." (D.H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943] 48, 49.)

2) In the years subsequent to Dordt, the Reformed Churches suffered a period of doctrinal and spiritual decline – as was true in Scotland. Many, concerned about such outward religion as was practiced in the State Church in Netherlands, searched for an emphasis in theology and religion on piety, a godly life, and an assurance of salvation that came from inner conviction. These trends sparked what is sometimes called *De Nadere Reformatie*, or "The Later Reformation". The perilous state of the Established Church and the reaction of many within

the church to dead orthodoxy and ungodliness of life found in the church, paralleled the situation in Scotland at the time of the Marrow controversy.

3) The spiritual state of the church opened the door in the Netherlands to influences from the Marrow men in Scotland. Such influences were actually brought about by exchanges of professors in the universities, ministers in the pulpits and close contact through books and pamphlets. In fact, many of the books written by the Marrow men and their followers were translated into Dutch and became the spiritual food for people who were starving for God's Word in the apostate State Church. But the price to pay for such exchanges was an introduction into Dutch thinking of the well-meant gospel offer. It took firm hold and characterized a stream of Dutch theology that has lasted to the present.

And so, in my own ecclesiastical tradition, the gracious and well-meant gospel offer has had remarkable influence.

We will continue this in our next installment, God willing,

## **DR. ABRAHAM KUYPER AND COMMON GRACE**

In my last installment, I discussed the basic concessions to Amyraldianism made by the men who sparked the so-called Marrow controversy. I also pointed out that the whole idea of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer came to the Netherlands from Scotland and, more particularly, from the Marrow men.

I must trace the development of this error in the Dutch churches and its subsequent spread to America.

During the long period of deterioration in the Dutch churches after the great Synod of Dordt, the people who were dissatisfied with the modernistic preaching in the State Church met in homes in small groups, in which groups the Scriptures were studied, religious books were read and discussed, and prayers were made for a reformation of the church. These house meetings were called *gezelschappen*, or conventicles. These conventicles were instrumental in bringing about the so-called "Later Reformation", and the influences of Scotland were especially strong among the people who attended these house meetings. The "Later Reformation" is to be distinguished from the reformation that came about through the Secession of 1834. It was a return to Christian piety in opposition to the cold and sterile religion of the State Church. The result of Scottish influences was that the whole idea of the gospel offer was found among many of these people of the "Further Reformation". Being impressed with the spirituality of the writers from the ranks of the Marrow men, many of the Dutch people, themselves, thirsting for spirituality, became persuaded that the offer of the gospel played a crucial role in the cultivation of genuine piety.

Because of the apostasy in the Reformed Church (the State Church), reformation was needed to preserve the truth among the Dutch people. God sent such reformation through the work of a rather insignificant minister in the small village of Ulrum, in the province of Groningen. His name was Henry De Cock. After De Cock's conversion to Calvinism and the Reformed faith, he and his consistory voted to secede from the apostate State Church to form a new denomination, orthodox in its theology and free from State control. Most of those who had been worshipping in conventicles saw the secession as an answer to their prayers. And

thousands joined the Secession Churches so that the new denomination grew rapidly, even though it was severely persecuted by the government. The year of the Secession was 1834.

Six ministers went along with the Secession in its first stirrings: De Cock, Van Velzen, Gezelle-Marburg, Scholte, Van Raalte and Brummelkamp. But there was not unity of doctrine among them. Basically, there were two groups, both of which had been found earlier in the conventicles. The one group, composed of De Cock, Van Velzen and Geselle-Marburg, were soundly orthodox, while Brummelkamp was a strong defender of the gospel offer, and Van Raalte was not a strongly orthodox man. Scholte was something of a maverick and had little influence on the development of the churches of the Secession. He immigrated to Pella, Iowa and set up an independent congregation there. Van Raalte immigrated to Holland, Michigan, and his band of settlers, with the arrival of additional immigrants, formed the beginning of the Christian Reformed Church.

Roughly, the two camps in the churches of the Secession were also geographically divided. Brummelkamp led a faction that was predominantly to be found in the southern part of the Netherlands, while the more orthodox men had influence in the north. Brummelkamp was professor in the theological school in Kampen, the Netherlands, where he influenced many of the ministers of the Secession.

With Van Raalte occupying a moderate position, it is not surprising that when the Christian Reformed Church was begun in 1857 the well-meant gospel offer was imbedded in the thinking of many preachers and members of the church. It became a part of the doctrinal position of the Dutch Reformed churches, though it was not officially adopted until 1924.

It is at this point that a major development in the doctrine of common grace, not related to the gracious offer of the gospel, took place, which we shall have to consider. In 1886, Dr. Abraham Kuyper led another reformation in the Netherlands that resulted in another denomination. His movement was called the *Doleantie* or “Aggrieved Ones”. The movement took that name because Kuyper and his followers insisted that, rather than form a church free from government control, they were the true continuation of the State Church and that, therefore, they had never really left the State Church, but simply represented it as it ought to be. They were “aggrieved” at the apostasy of their brethren and fellow members within the State Church. In this respect they differed sharply from the Churches of the Secession of 1834, which established a church free from government control.

Kuyper was a man of many gifts and one born to a position of leadership. However, when he entered the ministry he was unconverted and found a cozy home in the apostate State Church. But through a series of events, not the least of them a sharp reprimand from a simple farm lady in his congregation for preaching modernism, Kuyper was brought to the conviction that the Reformed faith, developed since the days of Calvin and Dordt, was indeed the truth of the Scriptures. He gave himself over to the defense of this Reformed faith and, to the utter dismay of his modernistic colleagues, began to do battle with them. His desire was to bring the church of the Netherlands back to its original strength when the Synod of Dordt scored a smashing victory over the Arminians.

Kuyper’s major writing in this period was a book with the title *Dat God’s Genade Particulier Is*, translated into English under the title “Particular Grace.” (The translation is by Mr. Marvin Kamps, and is published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association.) In this book Kuyper argued against the universalism of the modernists in the Reformed Churches and defended particularism in all areas of salvation, especially in the atoning work of Christ.. The interesting part of this book, as far as we are concerned, is Kuyper’s repudiation of the gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel. In fact, the texts commonly quoted in support of the offer of the

gospel (II Peter 3:9, I Tim. 2:4, etc.) were all explained by Kuyper in a particularist way as referring to the elect only. Kuyper was, at this stage in his life, soundly Reformed.

But Kuyper underwent a change. He came out with a three-volume work entitled *Gemeene Gratie* or, *General Grace*. In this work, Kuyper, without ever repudiating his rejection of the free offer of the gospel, now, strangely, steered the church in the direction of another aspect of common grace, namely, a grace given to all men that restrained sin and produced in the unregenerate the ability to do good works.

This change in Kuyper's thinking came about because Kuyper committed the grievous sin of resigning from the active ministry of the Word in order to enter politics. He formed a political party, ran for and won a place in the Lower Chamber and became the head of his party. He aspired, however, to the office of prime minister, but could not get sufficient members of his party elected to the Lower Chamber to thrust him into the prime minister's office. And so he formed a coalition with the Roman Catholic party to secure enough votes to gain the prime minister's seat.

But in Netherlands where sentiment could be as strong against Roman Catholics as it was in England, Kuyper had to justify theologically this strange and unnatural coalition. This he did with his theory of common grace.

In turn, Kuyper saw it as important that he lead the country as prime minister, because he held a view of the Netherlands, which sounds strange to our 21st century ears, but was not unusual in the days when the church was still a State Church.

Kuyper considered the Reformed Church of the Netherlands to be the true church, because it was the State Church. Now, it was characteristic of a State Church that that denomination, technically, is responsible for the spiritual welfare of all the citizens, even if they were not attending members of the one state-approved denomination. Usually every baby had to be baptized by the church, all the marriages had to be in the church, and funeral services and burials were conducted within the precincts of the church. Kuyper considered the Netherlands to be a genuine Reformed country with a genuine Reformed Church supported by a Reformed government. He saw a future in which the Netherlands would become the fountain-head of a mighty stream of the Reformed faith that would flow throughout all the world and make of the entire world a Reformed community, with every sphere of life subordinated to the rule of Jesus Christ. It was essential to Kuyper that a Reformed man be in a position of authority in the government to realize this dream. But he could gain leadership only by way of a coalition with Roman Catholics; and some theological justification for putting these two historic enemies in the same bed had to be made. That theological justification was common grace.

That brings us to a discussion of Kuyperian common grace, but that must wait till next time. We notice in passing that Kuyper's dream of a world where every country and every institution of society are subordinated to the one rule of Jesus Christ has become the goal of many post-millennial movements, of many theologians found in Reformed and Presbyterian circles, and of many colleges and universities. Today we have the strange and inexplicable situation in which thousands speak of the Kuyper of common grace and regularly travel to his shrine to be renewed in their thinking, while almost no one remembers the Kuyper of sovereign and particular grace. The Kuyper gone wrong is the idol of many; the Reformed Kuyper has disappeared from the earth.

## **DR. ABRAHAM KUYPER'S COMMON GRACE**

In my last installment, I introduced our readers to Dr. Abraham Kuyper's success in bringing into Reformed theology a novel view of common grace.

I call this view of common grace "novel", because Kuyper himself, in his three-volume treatment of the subject, speaks of his view as being new; he insists that nothing like it could be found in Reformed writings since the time of the Reformation.

However, in spite of Kuyper's claim to novelty, there had been, for a long time, those within Reformed circles who frequently spoke of the "good deeds" of the wicked. My own paternal grandmother, a basically uneducated member of the churches of the Secession, but an unusually godly and pious woman, and one who lived through the controversy over common grace in 1924, but stayed with Rev. Hoeksema, could never quite understand why it was not a good work for an unbeliever to help a man who had fallen into a creek or river and could not save himself. She was from the Churches of the Secession and reflected in her thinking a stream of thought in these churches that inclined towards common grace. She had, however, no use for Kuyper, and it is doubtful whether she ever fully understood what he was saying.

I offer here a brief sketch of Abraham Kuyper's views on common grace. (For a detailed description of Kuyper's views on common grace [his three-volume work has never been translated] see Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959], and, Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, tr. by Cornelius Hanko [Jenison: RFP, 2003].)

While Kuyper rejected the idea of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer, he held strongly to another kind of grace common to all men that restrained sin in such a way that men were enabled to do good works. By good works Kuyper meant works pleasing to God and of use by the church.

Kuyper spoke of common grace as first of all a major dose of some antitoxin administered to Adam immediately after the fall (the figure is Kuyper's). He claimed, without a smidgeon of Biblical support, that had God not intervened with His common grace, Adam would have, after the fall, become a beast and the creation a chaotic wasteland. In fact, according to Kuyper, Adam would have fallen dead at the foot of the tree. (Kuyper is not clear here on whether man

would actually have died a physical death or whether he would become a beast; both are claimed to be true. Sometimes he even speaks of Adam becoming a devil if common grace had not been administered to him.) The result of his sin was that, although a deadly and fatal dose of poison was administered to Adam because of the fall, by giving Adam common grace, God gave Adam, so to speak, a dose of an anti-toxin, which resulted in Adam's vomiting out some of the poison he had imbibed. The result is that while Adam came close to death and retained consequences of his brush with death, he did not actually die in the fullest sense of the word. While he became depraved, he was not as depraved as he would have been had not common grace been administered. While he would have become a beast without the antitoxin administered to him, he now retained his rational and moral nature and continued to be a man. While he would have become utterly incapable of doing any good if God had not intervened, he now retained the ability, apart from saving grace, to do some good in this world.

Kuyper spoke of this common grace as being the work of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the grace that the Holy Spirit worked, the full effects of sin were avoided. Apart from that common grace man would have become a devil, vicious, corrupt, depraved, beyond the possibility of being saved.

But, since common grace was given to Adam, and through Adam, to his posterity, and since by means of that common grace, unregenerate man is capable of doing good, a wide area of "neutrality" is created in this world, in itself neither good nor bad but morally neutral, in which the wicked and the righteous are able to cooperate in many works of mutual interest, particularly in making this world a better place to live. An example of this neutral ground would be the shop in which believers and unbelievers work together on assembly lines in a manufacturing plant. Because working conditions were frequently dreadful in the 19th and early 20th centuries, believers and unbelievers could and did join in "neutral" labor unions to fight together for improvement in working conditions. And here in this morally "neutral" area in which the unbeliever could, by his good works, contribute significantly to the well-being of mankind and the church, Kuyper found his justification for forming a coalition with Roman Catholics to work together to spread the Reformed faith throughout the world.

This cooperation, in Kuyper's thinking, would begin in the Netherlands where all the citizens, under the auspices of a State Church, could promote the Reformed faith and from the Netherlands would come a great revival that would spread throughout all the world and make this world a better place to live. This thinking has been carried on in many places where, under the supposed banner of the Reformed faith, labors are put forth to improve this world. And, to be a genuine Reformed believer in this world, it is said, means to be busy in winning all institutions of society, and society itself for the cause of Christ. If one does not hold to this sort of common grace and himself join in the crusade to save the world from itself, he is an Anabaptist, and guilty of world-flight.

The movement led by Kuyper began in the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The interesting and important aspect of this movement is that immigrants from the Netherlands came to America, now not only from the Churches of the Secession of 1834, but also from Kuyper's new movement. The result was tension in the Christian Reformed Church, which church most of the immigrants joined. Some within the CRC promoted the views of the Secession Churches with its emphasis on piety and from which came the common grace of the gospel offer, and some promoted the views of common grace developed by Kuyper. There was bitter enmity and antagonism between the two movements, both of which were found within the Christian Reformed Church.

I had a Dutch teacher while studying in Calvin College, himself a devotee of Kuyperian common grace, who frequently in class would speak to us of the bitter in-house conflicts between these two wings in the CRC, and who would say to us that the half of what went on had not been revealed, but that he was going to write a book about it someday in which the whole story would be told. He never wrote the book, so far as I know.

The conflict between these two wings in the church threatened to split the church. If this had happened, it would not have been surprising, for the same doctrinal and ecclesiastical split occurred in the Netherlands. Although the Churches of the Secession and the Kuyperian churches in the Netherlands did unite in 1892, the union was a shot-gun marriage that was, from the start, doomed to failure. An effort was made in 1905 to heal the divisions, but nothing worked. Finally, the split became reality in 1944, when Dr. Klaas Schilder was deposed from office and began what is now known as the Liberated Churches.

Interestingly, many who left the Reformed Church under Dr. K. Schilder were of the Secession of 1834 and, therefore, leaned toward the common grace of the offer, the same idea appeared among the people of the Liberated Church. It took, however, a slightly different form. It was connected with the sacrament of baptism instead of the preaching. The Liberated, therefore, instead of speaking of a general offer in the preaching, spoke of a general promise to all baptized children in the sacrament of baptism. Instead of the common grace that comes through the preaching, the Liberated speak of a common grace that comes through baptism. Instead of emphasizing the grace of the offer that enables a man to choose for or against the gospel, the Liberated speak of a grace that comes through baptism enabling all baptized children to accept or reject the promise. And so, both the gracious offer of the gospel and the gracious promise of the covenant are conditional, so that both depend upon the fulfillment of the condition of faith in order to have salvation realized fully.

But the division of 1944, while it included many issues, involved also the differences over common grace: Kuyperian common grace vs. the common grace of the well-meant offer of the gospel.

That nearly brings the history of common grace to the origin of the Protestant Reformed Churches. But we will wait with that part of the story till the next installment.



## **THE "COMMON GRACE" ISSUE IN THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH**

In the last installment I pointed out that the Christian Reformed Church (henceforth, CRC) was composed of basically two groups when divided theologically. There were, first of all, the immigrants who had their roots in the Churches of the Secession and many of whom held to a certain common grace that emphasized a gracious and well-meant gospel offer. Secondly, there was a sizeable group that had its roots in Kuyper's movement, had adopted Kuyperian common grace and had immigrated to this country where they had succeeded in taking over important positions in the church. A third group could be found, however, composed of immigrants (or children of immigrants) who, though the members of this group had their roots in the Churches of the Secession, did not hold to the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. Many of these were from the Northern part of the Netherlands where the more orthodox people of the Secession could be found. Also belonging to this third group were many from Kuyper's new denomination who were advocates of Kuyper's early teachings on particular grace, but, although perhaps unable to pinpoint exactly what Kuyper's errors were, were too Reformed to be devotees of Kuyper's common grace.

God, in His providence, works in strange and unexpected, but marvelous ways. So He did also in the CRC in the first quarter of the 20th century. The tensions in the CRC over common grace and Kuyperian theology were grievous and had the potential of splitting the church into two denominations, each of which supported either Kuyperian common grace or Secessionist theology. A split in the CRC seemed inevitable.

The whole issue of Kuyperian common grace came indirectly to the broader assemblies of the CRC through the teachings of a professor in the Seminary by the name of Dr. Ralph Janssen. He had received his advanced education in European universities, and had learned the arts of higher critical studies of Scripture. These higher critical studies and their teachings became the content of many of Dr. Janssen's courses. At bottom was a denial of the infallibility of Scripture and a natural explanation of Scripture's contents that robbed Scripture of its divine authorship and reduced Scripture to man's work – at least in part. Among other views of higher criticism that he held, Janssen insisted that the miracles recorded in Scripture did not have to be

explained in terms of God's direct work, but could easily be interpreted in such a way that scientific laws of nature were not violated. For example, the manna that Israel ate in the wilderness was not given by God directly, but was found naturally in a certain plant common to the wilderness. The miracle lay in Israel's ability to find it. How that plant could provide sufficient food for 3,000,000+ people for forty years we leave to the imagination of unbelievers. He also taught that the water that came from the rock at Rephidim was always present in the rock and not specially created by God. The miracle lay in the fact that Moses happened to hit the rock in a particularly thin spot. His blow broke the rock and the water, always there, was released. He also insisted that the religion of Israel came not from divine revelation in its entirety, but was a modification of heathen religions to suit Israel's unique position among the nations.

While we need not enter into these views in any kind of detail, we are interested in the fact that Janssen appealed to Kuyperian common grace in support of his position. He argued that, because it was true that the unregenerate could do such good works as created a neutral area of cooperation between the church and the world, scientific discoveries ought to be included in the church's thinking, and the church's interpretation of Scripture could be modified so as to make Scripture scientifically acceptable. He also argued that if the heathen possessed common grace, their religions had many elements of good in them, with the result that Israel could pick up these elements and incorporate them into its own religion.

Rev. Herman Hoeksema was, far and away, the most vocal critic of Janssen's views. He wrote against Janssen's views in the church paper, *The Banner*, until its pages were closed to any discussion of the controversy. When the views of Dr. Janssen became an issue in the Seminary, Rev. Hoeksema was appointed to a committee to study these views and bring conclusions and recommendations to the synod, the church's highest governing body. The report that was finally adopted by the Synod of 1922 was a report based on the word of and mainly drafted by Rev. Herman Hoeksema. However, the report did not address itself to Janssen's main line of defense, Kuyperian common grace, but limited itself to the issue of higher criticism itself.

The Synod of 1922 condemned Janssen's views, but, following the leading of the committee report, did not deal with the question of common grace. Hoeksema, in later years, regretted that the committee and the synod did not tackle the problem of common grace in connection with Janssen's errors. Although Janssen was relieved of his teaching responsibilities in the Seminary, nothing was said about his views on common grace, which he had used as a basis for his teachings.

The reason why both the committee and the synod refrained from dealing with the deeper issue of common grace does not appear in the record, but it can be conjectured that both the committee and the synod were aware of the deep tensions in the church over this question and were hesitant to bring these tensions to the floor of a major assembly at a time when the church was threatened by the deadly error of higher criticism.

But because Kuyperian common grace was wide-spread in the CRC, there were also many Janssen supporters in the college and throughout the churches. These men were furious that their mentor had been condemned, and decided to make common grace an issue that the church would be compelled to face. They did this by way of protests against the preaching of Herman Hoeksema, who, they knew, denied both Kuyperian common grace and the well-meant gospel offer. It is interesting that Hoeksema himself had been born and raised within the tradition of the Secession Churches, but had never held to a well-meant gospel offer. And when, while still in the Netherlands, he came into contact with Kuyper's teachings, he learned from the Kuyper of sovereign and particular grace, not the Kuyper of common grace.

The result was that Hoeksema's teachings went to the Synod of 1924. Strangely enough, Hoeksema's teachings were never condemned by the synod; and, indeed, the synod officially declared him to be Reformed. But, in spite of that, the synod took it upon itself to draw up an official statement on the doctrine of common grace. The leaders in the CRC, who were especially interested in such a statement, saw also an opportunity to heal a widening breach in the churches between the followers of Kuyper and the followers of the Secession leaders. And so they adopted a statement of common grace that approved both kinds of common grace: a gracious and well-meant gospel offer and a common grace in the unregenerate that restrained sin and enabled the wicked to do good works.

The decision served its purpose, and the breach in the CRC was healed by the decisions of this synod.

On the other hand, a little more than a half year after the synod, Hoeksema was deposed from office and driven out of the CRC for his denials of common grace. But in the good providence of God, that segment of the CRC that repudiated both the common grace of the Secession Churches and Kuyperian common grace, saw in the teachings of Hoeksema the solid and uncompromising truth of the Reformed faith taught by Calvin, on through Dordt and many Reformed theologians, and which was preserved to the present. They went with Hoeksema and became the nucleus of the Protestant Reformed Churches, a denomination that today holds firmly to the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace.

And thus we bring our brief historical study to an end. It ought, I think, be evident that history does not support the theories of common grace, but is on the side of those who stand for sovereign and particular grace.

God willing, we will enter into the doctrinal ideas of common grace vs. sovereign and particular grace in subsequent forum installments.

## **THE SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF "COMMON GRACE"**

I have finished the discussion of the history of common grace, giving particular attention to the history of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. The time has come to begin a discussion of the doctrines themselves, the Biblical proof offered in support of them and the evaluation of them from a Biblical and confessional perspective.

Before I enter a detailed discussion concerning the doctrine of common grace, I should make some general remarks.

The doctrine of common grace has implications for many other doctrines of the Reformed faith. By virtue of the fact that common grace deals with grace, it touches on and significantly modifies these doctrines that historically have been called "the doctrines of grace". These doctrines of grace are usually defined as the "Five Points of Calvinism." Common grace has implications for at least four of the five points of Calvinism, and perhaps all five: unconditional election, particular redemption, total depravity, and irresistible grace, and perhaps the preservation of the saints. While a consideration of this aspect of the subject surely has benefits, and while I intend to demonstrate in passing how common grace modifies these doctrines of grace, I will be concentrating on the doctrines of common grace themselves.

I say, I will be concentrating on the doctrines (in the plural) of common grace. Common grace itself is one doctrine that teaches that God is gracious to all mankind, and not only to the elect. But included in that general doctrine are at least four other doctrines. That is, God is said to show His favor to all men and not only to the elect in at least four different ways. Briefly, they are: God's attitude of favor towards all men shown to them by gracious and wonderful gifts in creation; God's work of restraining sin in the hearts of the unregenerate by His Spirit so that unsaved people are not as bad as they could be and would be apart from common grace; the ability of the unregenerated man to perform good works by the power of the Holy Spirit; and the gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel.

Although the four doctrines that form parts of the general doctrine of common grace are separate doctrines, and although they may clearly be distinguished from each other, the similarity and relationship between these four doctrines lies in the fact that all are manifestations of God's grace or favor to all -- although that grace is worked in different ways.

It is important to remember, as I have pointed out before, that the word "grace" has basically two connotations in Scripture. The first one is God's unmerited attitude of favor to the elect. No one does anything to merit that favor, but rather forfeits it with all he does. Favor is always gratuitous. The second meaning of the word "grace" is a work of God in the heart of the sinner that brings God's blessings upon the object of grace and spiritually changes the recipient of that grace. In the elect, God's grace is the power within men that bestows on them all the blessings of salvation, spiritually alters them so that the regenerated child of God can be called "a new creature" (Gal. 6:15); enables them to walk as God's people in the world, gives them strength to bear the trials of life, and leads them infallibly to their eternal destination. But if one teaches that God shows grace to the reprobate, this grace to the reprobate is also both an attitude of favor and an internal work of God, a bestowal of benefits internally given that change a man, though that change is not conversion or salvation. We must keep this in mind.

There is a point here that needs to be made. Although common grace is defined as an attitude of God towards all men, that attitude is not simply objective, out there somewhere, an attitude of which the object is unaware, an attitude hidden in the heart of God. The object of common grace may despise God's gracious attitude towards him, but he does know it and experience it and his rejection of it is the proof that he knows it..

The objective attitude of God's favor towards all men becomes subjectively man's experience in two ways. The first is simply that the object of God's attitude of favor is made aware of this favor of God and what it means for him personally.

The well-meant gospel offer is one part of common grace that stresses the knowledge the sinner has of God's gracious attitude towards him. The gospel itself expresses to him in a gracious offer, that God wants very much to save him and is willing to do all that is necessary to make salvation possible for him. In fact, it is God's intention to save him and the only reason he is not saved is because man himself puts up obstacles to God's work that are not overcome by God.

This consciousness of God's favor that makes the unregenerate sinner aware of this gracious attitude of God towards him is very important. What good does it do if the sinner is unaware of how greatly God loves him? A young man may like very much a young lady, but shyness keeps him at a distance and she never becomes aware of it. However, he may gain courage and send her a dozen roses on her birthday, or he may find the courage in himself to express his feeling towards her. Then she knows, whatever her own reaction might be.

So God also makes known to the sinner that He is favorably inclined towards him. He does this in more ways than through the gracious gospel offer. In giving a man the Holy Spirit who restrains sin in him, the man knows this comes from God. Just as a sick man knows he is made better by the skills of a physician, the sinner knows he is made better by the divine physician. This gift is impressed upon the consciousness of man by God Himself. God gives man this gift because God loves him – so the common grace advocate teaches.

It has frequently been said that man is conscious of God's goodness towards him because of what has been called in Reformed theology, a *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity), or *semen religionis* (seed of religion). This sense of divinity is indeed a reality, as Scripture and our confessions teach. But it is a serious mistake to claim, as some do, that this *sensus divinitatis* is also the fruit of common grace. We shall consider this more in detail at a later point.

Hence, man cannot escape knowing, so claim the advocates of common grace, that God loves him, shows mercy to him, truly shows kindness and benevolence toward him and is very much interested in saving him and making him blessed. Through all God's works man comes to know that God is indeed favorable towards him.

Grace involves all the communicable attributes of God. Grace is, in that sense, a broad term, a generic term that includes many different attitudes of God. Grace includes love, mercy, kindness, benevolence, longsuffering and the like. For example, if God gives him grace, God loves the reprobate, according to common grace. Some defenders of common grace are quick to point out that this love of God for the reprobate is not the same kind of love, perhaps not as intense, not as strong, but love nonetheless, which God shows to the elect. The same is true of the other virtues of God. He is compassionate to the wicked; He is merciful to them in their misery; He is sympathetic to them in their troubles; He enjoys nothing so much as to see them happy and does all that He can to make them happy. And so common grace is God's favor upon the wicked of which they are conscious, and the benefits of which grace they experience every day.

But this is not all. The defenders of common grace also teach that grace, subjectively bestowed on the sinner, involves a subjective and inner change in the sinner, although not a saving change. This lies in the nature of grace. When the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of the sinner to restrain sin and to enable the sinner to do good works, that powerful grace modifies his total depravity, lessens the power of sin in a man, and leaves an unsaved sinner no longer totally depraved. I know that defenders of common grace, in defense of this position and intent on trying to remain Reformed, speak of a distinction between total depravity (one of the Five Points of Calvinism) and absolute depravity. Apart from common grace, so they say, man is absolutely depraved, but through common grace he becomes totally depraved. It is obvious that this is a mere playing with words. In the thinking of those who promote common grace, the term "total" does not mean "total," but partial.

The same is true of the well-meant gospel offer. Because it is a gracious offer, it is a vehicle whereby God gives to everyone who hears the gospel a subjective grace by means of which a man has the power to accept or reject the gospel. In fact, as we shall see, that grace that never saves, gives sufficient power to the sinner to see his own sins, see the just punishment of God that is his lot because of his sins, see the blessedness of escaping from sin by fleeing to Christ; and yet he refuses to go to Christ for salvation. We shall discuss this at a later date. It was known among Puritans as the doctrine of preparationism.

That there is this internal working of God in the hearts of the unregenerate that changes him is made clear in the writings of Herman Bavinck, the great Dutch theologian and contemporary of Abraham Kuyper. Bavinck, though brought up in the tradition of the Secession of 1834, and though he became professor of Dogmatics in Kampen Seminary, the Seminary of the Secession Churches, nevertheless, moved to the Free University, Kuyper's pride and joy, to take up the position of professor of Dogmatics there. The Secessionists never quite forgave him for doing this.

Bavinck, in his book, *Our Reasonable Faith* discusses common grace from the viewpoint of general revelation and speaks of general revelation as a manifestation of common grace. (Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* [Grand Rapids: Wm B, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956] chapters 3 & 4.)

He first makes a point of it that the content of general revelation and special revelation are the same: But though they have the same content, they are to be distinguished from each other.

“And, however essentially the two are to be distinguished, they remain intimately connected. ... The general revelation is owing to the Word which was with God in the beginning, which made all things, which shone as a light in the darkness and lighteth every man that cometh into the world. ... The special revelation is owing to that same Word as it as made flesh in Christ, and is now full of grace and truth ...”(37, 38).

This relationship between general revelation and special revelation is described as follows: “It is common grace which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service” (38).

That this common grace is also worked internally in the heart of man is Bavinck’s conviction: “After all, the revelation of God in nature and in history could have no effect upon man if there were not something in man himself that responded to it. ... And so too the revelation of God in all the works of His hands would be quite unknowable to man if God had not planted in his soul an ineradicable (sic, ineradicable is correct) sense of His existence and being. ... God reveals Himself outside of man; He reveals Himself also within man. He does not leave Himself without witness in the human heart and conscience” (42, emphasis belongs to Bavinck).

And, of course, general revelation is, in the mind of Bavinck, common grace. And so the fruits of common grace in general revelation are many: “It is owing to general revelation that some religious and ethical sense is present in all men; that they have some awareness still of truth and falsehood, of good and evil, justice and injustice, beauty and ugliness; that they live in the relationship of marriage and the family, of community and state; that they are held in check by all these external and internal controls against degenerating into bestiality; that within the pale of these limits, they busy themselves with the production, distribution, and enjoyment of all kinds of spiritual and material things; in short that mankind is by general revelation preserved in its existence, maintained in its unity, and enable to continue and to develop in history” (59).

That all these things are true of mankind we do not doubt. That they are the fruit of general revelation, much less, common grace, is quite another matter.

## **THE FIRST POINT OF COMMON GRACE: AN INTRODUCTION**

Before I get into the material that I plan to send you in this letter, I need to answer a question that came from one of our forum members.

The question is concerning my remark in my last letter that common grace modifies at least four of the five points of Calvinism and, perhaps, also the fifth, namely perseverance of the saints. The reader's claim was that one ought not really be hesitant about saying that common grace also affects perseverance of the saints, and that thus all five points need to be modified if common grace is introduced into the body of doctrine known as the doctrines of grace. His reason for asserting this was that the five points of Calvinism are a whole, and to modify one is to modify all. The five hang together. They stand or fall together.

The reason for the objection of the correspondent is, of course, true. One cannot believe in a universal atonement without denying eternal predestination, including both election and reprobation. And so it is with all five.

My "perhaps" however, had a slightly different emphasis than the reader gave it. My point was and is that the error of common grace directly modifies four of the five points. A universal love of God for men is in flat contradiction to sovereign election and reprobation. A universal atonement is in direct contradiction to sovereign predestination and limited atonement. A work of the Spirit in the hearts of all men enabling them to do good is directly contrary to total depravity. But no teaching of common grace directly opposes the preservation of the saints.

Even the Arminians did not think that their view had a direct bearing on what we now call the fifth point of Calvinism, for in the original Five Article of the Remonstrance, in which document the Arminians set down their position, the Arminians would not flatly say that they denied the preservation of the saints. They merely expressed doubt about the question. Further, the defenders of common grace readily admit that their views modify the first four points of Calvinism, and I am not aware of a modification of the preservation of the saints by those who defend common grace – a denial as blatant as their denial of unconditional predestination, total depravity, particular redemption, and irresistible grace.



Nevertheless, the correspondent is correct in his insistence that it is impossible to deny one of the five points without, in the end, denying them all. And so also the doctrine of the preservation of the saints has come under attack in “Reformed” circles.

In the last installment I made a few general remarks about common grace, particularly noting that, although common grace is to be defined as God’s attitude of favor or grace towards all His creatures, including all men, nevertheless, this attitude is not only objective but also includes the subjective infusion of grace in the hearts of all men by which they know that God is favorably inclined to them, and also by which they are changed for the better, though the change does not result in salvation.

The first point of common grace as adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 is confusing and ambiguous on the question: To whom does God show His favor? The language of the first point speaks of God’s favor “towards His creatures in general” (Hoeksema and Hanks, *Ready to Give an Answer*, 63), but also speaks of an attitude of favor “towards humanity in general, and not only towards the elect” (Ibid). One could conclude from this that the first point intends to make a distinction between an attitude of favor towards the brute creation and God’s attitude of favor towards all men. But this is evidently not the way in which the first point of common grace is interpreted by its supporters. Both Louis Berkhof, the primary author of the three points (Louis Berkhof, *De Drie Punten in Alle Deelen Gereformeerd* [The Three Points Reformed in Every Part] [Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1925] 11), and H. J. Kuiper, for many years the editor of the church paper, *The Banner* (H. J. Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace* [Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1925] 11-13) assert that the meaning of the first point is that God’s attitude of favor is shown to people, not the brute creation.

To add to the confusion of the first point and seemingly to contradict what Berkhof and Kuiper say, one Scriptural passage referred to as proof of the doctrine of the first point is Psalm 145:9: “The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.” This text obviously refers to the brute creation and God’s works of providence in it, which reveal God’s goodness. The fact that this passage is quoted as proof would seem to indicate that the first point does actually teach that God has an attitude of favor towards the creation itself. If this interpretation is not what the Synod meant, but refers only to men, then Psalm 145:9 must be interpreted to read: “The Lord is good to all men, and his tender mercies are over all people.” This is an interpretation of the text that seems to me to be forced, unnatural and incapable of being sustained. Why, therefore, Psalm 145 :9 is quoted as proof of God’s attitude of favor towards all men remains a mystery.

But be all that as it may, we assert from the outset that it is correct and in agreement with the Scriptures to say that God is favorably inclined toward His creation – as Psalm 145:9 asserts. He loves His creation, is merciful towards it and views it with great favor.

Psalm 145:9 is a clear example of Hebrew parallelism, a poetic device in which two or more sentences are so related to each other that the one explains and sheds further light on the other. In this verse, for example, the expression in the second part of the verse, “his tender mercies”, explains “the Lord is good” in the first part of the verse. And the words “all his works” is a further explanation of the word “all” in the first sentence. Thus the verse teaches that God’s mercies are towards all his works and those tender mercies towards all His works show His goodness.

Further, if the first point of common grace wanted to interpret the sentence “The Lord is good to all” as meaning that the Lord is good to all men, this interpretation stands in flat

contradiction with verse 20 where the same Psalm reads: “The Lord preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked will he destroy,” where the reference is to those whom God loves is obviously to God’s elect.

The question of whether God loves His creation is important for another reason. I have met and spoken with men, especially, from a Presbyterian background, who say they believe in common grace. But when they explain their position, it becomes evident that these men identify common grace with providence and simply mean that God’s providence gives evidence of God’s goodness towards His creation. With this idea I have no dispute, although whether the idea ought to be called “common grace” is another question. To call it such is at least confusing when the term is universally used for different ideas.

There can be no question about it that God is favorably inclined towards His own creation, for He created it and it remains His possession. The devil, after his fall and banishment from heaven, attempted to seize the earthly creation from God and make it his own domain. He persuaded Adam and Eve to join him in that endeavor, because neither he nor his demons had any direct access to the creation. They were angels and not material creatures, as this creation is. He had to enlist Adam and Eve, for they had been placed by God as the heads of creation. Satan was eminently successful, and so it seems as if the creation today belongs to wicked man. Wicked man uncovers the powers of creation, penetrates its secrets, and from it makes products that make his life in the creation easier and more pleasant. Looking around us and observing what goes on in the world today, we could not only be easily persuaded that man has complete control over the creation, but that he uses it in countless ways to sin. He is a servant of Satan and has obediently followed Satan’s grand scheme to make this creation a kingdom of darkness where God is banished from His own world.

But God does not relinquish His claim upon His own world. In fact, it is impossible for God to do this, not only because of God’s own purpose in creating all things, but also because God is the Author of providence. Creation means that God gave all the universe its existence by the Word of His mouth. Providence means that God, by the same Word of His mouth, continues to give the creation its existence. Further, all that happens in it is done by His sovereign control. That is the doctrine of providence. He not only spoke the word “star”, but the star formed by the Word of His power is upheld by that same Word. That is, only when God continues to speak the Word “star” does that star continue to exist. If God should cease saying that word, the star would disappear and be no more.

There is a certain irony involved in this. The very creature God upholds by the Word of His power man uses to sin against God. If God did not uphold that creature, man would not be able to use it to deny God. And the same is true of man himself. He too is given his existence every moment by the Word of God’s power. From God’s point of view, the same is true. He upholds every creature to give it to man, knowing full well what man will do with it. It is like a murderer who uses his victim’s gun to shoot him. But there is one thing man cannot do: he cannot take God’s creation away from God.

God will not permit that to happen in any case, because God has His own purpose with this creation. To that purpose even all Satan does is subordinate; he too is under the sovereign rule of God. What that purpose is, God determined from eternity. It is to glorify Himself through the redemption of the creation by the suffering and death of Christ.

When Adam chose to assist the devil in his wicked purposes, Adam fell into depravity and corruption. The words of God were fulfilled: “The day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.” That death was not only physical, but also spiritual, for sin is death. Adam came under the

curse, a curse that drove Adam out of Paradise, but also out of fellowship with God. To live apart from God is death.

But Adam fell into sin as the head of God's creation. Created to be representative of God Himself in God's world, he became Satan's representative when he agreed to do Satan's will. As Satan's representative, the whole creation came under the curse. Death pervades this earthly creation. Evolutionism may claim that death in the creation is only a weakness inherited from lower forms of life and an animal ancestry and soon to be overcome as the creation continues to produce higher forms of life, but this is part of the devil's lie to draw man away from God the Creator. The curse of death is God's just anger and fury as He punishes the creation as well as Adam its head.

Christ died for the creation as well as for His people in order that the creation might be redeemed. The Biblical proof of that is solid. When God established His covenant with Noah after the flood, God established His covenant with every living creature (Gen. 9:9-17). The Psalms speak of God's love for His creation in many places. It is striking, however, that the Psalms, in extolling the glories of the creation, speak prophetically of Christ, revealed in the creation (Psalm 19:1-6, where the figure of the sun as a bridegroom coming forth from its chamber speaks of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness that arises with healing in His wings, Malachi 4:2). It is striking that the law of God is also mentioned in vs. 7-14 as the gospel that converts the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, and gives rewards to those who keep it. The connection between the first part of the Psalm and the second part is surely that the law of God is present in both the creation and man, and has the same power in both creation and man. Psalm 33:6-11 speaks of the power of the Word of God that creates and upholds all the creation. This same truth is mentioned in John 1:1, 2, where that same creative Word of God is said to have become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ (verse 14).

Many names given in Scripture for Christ are taken directly from the creation: Lion of Judah's Bright and Morning Star, Lily of the Valley, Rose of Sharon, etc. All these indicate that Christ's redemption extends to the entire creation.

Romans 8:19-22 speaks of the hope of the creation to be delivered from the bondage of corruption. "For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan without ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body."

Paul speaks of the same truth in Colossians 1:20: "And [God] having made peace through the blood of his [Christ's] cross, by him [Christ] to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven." The apostle is very specific and emphatic about the fact that in Christ's cross all the creation, the earthly and the heavenly, is reconciled to God. All shall therefore, be saved. God snatches His own creation out of the dirty hands of the wicked and not only restores it to its original pristine purity and beauty, but raises it to a much higher level of glory in the new heavens and the new earth, when heaven and earth shall become one creation.

Hence, to speak of God's grace towards the creation is a perfectly Biblical thought and no one can make objection to it. Surely the quotation of Psalm 145:9, used as a proof text for the first

point of common grace, is, on the contrary, a powerful text to prove God's love towards His own creation: "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works." How true!

Gradually the righteous are, for the present, squeezed out of God's world till they are all but destroyed. Then, at that moment when the devil congratulates himself in the accomplishment of his nefarious purpose, Christ comes in power and glory, and the whole creation is snatched out of the hands of the wicked led by Satan. And, irony of all ironies, that same creation, now glorified, is given to the people of God as their everlasting inheritance, for the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5), while the wicked are banished forever in hell.

## **IS GOD GRACIOUS IN GIVING GOOD GIFTS TO ALL MEN?**

In my last installment I called attention to the fact that some defenders of common grace define common grace as God's attitude of favor towards His creation. No Reformed man would ever disagree with this assertion. God made this world; He upholds it and governs it by His power. God has determined to save His creation through the atonement of Christ. God loves His world, looks on it with favor, and sends out His Spirit into the creation to renew it. There is, of course, the matter of terminology; that is, whether God's love for His creation can rightly be called grace. But apart from that, the controversy does not lie here.

The defenders of common grace speak of the fact that God also has a certain attitude of favor towards men – not some men, but all men. He is kind and benevolent towards men in general; He shows His desire that they be saved and does what He can to convince men of His desire to save them. That is, common grace, according to its proponents, is God's love, mercy, kindness, etc. towards every man in the world that has ever lived, lives now and will live in the future before the Lord returns. It is an attitude of favor in whatever form it takes; that is, God shows His favor or grace to men in different ways, the chief of which is the well-meant gospel offer. But He shows His love for men in general in ways different from the well-meant and gracious gospel offer as well.

I have postponed a treatment of the gospel offer for the time being, It is now my purpose to discuss that element in the doctrine of common grace that claims that God shows His favor to all men through giving them the good things in life. While a great deal has been said and much ink spilled over the question of the so-called offer of the gospel, proponents of common grace point also to rain and sunshine and the good things of this life as grace upon all men and His love towards mankind in general.

It is this matter of rain and sunshine (as well as other good gifts) upon the unregenerate that concerns us at present. The first point of common grace, adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, specifically speaks of this kind of common grace. The point reads: "Relative to the first point which concerns the favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect, synod declare 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 and 9, which deal with the general offer of the gospel, while it also appears from the citations made from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed theology that our Reformed writers from the past favored this view. (Quoted from Hoeksema and Hanko, *Ready to Give an Answer* [Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997] 63. The emphasis is mine.)

I note in the last letter that the wording of this first point of common grace is extremely unclear. It speaks of a favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect. According to the defenders of common grace, not the creation is meant, but men are the objects of this general grace of God – even though the wording does not sound like that.

But the confusion does not end here. When it comes to the point of telling us what that favorable attitude of God towards humanity is, the first point speaks only of a general offer of the gospel. One would think, upon reading the point, that this gospel offer is all that is meant. Even when one looks at the "proof" given for this assertion of God's favorable attitude towards humanity, one discovers that there is no confessional proof offered for any favorable attitude of God towards the wicked except that favor supposedly revealed in the offer of the gospel. Canons II, 5 and III/IV, 8 and 9 both speak of the gospel.

The same is true in part of the Biblical proof for this universal favorable attitude of God towards all men. The last four proof texts, I Timothy 4:10, Romans 2:4, Ezekiel 33:11, Ezekiel 18:23, are obviously intended to give Biblical proof for the gospel offer.

But then, strangely enough, other passages are referred to, which, though few, speak of something other than the gracious and general gospel offer. There are four such Scriptural passages. These four are Psalm 145:9, Matthew 5:44, 45, Luke 6:35, 36, Acts 14:16, 17. When we consider that I dealt with Psalm 145:9 and insisted that the text teaches that God surely does show favor to His creation, we are left with Matthew 5:44, 45, Luke 6:35, 36 and Acts 14:16, 17. Matthew 5:44, 45 speaks of sunshine and rain and is interpreted to mean that sunshine and rain are evidences of God's grace. Because the sun shines on everyone and because rain falls everywhere, God's grace is also upon everyone. Luke 6 speaks only of God's kindness towards the unthankful and evil. The interpretation of this, then, is that kindness is like rain and sunshine and is evidence of grace to all, all men being the unthankful and evil. Acts 14:17 speaks of the fact that God did not leave Himself without witness, but testified that He is God by doing good, giving rain from heaven along with fruitful season, and filling men's hearts with food and gladness. This witness of God is interpreted to refer to God's grace and favor that He shows to all men.

Let us consider the matter. Before we enter into the meaning of the few texts quoted, three other points have to be made.

The first is that no one disputes the fact that God gives good gifts to men. This is irrefutably taught in Scripture and no one wants to deny it. James 1:17 settles the matter: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." God is good! He is good in His own being. And as He reveals Himself in all the things He has made, He reveals that He is good. He is good in all He does; He is good in all the gifts He sends to man; He is the overflowing fountain of all good. Indeed, in whatever He does, He is good. It would be terribly wrong to say that there are certain things God does that are not good. The implication would have to be that sin can be

found in God; or imperfection; or lack of understanding; or some deficiency in what He does. All this would be blasphemy of the worst sort.

But this in turn means that God is not only good when He sends His rain and sunshine from heaven and causes an abundance of food to grow; He is also good when he sends drought and famine, pestilence and grasshoppers, which eat everything in sight. He is good, not only when He sends health and strength, but also when He sends sickness and pain. He is good in times of prosperity, but He is also good in times of adversity. That ought to be clear to anyone that holds to the truth of God's sovereignty and infinite goodness. If God is good when He sends what we want, why is he not good when He sends things we do not want and fear? Is He good when rain and sunshine come? But bad when floods and drought destroy crops? Is He good when He gives us strength to work, but bad when He sends sickness? That is the insoluble problem of common grace.

Who would dare charge God with badness? Not even those foolish people who deny that God sends sickness and trouble dare to claim badness on God's part. They simply move all trouble and affliction outside God's control and into the hands of the devil – and thus deny God's sovereignty.

From the viewpoint of our own subjective experience as children of God, we ought to see how crucial this is for our faith. If only the good things in life are grace, what about the bad things? We would be forced to conclude that the bad things are evidences of God's anger and hatred. What else can they be? But what would that do for our faith? Every affliction and trouble in this life would be reason for fear and despair. Why is God angry with us? Why does He send these terrible troubles? It can only be that God is angry with me and loves me no longer. Such is the inevitable experience of trying to equate God's favor with mere outward prosperity.

The problem is, obviously, that we equate God's favor towards men with the bestowal of pleasant earthly things. Rain and sunshine are favor, so it is claimed. So is health and strength. So is prosperity and affluence. The more things of this world I possess, the greater is the favor of God. But then the less of the things of this world I possess, the less I have of the favor of God. That follows.

We do grave injustice to our fellow saints in third-world countries such as Myanmar when we make such absurd statements. How can we claim to have more of the favor of God here in an affluent Western country when our fellow saints in Myanmar have all they can manage to keep body and soul together? It is a cruel slander of them.

And yet it is a mistake we are all inclined to make. Asaph made that mistake when he told us in Psalm 73 that in noticing the prosperity of the wicked and his own suffering, he almost lost his faith. The wicked owned an abundance of the things of this world and seemed to live tranquil and trouble-free lives, while he endured chastening each morning at the hand of God. The problem was so serious to him that, unless he found the answer, he found it impossible to believe God's goodness towards His people.

Common grace, which identifies favor with material things, is a threat to one's faith.

The same error is made into the central truth of preaching by the so-called "Prosperity Gospelers." Their main theme in all they preach is that to serve the Lord will result in material prosperity, health, and an easy life in the world. Thousands follow their teaching; it is the easy way to attain what their covetous souls desire. Common grace, insofar as it teaches that material possessions are indicative of the favor God, feeds this abominable teaching. It is a

teaching, when consistently applied to life, believed and accepted, leads to hell. And yet I hear voices claiming to be Reformed who make the same dreadful mistake.

It is sometimes argued that surely in the old dispensation material prosperity was indicative of God's blessing. Countless texts can be quoted in support of this, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. One example of such a text, outside of Deuteronomy, is Malachi 3:10 : "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house and prove me now here with, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

But we must not forget that all this was in the old dispensation in which all God's dealings with His church were in pictures and not in reality, in types and shadows and not directly in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The result was that material prosperity was, for the church, prosperity in the land of Canaan. And the land of Canaan was a picture of heaven: it was a land flowing with milk and honey as a picture of the rich spiritual blessedness of heaven. In keeping, therefore, with the nature of the old dispensation, all these blessings in the land of Canaan were dependent on Israel's keeping of the law of God (See especially Deuteronomy 28 ). And the fact of the matter was that Israel could not and did not keep God's law, with the result that the land of Canaan became a barren wasteland and Israel was brought into captivity ( II Chron. 36:21 ).

The believers in Canaan never made the mistake of confusing Canaan and earthly prosperity with the blessing of God in Jesus Christ. They looked at the picture and realized it was only a picture. When Christ would come, He would fulfill the law for them and do on their behalf what they could never do. And the reward would be, not that land on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, but heaven itself. Their hope and faith were fixed on Christ and on His perfect work, which would give them the fullness of the spiritual blessings of salvation ( Heb. 11:10, 13-16 ).

I shall return to this subject in my next installment.



## **ARE RICHES A BLESSING? OR SICKNESS A CURSE?**

In my last letter to you, I discussed the contention of those who hold to common grace, that the favor and grace of God towards a person can be seen in the possession of material and physical gifts. Wealth is equated with God's favor and health is equated with God's love. God shows His favor towards all and His enduring love to all men by giving them material and physical abundance. This view is very commonly held throughout the church world, by cleric and layman alike.

It ought to be obvious, however, that earthly good things, though given by a good God, cannot, in themselves, be indications of God's favor, for God also sends poverty, starvation, cancer and death. On what grounds ought we to say, therefore, that earthly well-being is to be explained as evidences of favor, and yet deny that poverty and suffering are evidences of anger, hostility and hatred? To tie God's favor to the possession of an abundance of material things and to interpret health as an indication of God's love gets one into all sorts of difficulties and ultimately ties God's favor to our own personal desires, carnal though they may be. We all would like to have more money. None of us enjoys cancer. To cater to our earthly covetousness would be for God to bless sin and to despise holiness. God's holy saints are frequently very poor. We must not be so foolish; nor does Scripture give us any ground for interpreting life in such a fashion.

The Bible does show us the direction we ought to go as we interpret the things of this world as things which God sends. We do well to pay close attention to this instruction from the Word of God, for we are prone to fall into the same error as those who teach common grace. How often is it not true that when some calamity befalls a child of God, his first reaction is, What have I done wrong to deserve this? Of what sin am I guilty, because God has sent this trouble upon me? Why do I have to suffer in this way? Questions like these are our natural reaction to life's trials. We frequently come perilously close to agreeing with the basic premise of common grace.

But there is no hope for us if we go that direction to solve the problems that adversity brings. We get caught in a muddle of questions to which there are no answers. We are lead by such thinking into dead-end paths that have no outlet. We trouble the tender consciences of God's

beleaguered saints in the midst of their woes of life. We take away the one hope and comfort they have and leave them with nothing to lighten their gloom. All they know is that material prosperity and physical well-being are indicative of God's favor. But I am dying from cancer and have just lost my only son in an accident. What now?

God's works are quite different. Scripture is very clear on the whole matter.

In this life we and all men live in the world. God gives all men without exception the things of the world. Without distinction, all men receive from God rain and sunshine, warmth and cold, money and homes, automobiles and television sets, automatic washers and clothing to wear. God disposes of all these gifts as it suits Him. To some He gives much, to others little. Some have health and strength all their life, others are sick from the date of birth. Some have cancer, others have Lou Gehrig's Disease. God may and does give to His creatures as He pleases. No one gives Him advice on the matter. He consults with no one and seeks no one's opinion. He pays no attention to outward appearance, rank, prestige, honor, nobility of birth or any other consideration. From the day an individual is born until the day he dies, God determines with absolute wisdom the entire pathway of a man's life and what of the things of this earth he may have.

This is true of all men. The wicked and the righteous receive all things in common and share all the bounties of this earth as well as all its calamities. A tornado destroys the home of an ungodly prince, but also a believing pauper. Cancer strikes without discrimination. Wealth is sometimes given to the wicked, but sometimes to God's people. Poverty stalks pagan lands where the name of God is not mentioned, but Christian communities are not immune to starvation. My wife and I have been in Myanmar (Burma) and seen the lodging places of the people there. I have eaten with them of their paltry handful of rice. I have been in their huts and shacks. I found godliness there – perhaps beyond our own, if godliness includes contentment. I have heard pastors in Myanmar tell of holding their dying children in their arms, because medical help was beyond their means. Shall we stand in the doorway of such a shack and tell grieving parents who are ready to bury their child that God's favor is shown in the material bounties of life as well as in health?

To possess or to be deprived of the things we desire here in the world is no indication of God's favor or disfavor. These things, in themselves, have nothing to do with grace and love or anger and hatred. They must not and cannot be interpreted in terms of God's love or hatred, God's blessing or wrath, God's kindness or vengeance.

All that I have said does not, however, mean that God's disposal of all that belongs to this life in this present world is arbitrary. We must not look on this divine disposal as being done willy-nilly, without reason or design, on the basis of spur-of-the-moment opinions. Nothing God does is done without the very best of reasons and as means to accomplish ends known only to the mind of God and belonging to His unsearchable ways. Whether we know God's purpose or do not know it, makes no difference. Most – indeed, nearly all God's ways are beyond anything we would think or imagine. God does not take us into His counsels, nor does He explain to us why He does what He does. He is not answerable to us nor are we permitted to summon Him with a subpoena that we may put Him in the dock and force Him to give an account to us of what He does.

God is not accountable to man for anything He does. This is the great lesson of the book of Job. Job was afflicted as few men are afflicted. His friends thought to solve the problem of Job's sufferings by pointing to the fact that Job had sinned a great sin and was being punished by God for his sin. Job rejected that charge, for, although he knew that he was a sinner, yet he

clung to the righteousness of Christ as his own (Job 19:25-27) and confessed repeatedly his trust in God's sovereign control of his life. But Job did have one question. He wondered why all this evil had come upon him and admitted that if God would only tell him the reasons for his suffering, he would bear his anguish with patience. (Job 23:3-10). But God's answer, when He spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, was, "Job, I am God. I do as it pleases me. No one may question my ways nor challenge my actions. No one may bring me into the witness stand and force me to give an account of what I have done. What I do is my work alone even if you do not understand it." God's ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts (Is. 55:8, 9).

God's purpose in giving all things to all men in common is to show, on the one hand, His justice in His just punishment against sin, and on the other hand, to show the riches of His grace and love to His people whom He has redeemed in Christ. Thus, though all men have all the things of this creation in common, God's attitude towards the wicked is different from His attitude towards His elect. God is never gracious, or loving, or kind, or filled with compassion to the wicked. Because He is sovereign, He sends them all that they receive; but all is His just judgment on those who hate Him. Equally, He is sovereign in all He gives to the righteous, but all that He sends them is blessing. We must understand this and confess it; it is the teaching of Scripture. Poverty but also riches are curses on the wicked. Strokes and diabetes but also health and strength are curses on the wicked. Riches but also poverty are blessings to the righteous. Health and long life but also heart failure and genetic illnesses are blessings to God's people.

The key text here is Proverbs 3:33: "The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just." The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked. That is, the curse of the Lord is with the wicked in everything that happens to them. They eat and drink the curse of the Lord. The curse accompanies them into their sitting room and bedroom and is upon all they do in these rooms. The curse of the Lord comes along with the husband when he brings his wages home. The curse of the Lord is in the work of the mother, going about taking care of the house and preparing to satisfy the needs of her husband and children. If they live in a castle or in a hut, the curse is there. If their home is turned into a hospital ward or a palace, the curse of the Lord is there. All the experiences through which the wicked pass are curses. All they possess and use in their daily lives are curses. Nothing but curse is upon them, for the curse of the Lord is in their house.

But the opposite is true of the righteous. Always blessing is in their habitation. If they are prosperous, it is the blessing of God. If they are poor, their poverty is sent because God loves them. If the family returns sorrowing from the cemetery, their grief is the direct fruit of God's tender care of them. If trouble and sickness come their way, God's blessing is not only in spite of the trouble, but through and by means of the trouble. All is curse for the wicked; all is blessing for the righteous. All this is taught us in the sacred Scriptures and we must take hold of it by faith.

It can be said without exaggeration that Proverbs 3:33 sums up the entire Scriptural teaching on this matter of our pathway in life. All Scripture testifies of the same truth. Read, for example, Psalm 1; and as you read the sharp antithesis between the wicked and the righteous, read it aware of the fact that Psalm 1 is the first Psalm in the Hebrew Psalter, because it defines the one theme that runs like a thread through all the songs. One does well to read meditatively this ancient Psalter of the church, The one constant refrain is the sharp contrast between the rich blessings bestowed on God's people and the dreadful judgments God in His anger pours out on the wicked. My wife and I just finished reading the Psalms (our favorite book of the Bible) once again. We were struck by this repeated contrast. We tried to find a

passage where Zion's songs speak of God's love towards His people and the wicked. We could not find one. I recommend to anyone to whom a common love of God towards all men seems a viable doctrinal option to read these delightful songs and try to find just one place where the church happily sings of a universal love or mercy or grace of God. One may start with Psalm 3:7, 8, go on to Psalm 5:4-7, pause for a moment at Psalm 9:5-9 and move carefully through the Psalter until he comes to the end in which concluding songs the Psalmist calls upon the entire creation to join with the church in praises to God who alone is worthy of all praise. But even then, with heart full of praise, the Psalmist reminds us that part of God's great works for which He alone is to be praised, is God's two-edged sword, "to execute vengeance upon the heathen, and punishments upon the people; To bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; To execute upon them the judgment written; this honour have all his saints. Praise ye the Lord" (Psalm 149:6-9). It is our honor to praise God for His judgments upon the wicked? Indeed it is. Then what is it to the defenders of common grace to speak of love towards the wicked and grace towards them that hate God? It can only be their condemnation. There is more that must be said on this point, but I will wait with that until my next letter.

## **THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN GIFTS TO THE RIGHTEOUS AND GIFTS TO THE WICKED**

Before I continue with our discussion of God's dealings with the human race, I must turn to a question sent in by one of our forum members. He writes that although he agrees with the sharp antithetical teachings of the Psalms, he is puzzled by Psalm 68:18: "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them."

Psalm 68 was written by David at the time the ark was brought to Jerusalem. The event was a type of the ascension of Christ 40 days after His resurrection, and of Christ's exaltation to the glorious position at God's right hand. It speaks especially of the blessings that come to the church from the exalted Christ, but it also speaks of Christ's sovereign rule of the wicked for the benefit of the church. Concerning this sovereign rule of the wicked, the Psalm says three things: 1) The exalted Christ shall destroy in His fury these wicked (verses 1); 2) the exalted Christ shall so use His sovereign power over the wicked to further the cause of His own church. He leads captivity captive; that is, He uses those great powers of darkness that held His people in the captivity of sin and death to serve His own purpose (verse 18); and He saves His elect from all these nations. The perspective is, of course, Israel, God's people, the church of the Old Dispensation. But this salvation of a catholic church is the idea of the expression in verse 18 and is one of the blessings of the exalted Christ: "Thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them." This same truth is mentioned again in verses 31 and 32. All these are the mighty deeds of the ascended Christ. A part of the work of the ascended Christ is the gathering of a church from every nation.

In my last letter to you, I spoke of the fact that while all men, believers and unbelievers alike, have everything of this creation and everything that happens in this creation in common, nevertheless, God's attitude towards the wicked and righteous is essentially different. God is favorable towards the elect, but is angry with the reprobate.

All God's favor and love can be bestowed only in strictest justice. I have emphasized that God is inherently and essentially good. That is, God is good in Himself and therefore, to Himself. His absolute holiness cannot allow Him to be anything but angry with anyone who is a sinner. To love or look with favor on a wicked person is to deny Himself as the only good. He must hate

sin if He is to be God. He must defend holiness, for it is an attribute of His own being. Sin must be punished if God's goodness is absolute.

Because it is true that God's goodness prevents Him from being anything but wrathful towards the sinner, it is possible for God to be favorable to some only in the cross of Christ. The cross, planted on Calvary, now nearly 2000 years ago, was the central act of God in all history. It is as if God planted the cross, on which His own Son hung, right in the middle of the stream of history. From the beginning of history to the end, the stream of the human race rushes towards Calvary and flows past the cross. The cross makes division between men. It divides the human race into two streams: the stream of the wicked and the stream of the righteous. This fact was true already on Calvary itself where the cross brought division between two thieves, equally sinners, but divided by the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

The cross of Christ means judgment upon the wicked. Shortly before He died, Christ Himself described His imminent death on the cross as judgment: "Now is the judgment of this world: now is the prince of this world cast out" (John 12:31; see also John 16:11). But while His cross brings judgment upon all the wicked, at the same time it brings blessings upon the righteous. For, as the judgments of God fall upon sinful men because of their wickedness, these same judgments become in the cross, not God's fury, but God's love upon the righteous. God's judgments are, so to speak, changed for the righteous from wrath, which all men deserve, to blessing, from curse to favor, and from hatred to love, for Christ bore the fury of God's wrath, the curse and God's punishment for sin, in Himself, by atoning for all the sin and guilt rightfully belonging to the people of God.

To teach a love of God for all men, no matter what kind of love that may be (if, indeed, there are different kinds of love in God), is to deny the judgment of the wicked by means of the death of Christ. It is to say that Christ died for all men as atonement for sin. Such an unbiblical conclusion is forced on those who teach universal love. And so proponents of common grace are compelled to resort to a universal atonement in support of their position.

It is true that defenders of common grace who want to retain a semblance of being Reformed talk of two different ways in which Christ died. He died fully and completely for His people, earning for them salvation. But He died partially for the reprobate wicked earning for them only a non-saving love. This partial atonement of Christ for all men is said to be an atonement for all in intention, sufficiency and availability, but not in efficacy. (The terminology I use here is one way of explaining a partial atonement; other terminology is sometimes used. We will discuss this whole concept in connection with the gracious offer of the gospel, in connection with which it is usually used.) As anyone who has any knowledge of Scripture knows, there is nothing like this in the Bible. And I challenge any man to demonstrate from God's holy Word that Christ's death is, in any non-saving way, for all men.

That sharp antithesis that happened on Calvary is revealed in history. The judgment of wrath and the curse is always on the wicked, while God's favorable judgment of love and mercy is always on the righteous. Everything God does to the human race for its sin expresses God's attitude towards both parts of the human race as this attitude is mediated through the cross. Because the wicked hate God, they are cursed; but in Christ there is only blessing for the righteous, for they are made righteous through Christ's work.

Prosperity is also, therefore, the expression of God's judgment upon the wicked (Psalm 73:18, 19). But so is sickness, suffering, loss brought by earthquakes, drought and pestilence. Prosperity for the righteous is blessing, but so is poverty, disease, suffering and disappointment. The latter God uses to chastise His people and work in them His salvation. The cross of Christ is the great divider.

Behind all that happens in history is the eternal purpose of God. What took place on Calvary is the realization of God's eternal decree of election and reprobation. One could even say that the cross of Christ is the historical realization of election and reprobation. It is not strange that one hears less and less of sovereign predestination from the lips of those who promote common grace. I must call attention to this crucially important truth. Without predestination one is at a loss to understand things properly – that is, if one wants to maintain with Scripture, a sovereign God. I probably will get at what I want to say in what some might consider a roundabout way; but it is, I think, the best way.

From our human and earthly point of view, sin is always the reason for God's hatred of the wicked. The wicked do that which is contrary to the will of God, deliberately defy Him who holds their very lives in His hand, turn their backs to Him in loathing, spit in His face and crucify His Christ. Can God do anything else but punish such glaring wrong? To do good to such people, I say again, would only mean that God is, after all, not good to Himself, not good in revealing His own divine being in all its pristine holiness – including his just and righteous punishment of the ungodly in this life and in the life to come. The searing wrath of God and the horrors of hell are justly given to the wicked as retribution for the monstrous evil of which they are guilty.

To teach that it is otherwise is to do dishonor to the name of God. You understand what I mean. If God can indeed be good to the wicked, love them, be kind towards them, then God is not God any longer: just, righteous and pure in all His actions. It seems to me that this point is part of the abc's of justice. If a man tortures and kills a father and mother with a new born baby in their home by forcing entry, and if when tried for his crime, the judge says to him: "I see your sin as terrible, but I am going to forgive your sin and show you mercy and kindness; I will let you go free," is that judge good? And if the brute commits a yet more terrible crime and appears before the judge a second time; and if the judge says to Him, "I will be yet kinder towards you and more merciful than the last time you stood in the prisoner's dock; I will let you go free, and furthermore, I will give you \$1000.00 a week for all your expenses," do you not think that the citizenry of that area will plead for the removal of such a merciful judge? Is such a judge showing goodness and mercy? People will say, "Deliver us from the mercy of this judge, or we will all perish."

That God gives good gifts is true. This creation, though nothing compared to the new heavens and the new earth, is still a very beautiful and verdant earth. Anyone who cannot see the goodness of God in the corn fields ripe for harvest, in the deep blue of the sky against which stands the rugged profiles of the mountains, or hear it in the song of the meadow lark and small wren and in the rippling of the sparkling clean waters of a mountain stream, is blind and deaf to God's goodness because he has set himself against God and despises the One who made it all. He is guilty of the most heinous crime, for he sneers at the goodness of God; he is worthy of God's just judgment.

From God's point of view, however, God is accomplishing an eternal purpose. Behind all that happens in this world is a sovereign God who reveals all His virtues throughout history; not only His goodness and grace in the salvation of His elect, but also His justice and deep wrath against the sinner in His decree of reprobation. Article 16 of the Belgic Confession reads in part: ". . . God then did manifest himself such as he is; that is to say, merciful and just: merciful, since he delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable council, of mere goodness hath elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works: just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves." The Westminster Confession follows the same thought. In 3/3 the

confession states: “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.” After defining election more fully, the Confession says: “The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice” (3/7). “To ordain them to wrath.” Not, “to ordain them to love.”

It is a contradiction of the confessions to say that God takes an attitude of favor towards the reprobate, for an attitude of favor towards the reprobate is totally incompatible with that eternal decree to “pass them by” and to “ordain them to dishonor and wrath.”

Yet, some effort to salvage their precious error goes like this. The evident contradiction between God’s decree of eternal predestination is said to be explained by the difference between God’s secret will (His eternal counsel) and His revealed will (His desire for the salvation of all). This distinction has the sound in it of desperation to try to justify that which cannot be justified. But because this distinction is the paper fort behind which defenders of common grace hide in defense of every doctrine that forms a part of common grace (including the gracious and well-meant gospel offer), we will defer treatment of it for some later date.

The sovereign and eternal decree of God is carried out in history in the way of the sin of the wicked. I am, of course, aware of the fact that the workings of God in His sovereign execution of the decree of reprobation are mysterious and beyond our understanding. Reformed people have always confessed the mystery of God’s decree. But at the same time, they have repudiated the Arminian conception of reprobation (and election for that matter) that unbelief is the basis or ground of the decree of reprobation, while faith is the basis or ground of election. That is, God reprobates those who do not believe. Reprobation is the punishment for man’s sin.

With the same discernment, the Reformed people have also rejected the idea that reprobation is the cause of sin. That is, that man sins because God reprobated them. (See, for example, Canons 1/5 and the Conclusion to the Canons.)

God is, therefore, according to our Confessions, neither the cause of sin nor is sin the cause of God’s rejection. Rather, our fathers and spiritual forebears spoke of God as reprobating in the way of sin. This expression is important. It means on the one hand that man is himself responsible for all the sins that he commits. He may not and cannot blame God for them. They all arise out of his depraved will. But this careful expression means, on the other hand, that reprobation is the eternal decree of a sovereign God.

It is not surprising that in those ecclesiastical circles where common grace is taught, reprobation is either minimized or denied. Those who appeal to a hidden will and a revealed will of God cannot really maintain sovereign reprobation. The hidden decree is finally so well hidden that no one remembers that it exists. The result is that the sovereignty of God is compromised and eventually lost. To lose God’s sovereignty is to lose God.



## **IS LOVE CONSISTANT WITH JUSTICE AND WRATH?**

Before I take up an investigation of the proof texts for the aspect of common grace I am investigating, namely, God's attitude of love, favor, kindness and blessing to all men without distinction, I must treat objections that have been raised against the view of grace defended in these articles and which was sent to me; they involve important questions and demand an answer. I do so gladly, for they really bring us to the heart of the whole issue that confronts us.

I am going to summarize the argument here and perhaps take a few quotes from the letter. Before I do this, however, it should be noted that the correspondent asks questions and makes observations, not so much because he differs with what I write and wants to defend common grace, but because he hears these objections made against our position and is interested in a correct answer.

In general, a major concern of the writer is a negative attitude that many take towards the PR position that their viewpoint does not do justice to God's attributes of mercy, love, kindness, etc., but tends to present God as tyrannical and possessing attributes at odds with His goodness.

Although without his approval, the writer refers to one acquaintance as saying, I like my God a lot more than the God of the PRC. The explanation of this remark, in the writer's own language is: "He wanted to preserve the view that God's attitude to the sinner undergoes development. God gives a period of probation in which the sinner is tested. As the sinner grows older and goes on in the course of sin, God reacts accordingly, until the sinner is eventually ripe for judgment. God was prepared at the beginning of the sinner's life to give him the leeway to repent that eventually he takes away."

The writer goes on to describe those who disagree with the position I outlined as "involving a negative and malicious view of God: Hoeksema at one point used the analogue of a farmer fattening up cattle for slaughter for God's dealings with the non-elect. God almost seems to want to trip them up, and in a cruel and malicious sort of way to place them in circumstances he knows very well will simply add to their eventual misery, taking delight in this misery in an almost Satanic way."

There were other questions that need to be addressed, but I want to comment on these remarks, first of all. While I think these matters are extremely important and these questions raised need to be answered, I am struck by the fact that some of these same objections were raised against the fathers at Dordt by the Arminians. You can find a list of these objections in the Conclusion of the Canons of Dordrecht. I cannot quote the entire conclusion, but do quote a few statements that reflect the same position that is described above. After setting down the doctrines of sovereign grace, including the truth of sovereign and double predestination, the Conclusion says of these doctrines, “And this is the perspicuous, simple, and ingenuous declaration of the orthodox doctrine respecting the five articles which have been controverted in the Belgic churches (that is, the churches found in the Lowlands including Belgium and the Netherlands, HH), and the rejection of the errors, with which they have for some time been troubled. This doctrine the synod judges to be drawn from the Word of God, and to be agreeable to the confessions of the Reformed churches.”

Then turning to the Arminians and their unprincipled attacks against the Reformed faith, the Synod calls attention to their distortions and slanders of these doctrines: “Whence it clearly appears that some whom such conduct by no means became (that is, such conduct was not becoming to the Arminians, HH) have violated all truth, equity, and charity, in wishing to persuade the public:

“That the doctrine of the Reformed churches concerning predestination, and the points annexed to it, by its own genius and necessary tendency, leads off the minds of men from all piety and religion; ... that it makes God the author of sin, unjust, tyrannical, hypocritical; ... that, if the reprobate should even perform truly all the works of the saints, their obedience would not in the least contribute to their salvation: that the same doctrine teaches that God, by a mere arbitrary act of His will, without the least respect or view to any sin, has predestinated the greatest part of the world to eternal damnation, and has created them for this purpose; that many children of the faithful are torn, guiltless, from their mother’s breasts and tyrannically plunged into hell ... and many other things of the same kind, which the Reformed churches not only do not acknowledge, but even detest with their whole soul.”

The fact of the matter is that the objections raised against the position that God is always good to His elect, but is always filled with wrath against the reprobate has been a doctrine criticized throughout the history of the church. Augustine, the venerable bishop of Hippo (d. 430 AD) faced and answered the same charges that were raised against his doctrine by the Pelagians. Calvin repeatedly answered those who objected to His views with equally scurrilous objections. He answered these objections most clearly in his booklet on predestination and providence. (This has recently been republished under the title “Calvin’s Calvinism: A Treatise on Predestination and Providence” and is available from the Reformed Free Publishing Association. It contains Calvin’s answer to such objections raised especially by Georgias, Pighius and Bolsec, all opponents of the doctrine of sovereign predestination.) These objections have been repeatedly raised since the time of Dordt against those who taught the same truths.

But this historical fact does not release us from the responsibility of answering these objections again.

One remark needs to be made at the outset about the view that God reacts to man’s faith or unbelief and gradually develops in His opposition to them. This view is currently being taught by the “Process Theologians” who have abandoned the doctrines of sovereign grace. To hold to such a view as Process Theology teaches is not only to deny the immutability of God (and

thus His eternity), but it is also to make predestination conditional; that is, God only reacts to man's acceptance or rejection of the gospel. The Canons of Dordt were specifically written against the same Arminian rejection of the sovereignty of God in predestination. Let anyone who holds this view be aware of the fact that he is taking a position contrary the doctrines of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches as set forth in the Canons and the Westminster Confession of faith. And let it also be understood that if God can and does change His divine mind over against the wicked, He can change His mind also about His people and cast them into hell, after all. Such a view is too awful to contemplate.

The fundamental and underlying error of those who want a kinder, more merciful, and more gracious God than seems to be the case with a God who is sovereign in all that He does is a definition of kindness, mercy, and grace that is learned more from human relationships than from Scripture's revelation of God in all His perfections. We may not and do not dare define God's grace and mercy in terms of our own ideas of such attributes. We must let God Himself define His own attributes and we have no choice but to bow – whether we like it or not. God must remain God and He cannot be defined in our terms. Doing such a foolish thing is to construct an idol.

One of the chief fallacies of such definitions of God is an almost total disregard for God's holiness and justice. So broadly are grace, mercy, kindness, etc., defined that they swallow up to the point of disappearance the great truths that God is the Holy One and is just and righteous in all He does. In His holiness God hates sin and cannot tolerate sin's presence even for a moment. To tolerate, overlook, or make light of, sin to any degree is to make God less holy than He is. Holiness by definition is not only pure unblemished freedom from sin, but it is also a terrible abhorrence of sin. This abhorrence of sin is so complete that punishment of the sinner is necessary to retain God's holiness intact. If, in any way, punishment of sin is minimized, holiness is lost. The more kind, merciful and gracious men want to make God, the less holy and just God becomes.

Herman Hoeksema is correct in his *Reformed Dogmatics* when he makes all God's communicable attributes subordinate to and manifestations of the one essential attribute of holiness. (Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004] 96-98, 135-144.) It ought to be clear that kindness, benevolence and mercy are not more important than wrath against sin and God's just anger against the sinner. Nor can mercy and kindness be set over against justice so as to modify justice, mitigate the severity of it, or even swallow it up or push it into oblivion. God's attributes are all one in Him.

Mercy and justice must and do agree with each other. This agreement between mercy and justice is fully revealed in the cross. Mercy is and can be shown to sinful man only on the basis of Christ's meritorious sacrifice. Sin has to be paid for, or God is no more just. If God reveals His mercy (grace, love, compassion, kindness) to man, it can only be done through the payment and satisfaction of the debt sinful man owes God. Christ pays that debt.

This necessity of atonement is what pushes the defender of a general and common grace or mercy to universalize the cross of Christ. Any man with any sense of the atonement must realize that the atonement of Christ is the only possibility of any mercy at all towards men.

This fundamental truth is the reason why the Belgic confession speaks of election as the manifestation of God's mercy and reprobation as the manifestation of God's justice (Article 16). But this does not mean that God's justice is not revealed in His favor and love towards His people. His justice is revealed in the cross, for the terrible suffering of our Savior was God's

exclamation mark behind the importance of His justice in showing grace to a sinner. Kindness and grace to the sinner without the cross is divinely impossible

## **THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD -- AND SIN**

In my last installment I was answering some questions that had been raised in connection with my assertion that God's kindness, mercy, grace, etc. are shown by God only to His elect, and that the reprobate wicked are never in any sense of the word the objects of these delightful attributes of God. The questions inquired into the possibility of kindness and grace to the reprobate wicked, which would make God less tyrannical, hateful and even cruel towards men.

A few more things have to be said about this matter before we can move on; and, indeed, other questions included in the letter have to be answered. I am glad that I can address these problems and questions that arise in the minds of our readers, not only because they are necessary questions, but also because they are asked, not in the spirit of confrontation, but expressing a desire to learn of these things more completely. The questions give such an opportunity and it is my prayer that the answers will help as well. We shall pursue this matter a bit further.

It is difficult for us, mere men and sinners as well, to take sin seriously. We are seemingly so accustomed to sin, also in our own lives, that we are frequently unaware of it, or if we are aware of it, we tend to brush it aside lightly. The world has constructed a false doctrine about the non-existence of sin; and the apostatizing church has bought into worldly philosophy in its efforts to minimize sin. Divorce and remarriage are no sins; Sabbath desecration is no sin; wrong doctrine is to be tolerated; "minor" lapses in conduct are to be overlooked; "white lies" are a necessary part of life; and such evils as materialism, worldliness, feminism, not to mention such horrible sins as immorality and homosexuality, are opening practiced and generally accepted as a normal part of life. Our tendency is, as we are also affected by the world, to become insensitive to sin and thus come to a position where sin is tolerated.

Such a cavalier attitude towards sin influences our thinking, and the result is that sin is no longer the horrible monster that Scripture makes it. Scripture points out in blistering language that not only sin as sinful words, deeds, thoughts and desires is abhorrent to God, but also that we are, apart from grace, sinful people, with depraved natures who can only be described in terms of being clothed with filthy rags (Is. 64:6, literally, menstrual rags), covered with pus-dripping sores (Is. 1:6), leprous from top to bottom, and such other graphic illustrations. We have sinful natures that are totally depraved and for which there is no cure – outside the balm

of Gilead. These sinful natures, the source of a river of sewage, are also our responsibility before God. We have winked cheerfully at our reflection in the mirror as we contemplate our own favorable features, but God sees, apart from Christ, repulsive people whom His soul abhors.

The measure of the seriousness of our sins in the eyes of God is to be found in the impenetrable depths of the suffering of the Son of God. God gave His Son to an awful cross! Why? God takes sin seriously, for He is a holy God. God will give His beloved Son to hell's degradation and agony to satisfy His fury against sin. One who bows in shame at the foot of the cross realizes how dreadful sin is. My wife and I were reading in our devotions that sad book of Lamentations 4. If God deals so harshly as there described by the prophet, with His people, how must He deal with the wicked? (I Peter 4:17, 18 asks the same rhetorical question.)

All this judgment of God against sin is in no way eased by an appeal to the sovereignty of God. God is sovereign. His sovereignty does not mean that we are not responsible for our sin. We are! Every sinner knows it – deep down, where he will not even permit himself to venture in his own thoughts. In the judgment day when all stand before the white throne of Christ, not one sinner will open his mouth in protestation. Hell is the anguish that it is, because it is the endless memory of our sins for which we are to blame and for which we now suffer.

The decree of reprobation is also sovereign. Reprobation does not imply that God's eternal, all-wise, sovereignly good and holy decree is the cause of sin. Reformed people have turned away in horror at such a thought. But it does mean that God sovereignly accomplishes His purpose in damning the wicked in the way of man's sin, so that God remains sovereign over sin, but also everlastingly free from sin's blot or guilt. Even reprobation underscores the seriousness of sin.

Is your response: "I cannot understand these things"? I did not keep track of how many times I was asked about these things during the years of my ministry, but I think I am correct when I say that in my catechetical instruction over the years, no single question has been more frequently asked by catechumens in doctrine classes than the question: How does one harmonize God's sovereignty, which includes sovereignty over sin, with man's responsibility?

It is not my intention to go into this question in this letter. I only want to emphasize one point: Both God's sovereignty (also over sin) and man's responsibility are so clearly taught in Scripture, and so frequently in the same breath, (See Acts 2:23 and 4:26, 27 as only two examples), that they cannot be denied. Nor can we dismiss these two ideas with the off-handed remark that they are mutually exclusive, and contradictory; they are not. They fit together without contradiction. – even if we cannot understand fully how this is possible. God is absolutely sovereign – even over sin; I am a wretched, hell-bound sinner; I receive what I deserve when judgment comes. I need Christ. I shall cling to Him.

I stress these things, because, in the final analysis we must be God-centered in our thinking, not man-centered. We can have such feelings of sympathy in our hearts for mankind and such horror at the thought of everlasting hell that we turn away with the shivering comment: "Such things cannot possibly be true of God. He would not take a baby out of this life. He would not put a man in hell where there is anguish and pain forever. He would not send tornados and tsunamis that kill thousands." Such language ought never to cross the lips of one who fears God.

God is God! He is the Holy One who inhabits eternity. He is infinitely above us. We cannot climb the ladder of our own thinking and reasoning to find God and describe Him. He dwells in

an unsearchable light. He is beyond finding out. If we would collect the knowledge of all God's faithful servants, what the church of all ages has collectively said of God and His works, into one whole, it is less than a thimble full of water in comparison with all the oceans of the earth. He made them all! He set their bounds! He controls their movements! He is God.

"O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" (Rom. 9:20). And this comes after, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (9:13). "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (vs. 13). "So it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (vs. 16). "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (vs. 18).

Before such a great God we can do nothing but fall on our faces and worship.

It is no wonder that men from the church, men who ought to be spending their time defending the great name of God, are ashamed to confess God's absolute sovereignty. And, almost inevitably, when these churchmen launch their attacks against a God-centered theology in some vain hope of rescuing man from his shame and degradation, their attacks are against the doctrine of sovereign reprobation. They apparently consider this doctrine the Achilles' heel of true Reformed theology. They do this, it would seem, to appeal to the sympathies of men without regard for the transcendent greatness of the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.

Calvin's theology was centered in God's glory. His enemies called him a "God-intoxicated man". He was, they said, "drunk with God." They meant it as a slur. It is the highest of all compliments. Would God we had more God-intoxicated men today.

There are no other options available to us: either we are "God-intoxicated" or we are man-intoxicated. The latter will lead to forming our own images of God in our own minds, but images nonetheless; images as awful as Baal, Moloch or Ashtaroth.

Who by searching can find out God? We may be puzzled by problems that arise in our own minds concerning truths Scripture sets down, but what of all the works of God can you and I understand? Do you understand how God forms a baby in its mother's womb? Do you understand that God creates wine by causing vines to produce grapes? Do you understand how a blade of grass grows, nourished by the dirt? I do not. Nor does anyone. I am not disturbed by my inability to understand the ways of a sovereign God. To try by refusing to believe Scripture's teachings is to be kinder, more beneficent, more gracious than God Himself is. But God will not allow Himself to be squeezed into molds of our devising.

Let us then join the company of saints in all ages and say with them, "Oh God, how great thou art!"

## **CHRIST: HIS HUMAN NATURE AND HIS LOVE - FOR WHOM?**

In the last letter I addressed the question whether any possibility of kindness towards the reprobate exists in order that God may be delivered from the charge of being unkind and tyrannical. I answered this with an emphatic “No.” Neither Scripture, the Reformed Confessions, nor the Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of this general kindness of God. I stressed rather, that God is a holy God, that any sin against Him is terrible, and that God is also a God of perfect justice. In His holiness and justice He cannot overlook sin and be kind or gracious to the sinner – apart from Christ.

Nor can God be charged with tyranny. He is good in all He does, even in His just judgment of the wicked. It is not tyrannical for God to punish the wicked with a punishment commensurate with their monstrous sin against His great holiness.

Nevertheless, behind God’s just punishment of the wicked is God’s eternal decree of reprobation. According to this decree, God’s purpose eternally is to manifest His justice in the way of the punishment of the sinner.

These considerations are closely related to other questions to which we now turn.

One question that was raised by correspondence was the question whether Jesus, from the view point of His humanity, loved all men. The argument goes like this. When our Lord Jesus Christ came into our flesh, He came under the law (Gal. 4:4). The law demands of everyone under it that he love God and his neighbor as himself. A man’s neighbor includes all those without distinction with whom he comes into contact. No man under the law knows who is elect and who is reprobate, except our Lord Jesus Christ, who did know who were His people and who were not. And so, because Christ also was under the law, even though He knew His own and knew also who were not among His sheep, He had to love the reprobate as well as the elect if He was to keep the law – although this was only in His human nature.

I recall that there was a controversy over this very point in a Presbyterian Church a number of years ago. The controversy centered in the gracious gospel offer, but involved the same line of argumentation as is used in this question we now consider. The defender of this view talked personally with me to explain his position. In order to explain his position on the discrepancy between Christ’s love for all revealed in the gospel offer and Christ’s sovereign love for His



people only, he appealed to the distinction between the divine nature and the human nature of Christ. He claimed that Christ in His divine nature loved only the elect, but in His human nature, He loved all men.

He was correctly charged by his church with Nestorianism, an ancient heresy, which separated the two natures of our Lord so completely that Christ possessed, according to this view, two persons. Nestorianism was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD and by the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

All that our Savior did while on earth and all that He now does is His work as the divine-human Mediator. It is wrong to say that Christ did one thing in His divine nature apart from His human nature, or to say that Christ does something according to His human nature without the involvement of the divine nature. It is yet more wrong to say that Christ in His human nature could do something completely at odds with His divine nature, so that the two natures did not agree with each other. Hence, in answer to the question: Did not Christ, who came under the law, fulfill the law by loving all his neighbors, whether elect or reprobate? we insist again that the Biblical answer is, No; Christ who knew His own that were given Him of the Father loved His neighbor, but only His elect neighbor. This truth is, in fact, clearly stated in John 13:1: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end."

I really do not understand very well the force of this argument. Neither for Christ, nor for us, is our neighbor every man who lives in the world. My neighbor is the one with whom I come into contact, with whom I must live, who is on my pathway, who requires my attention, who places me under certain obligations towards him. My neighbor is my wife, my child, my fellow saint – as well as the man along side of me in the shop. And I am called to love him in such a way that I, caring for whatever need he may have, seek his salvation. Love always seeks the good of the object of that love; and no greater good can we show to someone we love that to seek his salvation. I do this because I do not know who are elect and who are reprobate, and it may please God, should he be an elect, to use my love for him to bring him to salvation (Matt. 5:16).

But the Lord loved His neighbor too. He sought the salvation of His neighbor and in fact accomplished it. But His neighbor was the one for whom He was sent into the world to die, the elect in this world whom the Father had given Him from all eternity. That neighbor was by no means kind towards Christ. That neighbor opposed him, rejected His gospel of the kingdom and finally crucified Him. But the power of the love of Christ on the cross, brought and still brings that neighbor to faith and salvation.

This truth is clearly taught by the Lord Himself. At the time the Lord received a delegation from the imprisoned John the Baptist to inquire whether He was the Messiah or whether another was still to come, the Lord addressed the people by extolling the important place John had occupied in the working out of God's salvation in Christ (Matt. 11:7-15). At the conclusion of this sermon, the Lord pronounced dreadful woes on the cities of Judah and spoke of the fact that Sodom and Gomorrah as well as Tyre and Sidon would not be punished as severely as Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazin (Matt. 11:20-24).

Immediately after this solemn and divine pronouncement of judgment on apostate Judah, it seems the Lord paused to pray – although He must have prayed audibly: "I thank thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight" (Matt.

11:25, 26). This prayer was not, however, a conclusion to which the Lord was driven by what he observed as He witnessed the unbelief of the leading cities of Palestine; He not only acknowledged that such hiding and revealing belong to the sovereign work of His Father (“Thou hast hid these things . . . and revealed them . . .”), but He also emphatically states that He is on the earth to carry out this divine purpose of His Father: (“All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (27).

I see no problem here.

We can consider two additional questions in this letter. They are related to each other. One question asks about the possibility of hating a man’s sin, but loving the man himself. The figure of a judge is used. A judge may be utterly repelled by a man’s sin, but nevertheless have a sense of pity and compassion for the man. It is not necessarily true, so the questioner argues, that love and hatred are totally incompatible.

The second question, related to the first, refers to Galatians 5:22, 23, where the fruit of the Spirit is defined as principally love. Did not Christ, so the question goes, have the Spirit? And did He not, therefore, love all those with whom He came into contact? The same can be said of us in our calling. We have the Spirit and if we show the fruit of the Spirit, we show love for our fellow man. Parenthetically, I observe that the question is reminiscent of our modern judicial system in which more pity is shown to the criminal than to the one against whom a crime has been committed. And, again, I remind you that sin is against “the most high majesty of God” (Heidelberg Catechism, 4/10).

Now it seems to me that we ought to be clear on what is meant by love and hatred. And the questioner himself recognizes that an understanding of these two terms is essential to the problem.

Love is a not a sentimental and romantic feeling. While love certainly has to do with the emotions, the emotions are, quite naturally, a part of the mind and will. Love is far more than a feeling. Scripture gives us what is almost a formal definition of love in Colossians 3:14: “And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.” The word translated “charity” in many places by our AV is, of course, the word for “love.” Now the text says two things about “love”. It is first of all a bond, and second, it is a bond of perfection. This definition holds whether we are talking about the love of God for Himself or for us, or the love we have for God or for our neighbor. Love is therefore, a bond of friendship and fellowship. But it is a bond that is characterized by perfection.

Hatred, on the other hand, is exactly the opposite. Hatred is repulsion, abhorrence and total refusal to have fellowship with someone. God loves Himself as the holy and perfect One and has fellowship with Himself. That fellowship is a bond between the three persons of the holy trinity that is characterized by life, love and happiness.

God loves His people, even while they are yet sinners (Rom. 5:8). Impossible, you say? Yes, indeed! But it is possible because God loves them in Christ and they are without sin, holy as God is, in Christ. He establishes with them a bond of fellowship that is characterized by life, love and happiness. And so great is the love of God that it reaches down to us through Christ and transforms us into a holy church in which God’s holiness itself is revealed.

God’s hatred of the wicked is His revulsion of them because of their sins. (Psalm 5:5: “Thou hatest all the workers of iniquity;” Not: “Thou hatest iniquity,” but “Thou hatest all the workers

of iniquity.”) God does not give them even for a moment any sense of His fellowship with them. He drives them away from His presence and causes them to experience His curse. When they die, He puts them into hell where they are made to suffer the just judgment of their sins. And hell is as far from God as one can be. God hated Esau, not only Esau’s sins (Malachi 1:3).

We are called to love God; that is, to enter into fellowship with Him, live in the consciousness of that fellowship and give praise to Him as the infinitely holy One. We love Him because He first loved us and shedding abroad His love within our hearts, He makes us love Him (Rom. 5:5, I John 4:10). The work of making us as holy as He is includes the work of causing us to love Him, for holiness that comes from God draws us to Him and into His fellowship.

Yet, as we have previously observed, God’s decree of reprobation stands behind man’s sin and punishment. Once again, this is true, not in such a way that God is the author of man’s sin, but in such a way that God’s sovereignty is revealed in the way of man’s sin and God’s just punishment for sin.

We may not like this truth; we may protest against it; but let it be known that our puny and worthless objections do not (thank God!) change the truth and will not ever change the fact that God is absolutely sovereign in all He does. We add to our sin when we persist in our questioning. It is our calling to bow in worship and adoration. “Nay but, O man, who art thou that replest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction” (Rom. 9:20-22)?

The difficult part comes in our calling to love our neighbor when our neighbor is wicked. When our neighbor is holy as we are, that is, also a saved sinner, that love is (at least, theologically; in fact very difficult) no problem. We love our wives, our children and our fellow saints because we love God as they love God. We have fellowship with them and live in the bond of life, love and joy.

But some of our neighbors are wicked. How are we to love them? This is how we must do it. The answer seems so obvious. Because love is the bond of holiness, our love for them is an earnest desire to have them saved. We do not know who are God’s people and who are not. We hope and pray they may be elect, loved by God, and so we seek their salvation. This does not mean that we neglect their needs; God placed them on our pathway because they need us. But we supply their needs in order to seek their salvation. We bring them food when they are hungry, but in order that we may display the love God has for us who are undeserving sinners; we, therefore, tell them that such love as God has for us, poor sinners, can and also will be theirs, if they repent of their sins and turn to Christ in faith.

Obviously such love is a “one-way street,” for we refuse to have fellowship with them in their sin. In that sense of the word, we love them, but hate their sin. We, in our love for them, condemn their sin and seek their repentance. We refuse to have fellowship with them in their sin, just because we love them and seek their salvation. God acts towards us in the same way, though in an infinitely higher way. He shows His hatred of sin and His love for us in giving us Jesus Christ – while we were yet sinners. And in Jesus Christ we are sanctified and have the true fellowship of love with Him.

How that all works out in our lives is obvious. Our love for our neighbors has the same two-fold effect as the preaching of the gospel, for that kind of witness is empowered by the gospel. Our

love for our neighbor will either save or harden. It will save our wives, our children, our fellow saints and God's elect among the unbelievers. But the love we show to our neighbor will also harden the reprobate in their sin. God does good in all the gifts He gives them and they are hardened in their hatred against God. So with our gifts to them. Try it once. Go to them in God's name and in the name of Christ. The more we bring to them our earnest entreaties for them to repent and believe in Christ, the angrier they become, for they do not want to be told that they are sinners who will perish if they do not repent.

God works His salvation through us, for He always uses His church to accomplish His purpose in the world. As the wicked increase in their hardening we find it increasingly difficult to have anything to do with them. They want nothing to do with us. They despise the gospel we bring to them and despise us for continuing to bring it. They demonstrate that they hate God and hate those who represent the cause of God in the world. And so the time comes when the child of God cannot even have that limited one-way-street-love any more. He can no longer seek their salvation, for they slam the door in his face. Every child of God has experienced this. And the believer's response is: "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee" (Psalm 139:21)?

For myself as well as for others who sincerely desire to know the truth of these matters, it is essential that we begin with God and not with ourselves or our conceptions of what God ought to be like. As I said before, we cannot climb the ladder of our own thinking to reach the dwelling place of God who makes the heavens His throne and the earth His footstool. We will always end up fashioning our conception of God according to the pattern of what we think He ought to be.

God must reveal Himself; that is, He must tell us who He is and what He does. Scripture is very, very clear on how great God is. I sometimes think it would be well for us simply to sit down and read Job 38-41, for, if we truly hear God speak, we will say with Job, "I know that thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak; I will demand of thee, and declare unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6).

Or perhaps we ought to read Paul's cry at the conclusion of Romans 9-11: "'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (11:33-36).

That is a summons to lay our hands on our mouths and bow in the earth in worship!

## **ELECTION AND REPROBATION DENIED**

In the past letters I have sent, I have been at some pains to demonstrate from Scripture that the common grace of a universal benevolence and love of God is contrary to the Word of God and the teaching of the Reformed and Presbyterian Confessions. Over against this position, I have also attempted to present a positive Biblical and confessional statement concerning the truth of sovereign and particular grace.

In doing this latter, I have, more than once, mentioned that the Biblical teaching is that God's sovereign and particular grace is rooted in the truth of sovereign and eternal predestination, both election and reprobation . This teaching is found in Scripture and in our Confessions.

Without any doubt, this same doctrine of sovereign and eternal predestination, both election and reprobation, was taught by the Reformers, including both Martin Luther and John Calvin. Those who hold to double predestination today stand firmly in the tradition of the Reformation and of the Reformed and Presbyterians Confessions.

To maintain double predestination is to close the door to any form of common grace, particularly to the idea that God's love, kindness and benevolence are shown to all men. But it works the other way around as well. If one is committed to common grace, in whatever form it takes, sovereign and double predestination falls by the wayside.

This was evident in a recent reprint of Arthur Pink's influential book, *The Sovereignty of God*. In this book, Arthur Pink defended the Biblical doctrines of both election and reprobation. Yet, the *Banner of Truth*, in republishing the book, deleted all references to reprobation, without any notice in the book of having omitted these sections, without a credible apology for doing so, and without permission from the author, dead at the time the reprint was made.

I recently received a letter from one who read my forum articles in which the correspondent claimed to believe in election, (because it was, after all, found in Scripture) but who insisted that we could know nothing about it and that it ought not to be a part of the preaching. As far as we know, he said, God loves all men and presumably, Christ died for all men. To ignore this basic doctrine of Scripture is to deny it.

A correspondent and member of the Forum called my attention to the fact that a recent article in *The Banner*, the official periodical of the Christian Reformed Church, repudiated both reprobation and election. The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) is the mother Church of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and the two denominations have existed separately since the CRC expelled three ministers for repudiating the doctrine of common grace.

Where has an adoption of common grace led the CRC? It has led the CRC down the road of increasing apostasy although our interest in this article is in what it says about predestination.

The article to which I refer (Alvin Hoksbergen, *The New Calvinism: Calvinism is on the Rise – but Other Faith Traditions are Getting all the Credit* [*The Banner*, August, 2009], pp. 38, 39. The article can be read on [www.thebanner.org](http://www.thebanner.org).) is discussing a feature article that originally appeared in *Time* magazine entitled “10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now,” published in the March 22, 2009 issue of *Time* magazine. Among these “10 Ideas” Neo-Calvinism was included.

The article was, in its description of Calvinism, a caricature of it, understandably if *Time* was speaking, not of Calvinism, but of Neo-Calvinism. *Time*’s description of this Neo-Calvinism bore no resemblance to Calvin’s teachings; this kind of Calvinism was indeed “Neo,” and could rightly be called “No-Calvinism.”

One would think that a minister in a denomination that professes to be Calvinistic would come to the defense of Calvinism as it has been taught in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions. But such is not the case. Rather, the author is puzzled that neither the Reformed Church of America (RCA) nor the CRC was included in the lists of churches who are promoting the new Calvinism. The author points out various areas in which the CRC has been active and should have received proper credit: The CRC is active in social work and the CRC properly recognizes the authority of God’s Word in creation (presumably a reference to the CRC’s approval of evolutionism). These certainly, the author opines, are credentials that admit the denomination into the ranks of Neo-Calvinists. But these credentials were obviously ignored by *Time*.

Finally, the author presumably finds the real reason why the CRC has been overlooked. It has an albatross hanging about its neck, which has been hanging there for some time: “I wonder why the RCA and the CRC traditions aren’t mentioned. Whatever the reason, now might be the time for us to take another look at who we are and how we might be included among other Calvinists who make a noted difference in today’s world” (38). He then suggests that the reason for the exclusion of the CRC from *Time*’s list is: “Our problem with election. An area that we in the CRC tradition must address if we are to be part of the ‘new Calvinism’ is the perception that there is an albatross that hangs around our neck. I am referring to the perception that we believe God predestinates some people to everlasting hell, while others are granted eternal life in glory” (39).

The author then goes on to give a caricature of the doctrine, even though, in his opinion, the church no longer believes or, at least, never talks about it: “While most seem to have moved away from the concept of double predestination (God is glorified by those assigned to hell as well as by those accepted into heaven), the biblically based concept of election remains a major factor in our theological structure” (39).

He then goes on to say, “[Election] is not a topic that plays well from the pulpit. It is an arrogant position that may consign good acquaintances to hell while granting heaven to only a select few” (39).

The author then goes on to define what he thinks election really is. “When God called (elected) Abraham, God mentioned nothing about Abraham’s being translated to heaven after death. Instead, the promise was wrapped up with what Abraham and his descendants were to do in their daily lives” (39). This is a time-worn definition, repeatedly refuted, that election means nothing more than God’s choice of a nation or individual for a specific task in the world; in this article that task is said to be social action.

All the Reformed theologians throughout the ages, including Bavinck, Kuyper, Turretin and many others in the Reformed tradition, and Rutherford, Gillespie and others in the Presbyterian tradition, not to mention the outstanding theologians at Dordt and Westminster, and the Reformers themselves, are brushed aside with a careless wave of the hand and dismissed as responsible for an albatross hanging about the neck of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. Speaking of arrogance, brushing aside in a cavalier fashion outstanding theologians to me is a towering arrogance that cannot be excused. Such dismissal of the traditions of the church of Christ is, of course, done in the interests of a “new Calvinism,” a “neo-Calvinism”, which is no Calvinism at all, but which is, after all, a categorical dismissal of Scripture itself, in which all these doctrines are to be found. And so it becomes a towering arrogance in its own right that lifts man’s vain speculations to a position higher than the Scriptures.

Such ecclesiastical disaster comes upon defenders of common grace. It may take years, but it comes, with astonishing certainty. We do well to take heed.

## **SCRIPTURAL "PROOF" FOR COMMON GRACE: MATTHEW 5:44-45**

I have been at some pains to deal with the arguments raised in defense of the idea that God has an attitude of favor towards all men, and not only towards the elect. I also gave a positive statement concerning the truth of this matter, namely that God's favor and love are always towards His people and are rooted in sovereign election; it is not possible to answer the questions posed by common grace without taking into account both election and reprobation.

Although I am reserving our discussion of other aspects of common grace for future articles, I must remind our readers that the question of God's general attitude of favor and love towards all men underlies all aspects of common grace: the restraint of sin, the good that the unregenerate do, and the free and well-meant offer of the gospel. All three are based on the idea that God is favorable towards all men. The point we are now discussing is crucial and fundamental to all aspects of common grace.

Further, I must remind you all that what I said at the beginning of these letters is an important point to bear in mind. God does not only take an objective attitude of favor towards all men and leave it go at that so that most, if not all, the objects of common grace do not even know that God loves them; rather, God's attitude of favor includes the actual bestowal of grace upon the object of that favor. God's "attitude" is not a mere thought in His mind; it is the living will of the living God. He shows His favor towards all, and makes certain that these objects of His favor know that God loves them. He gives them His grace in their hearts to enable them to be what apart from His grace they cannot be and to do that which apart from His grace they cannot do. They know His love whether they accept this love or not.

Bearing these two thoughts in mind, we can proceed with our discussion.

It is now time to examine the Biblical proof given by defenders of common grace for God's attitude of favor towards all men.

The first point of common grace adopted by the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 offered the following Biblical proof: Psalm 145:9, Matthew 5:44, 45, Luke 6:35, 36, Acts 14:16, 17. We shall discuss these texts one by one. If anyone among our forum members had other texts to consider, I would be more than willing to consider them as well.



Now, there is not much here to which we have to pay attention. I have already discussed Psalm 145:9, and need not deal with that text again. I pointed out that the reference in this Psalm is not to men but to God's creation. God is good to His creation, for it is His; Christ died for it, and it shall be redeemed.

Further, Matthew 5:44, 45, Luke 6:35, 36 and Acts 14:16, 17 are all very similar, and the correct interpretation of one will give us the correct interpretation of the others.

Even the two brochures written almost immediately after the adoption of the three points by the Christian Reformed Church contain no additional Scriptural proof for the point we are discussing. The two brochures are: Louis Berkhof, *De Drie Punten in alle Deelen Gereformeerd* (The Three Points, in all Parts Reformed) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1925) and H. J. Kuyper, *The Three Points of Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1925).

Now this is in itself rather significant. It would seem to me that in a official doctrinal statement made by the highest ecclesiastical body of a church and introducing into the church's body of faith a doctrine that from the viewpoint of the Reformed creeds and the history of the Reformed churches has at best only dubious historical support (although the first point of common grace claims that this view was held by all theologians in "the most flourishing period of Reformed theology,")—that ecclesiastical body would give an abundance of Scriptural proof, and even, one would hope, an explanation of the texts referred to as proof. But such is not the case. The need for careful exegesis of Scripture is the more pressing when faithful ministers of the gospel are stripped of their office because they refuse to sign the doctrinal statement at issue. Nevertheless, we ought to look at the proof given.

I must, therefore, turn to Matthew 5:44, 45. In general, there is no question about it that this is a key passage in the defense of God's attitude of grace and love towards all men. Every defender of common grace that I have read or listened to has quoted this text as decisive in the debate. And all defenders of common grace assure us that this passage ought to mark the end of all debate.

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

The argument as I understand it goes like this. God sends rain on the just and on the unjust. The common rain that God sends is proof of His favor, love, kindness, etc. towards the unregenerate. Rain is God's common grace.

Sometimes the argument is turned around, in the interests of showing that all who receive rain actually do receive favor. The argument goes like this: We are called to do good to the just and to the unjust. For us that doing good to the just and unjust includes all men without any distinction, or, at least, includes elect and reprobate alike, for we are unable to distinguish between them. Because we are imitating God as His children, in doing good to all, God also does good to all.

We may not, however, argue from our calling to love our neighbor as ourselves to God's attitude of favor towards all men. We are creatures, living here in the world, in the world though not of the world. God is God, sovereign over all who does all His good pleasure. Known

unto God are all His works from the beginning. We do not know who are God's elect and who are reprobate. But God does know, for He determines it all. We ought to keep this in mind.

An important question that arises from the text is: Whom does Jesus mean by "the just and unjust" upon whom God sends rain? Does Jesus mean: good men in this world and bad men in this world? That is, men who deserve rain and sunshine and men who do not? The answer, very obviously, is: The text cannot mean that, for there are no just people in the world, for "there is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom 3:10).

Does it then mean to distinguish between those who are righteous because the perfect satisfaction for sin earned on the cross has been imputed to them, and those who are still in their sins and not righteous in Christ? That is, is the distinction between just and unjust a distinction between elect and reprobate? It would seem that the latter would have to be the meaning. But then the text means only, as we have repeatedly observed, that God manifests that He is a good God by giving good things to men, something no one denies. The question still remains: What is God's attitude and purpose behind these good gifts? And then Psalm 73 and Proverbs 3:33 give us the answer.

But the whole idea that God loves the reprobate is an imposition on the text of man's own devising.

A positive explanation of the text would, I think, be helpful.

Actually, I dealt with some of the issues in this verse in my last letters and I ask the reader to consult what I wrote there. There is some repetition here, therefore, but perhaps the points are worth repeating.

Before I take our journey through this text, it is necessary to put the text into its context. In the broader context Scripture gives us Jesus' words in His Sermon on the Mount. This sermon is spoken to the disciples and, more broadly, to all citizens of the kingdom of heaven. The Sermon on the Mount has frequently and rightly been called, "The Constitution of the Kingdom of Heaven." After describing the characteristics of the citizens of the kingdom in the Beatitudes, the Lord lays down fundamental principles that govern the lives of these citizens while they are still in this world. Note this: Jesus is laying down principles of conduct to be observed by those who are citizens of the kingdom.

In the section of which verses 44, 45 are a part, beginning with verse 21, Jesus is explaining how He did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. And in connection with His calling and work to fulfill the law, He condemns the keeping of the law as it was explained by the scribes and Pharisees. They saw the law only as an external code of conduct and paid no attention to the spiritual demands of the law: Love God, and love thy neighbor. Even to the command, Love thy neighbor, the Pharisees had added the command, Hate thy enemy (verse 43). This interpretation was indeed what the Pharisees taught, for in verses 46 and 47 the Lord adds, "For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans the same?"

The evil interpretation of the law by the Pharisees was basically a self-centered conceit: I will be nice only to those who are nice to me . . . .

In other words, the command of God to love our neighbors as ourselves had been corrupted and abused by the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes. They had interpreted "neighbor" as

referring to their brethren, and, even more narrowly, to those who loved them. The Lord warns the citizens of the kingdom not to do as the Pharisees, for that is not the law of God.

But the Pharisees forgot that the command to love our neighbor is rooted in and flows from the command to love God. We cannot love our neighbor without loving God. And, indeed, our love for our neighbor is a manifestation of our love for God. Furthermore, the love the citizens of the kingdom who love God must show to others is a manifestation of the fact that they are loved by God (I John 4:19). The Pharisees, when they interpreted the command, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," and interpreted it to mean that we are to love those who love us, immediately had to face the question: Does God love those who love Him? What a foolish question to ask. The answer obviously is, He does not! Jesus' answer demonstrates that God loves those who hate Him, though they be elect.

The term "neighbor" in the law of God is broader by far than our brethren and those who love us. That it has a broader connotation is evident from the parable of "The Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37). In this parable Jesus explains that we are neighbors to anyone whom we meet or walk with on our life's pathway, who is in need of our help. That means that our neighbors are not only those who unexpectedly cross our pathway and need our help, but also those with whom we walk on life's pathway every moment of our lives, but who need our help: our wives or husbands, our children, our fellow saints . . . Quite frankly, I have a great deal of difficulty accepting the hypocritically pious prating of the ministers who are continuously telling us to love our neighbor, but who divorce their own wives and marry others. Let them first love their neighbor nearest to them, their wives and their children.

For all that, we are also called to love the neighbor who is quite obviously an unbeliever. That is, we are called to love our neighbor without discriminating between those who love us and those who persecute us. We are not to love those only who love us. God does not love those who love Him. God does not love those who make themselves worthy of His love. He loves us, the worst of sinners. If we are children of our Father, therefore, we love those who do not love us. But those whom God loves are those wicked and undeserving people who are nevertheless those for whom Christ died.

The point of comparison between God's love and our love is: God loves unworthy sinners (though they are the elect whom God knows) and we are to love unworthy sinners (though we do not know elect from reprobate.) In doing so we imitate our Father in heaven.

We may very well ask the question: Why does God want us to love our neighbor and not only our brethren? The very obvious answer to that question is: We do not know who are our brethren (or will become our brethren), and who are not. That is why the Pharisees interpreted the command to love our neighbor as referring to those who love them. If, said the Pharisees, a person loves us, he must be one of our brethren and we ought to love him.

This was very perverse and wicked. We do not even know with absolute certainty who among our brethren are truly people of God; much less do we know of those outside the circle of our brethren who are true people of God. Luther was right when he said that there would be many in heaven who surprised him by their presence, and there would be many he thought to meet in heaven who were not there. Hypocrites are to be found in the church and God's people are to be found outside the circle of "brethren", though they may as yet be unconverted. God knows who are His own; we do not know with absolute certainty. Nor need we know. It is enough for us to live in fellowship with those who manifest themselves as faithful servants of Christ, with whom we live in our homes and in the communion of the saints. Going back all the way to Calvin and our Reformed fathers after him and following them, we must exercise

towards those who profess to be believers “the judgment of charity,” or “the judgment of love.”

But God is pleased to save His church from the world of unbelief. He is pleased to save His church by the preaching of the gospel. The effect of the preaching of the gospel is that God’s people are His witnesses in the world of sin; and the witness of God’s people is itself the power of the preaching within them. God uses the witness of Christians to bring His people outside the church into the fellowship of the saints and under the preaching. This is God’s reason for the command to love our neighbor.

As Jesus makes clear, our neighbor is anyone who comes in our pathway: our wives or husbands, our children, our fellow saints, the man next to us in the shop, the man who knocks on our door to ask for food, the man who threatens us with harm, the man who persecutes us – these and all the rest who, if only fleetingly, enter our lives. God brings them there. God has His purpose in bringing them there. That purpose is to hear our witness of what God has done for us. We do good to those on our pathway whom God has put there.

We who are husbands surely seek the salvation of our wives. We do all we can to help them fulfill their own calling in the home and in the church. We surely seek the salvation of our children, for we teach them the ways of God’s covenant and insist that they walk in those ways. We surely seek the salvation of our fellow saints, for we earnestly desire to go to heaven with them.

The command to love our neighbor is broader than showing love to our acquaintances. We are to love those whose pathway crosses our pathway and who, like the wounded Samaritan, block our path so that we have to go around them if we are to ignore them. God put him on our pathway and did so for a good purpose.

Our neighbor is emphatically someone on our pathway. To love my neighbor who lives in Zaire is very easy. Even if occasionally I have to write out a check because famine is stalking Africa; to love these neighbors is the easiest thing in the world. But to love the unkempt and stinking man who knocks on my door for some food when I am in a rush to meet an appointment with a parishioner who has just lost a loved one – that is something more difficult.

We must love the neighbor. Love is not sentimental and syrupy do-goodism. Paul defines love as being the bond of perfection (Col. 3:14). Paul means that love binds two people together in a friendship that is characterized by holiness. So it is within the church. When that love is to be extended to our neighbor, it means that we earnestly desire the salvation of our neighbor, that he may, through faith in Christ, be perfect also; and that, saved by God’s grace, he may be one with whom we live in the communion of the saints. Love always seeks the salvation even of those that hate and curse us, despitefully use us and persecute us, for they may very well be brought to faith in Christ by our love for them.

Love is not, therefore, having fellowship with them in their sins, going to parties and sporting events with them, visiting them in their homes for amiable chats in front of the fireplace, or having a beer with them at the local pub. To seek their salvation is to reprove their sins, call them to repentance and faith in Christ, and point them to the way of salvation. When God shows mercy to us, He shows mercy to the unthankful and evil. We, moved deeply by such a mercy, do likewise.

To love them is therefore to do good to them and to pray for them, for this is what the Lord enjoins. Our concern for their salvation must be earnest, heart-felt and rooted in a genuine

desire to see them one with us. But it is always a reflection in our lives of God's love for us, undeserving sinners. God does not love those who do good to Him, who deserve His love. He loves the unthankful and evil But He loves them in Christ, seeks their salvation by sending His own Son into the world to suffer and die, and does all that is necessary to bring them to heaven.

As I said, witnessing has the same power as preaching. Preaching brings to faith in Christ; so does witnessing. Preaching is directed to far more people than the elect; so is witnessing. Preaching condemns sin and calls to faith in Christ; so does witnessing. Preaching is a two-edged sword that hardens as well as saves; so is witnessing. Witnessing is a sort of echo or reverberation of the preaching – preaching that we have heard and by which we have a faith that echoes in our witnessing. The two belong together. God uses promiscuous preaching to save His elect; so also He uses witnessing to bring His elect to the preaching of the gospel, to the fellowship of the church and to faith in Christ. We must not be as the Pharisees; we must be children of our Father in heaven.

Considering these things, we can understand the words: "That ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven, for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." The point Jesus is making is that we must do to others what God has done to us. This is always a theme in Scripture, as Jesus makes clear in the parable of the two debtors (Matt. 18:21-35). God loves us and has shown His love for us by giving us Christ and salvation in Him. We are undeserving sinners who have no claim at all on God's mercy. We receive what we do not deserve. If we fail to show this great blessing to our neighbor, we are thankless and unappreciative, not worthy of the blessings we are given. If we are aware of the amazing wonder of our salvation and if we have the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, then we will also be inwardly compelled by the power of that love to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is Jesus' point in this passage.

If you say that Jesus points us to the fact that God sends His rain and sunshine on men indiscriminately, you are, of course, correct. The point of the terms "just and unjust" is precisely to demonstrate that God's love does not depend on the worthiness of the object. But, further, God always gives only good gifts. I have pointed out in an earlier installment that God gives good gifts, for He is good in Himself. The good gifts He gives show beyond question the wickedness of the world, for they despise God's good gifts and use them in the service of Satan. In this way God Himself demonstrates that His judgment on the wicked is a judgment they deserve. In His good gifts to the reprobate, God sets them on slippery places where they slide rapidly into everlasting destruction (Psalm 73:18, 19). Behind this just judgment stands the eternal and unchangeable decree of sovereign predestination.

But God's goodness is a manifestation of His grace to those whom He has chosen in Christ and for whom Christ died. We are unthankful and evil and deserve nothing. But God knows us as His own and knows all who are His own. He saves us sovereignly. We do not know who are elect and who are not. We are called to be witnesses of what God has done for us in the hope that God will do the same to those to whom we witness. And God will do what He has eternally planned to do, but in such a way that our witnessing always accomplishes His purpose whether that means to save or to harden. Or, to put it a little differently, God who knows His own in this world, gives good gifts to them for their salvation; but He also gives good gifts so that the wicked may be without excuse and God's purpose in reprobation accomplished. We do not know who are elect and who are reprobate, but our manifestations of love have the same affect: they save (by God's grace) the elect and harden and condemn the wicked.

You say, But God gives rain and sunshine to the just and unjust. That is, of course, true. But it is a false assumption to interpret giving rain to just and unjust as tokens of God's love for the wicked. He gives rain and sunshine to the unjust reprobate for their condemnation, and to the just elect for their salvation. So we, the objects of such undeserved favor, must love our enemies and do good to them that hate us. That is, we must seek their salvation, not knowing whom God will be pleased to save through our goodness. God will use that very love for our neighbor to harden and condemn the wicked, but also to save those whom He has chosen to everlasting life.

One correspondent asks whether it is an accurate statement of God's attitude towards the reprobate to say, "The good gifts of providence that he gives to them (the wicked, HH) are meant as a testimony to them that he is a good God, full of kindness and love, and therefore one worthy to be worshipped and before whom they should repent were they in their right mind, and that if they were to do so they would experience his loving fellowship as sweet." My response to that summary is a hearty "Amen."

This is Biblical and what we must believe.

## **GOD IS KIND TO THE UNTHANKFUL AND TO THE EVIL**

Before we pursue further the discussion of the proof texts used to prove an attitude of favor and love that God shows to all, I must deal briefly with a text that one of the readers of the forum sent in. He says that it is usually quoted as proof for a gracious and well-meant gospel offer, but would like to have a brief explanation. The text is Revelation 22:17: "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

I am aware of the fact that this text, and others like it, have been used to prove from Scripture a well-meant and gracious gospel offer in which God expresses His desire to save all men. But such an interpretation is incorrect. Presumably, the defenders of this position assume that, though this call of the gospel comes only to those that hear or are thirsty or will to come, such characteristics belong to all men. All men hear; all men thirst (for the coming of Christ), all men desire to come.

But this is an evident impossibility on the face of it. Such a view is based on the Arminian doctrine of free-willism, and cannot be found in Scripture. I am just now reading a book by Robert A. Peterson with the title, "Election and Free Will" in which the author traces the history of free-willism from the early church fathers till today and speaks of it as the dividing line between Arminianism and Calvinism. (P & R Publishing, 2007.)

Briefly, the meaning of the text is quite different. In the first part of the text John lays down the general truth that the "bride" of Christ, that is, His church, prays, by the power of the Spirit for Christ's return. The words "The Spirit and the bride say, Come," mean, by a Greek hendiadys, "The Spirit in the hearts of the bride says, Come." He then turns to an admonition directed to the bride to make this prayer earnest and one's own. These members of the church are described by their spiritual names. They hear what the book of Revelation says about the coming of Christ; they thirst for that coming, for it means their full salvation, and the waters of life shall be their's to drink forever and ever to quench their thirst.

But even the saints need this admonition, for they are yet in the world, sinful and not always earnestly and eagerly longing for Christ's return. They are too trapped in their pre-occupation

with earthly things to give much thought to Christ's coming. So the admonition directed to the saints is urgent.

Let us be aware of the fact that Scripture does call all men who hear the gospel to faith and repentance. Proverbs 8:1ff and Matthew 22:14. This command of God is not an expression of His loving desire to save all, but simply a sharp and earnest command. But there are also texts directed only to those who are God's elect and who know already the work of the Spirit and the grace of God in their hearts. They are addressed by their spiritual names and cannot refer to all men. Such passages as Rev. 22:15, Isaiah 55:1 and Matthew 11:28 are clear instances of such passages. But in neither case does such a passage speak of God's gracious and loving desire to save all who hear the gospel.

One other item demands our attention before we go on. In an earlier installment I said, "God does not love those who love Him." Some of our forum members misunderstood what I was saying, wrote, "God does love those who love Him." I apologize for my lack of clarity and hope this note clarifies the point. What I meant to say, and thought I had said in the context was, "God does not love His people because they love Him." His love is first, creative, powerful, salvation itself. God's love for us creates our love for God.

I hope this clears up the matter.

We will now consider the Biblical proof that is used to support the idea of God's general attitude of favor and love that He shows to all men. No confessional proof was offered in support of this point of common grace, but a few Bible verses were quoted in support of it. In the last installment, I considered Matthew 5:44, 45. In this installment I consider the second proof text, Luke 6:35, 36: "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful."

This passage in Luke is nearly parallel with the passage in Matthew 5 that we considered last time. The context also is very much the same. The Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matthew 5-7, but here, though spoken on a different occasion, the subject is the same. The text is also very close to being the same, the only difference being that Jesus here speaks of God's kindness to the unthankful and evil, while in Matthew 5, Jesus speaks of the rain and sunshine God sends to the just and the unjust. Luke 6 therefore makes explicit what is implicit in Matthew 5: the reference to the unthankful and evil is, therefore, a reference to the unthankful and evil elect. Election is not based on works, but on the free and sovereign choice of God. Those who are eternally chosen are not chosen because of any good they did, nor because something was found in them that made them suitable to be counted among the elect. They were as evil as any in the world. They were as ungrateful for God's good gifts as anyone elsewhere. They were as deserving of everlasting condemnation as those who were not chosen. But they are in any case, citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus is giving them the principles by which the citizens of the kingdom live here in the world.

The elect who are the objects of God's mercy know with total certainty that they were not chosen because they were in any way better than those not chosen. The awesome character of election and its sovereign work of God is the reason for the humility of God's people. How can it be any different? It is not at all strange, therefore, that these people are admonished to be merciful to others. They are eager to love their enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again. They cannot help but be themselves kind unto the unthankful and evil, for this is the way God dealt with them.



There is no reason at all in the text to argue, as those who teach common grace argue, that God is merciful to all men. After all, Jesus is speaking here to His own disciples (verse 20) and is describing the characteristics and calling of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven. Citizens of the kingdom of heaven are saved by grace; they are now to be gracious to those with whom they come into contact. In this way they manifest to others the grace God has shown to them. What could be more obvious?

To argue that because within the sphere of the kingdom of heaven, God is kind to unthankful and evil people can never be reason why we conclude that God is gracious to all men. One ought to re-read Psalm 73 and Proverbs 3:33 if he has any problem with this explanation.

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

This is an interesting text that requires considerable explanation, though not because it is difficult to refute those who want to thrust common grace on the text. Whatever the text may mean, it certainly does not say anything about a general attitude of favor and grace that God has towards all men. That seems to be clear on the very surface.

The context is clear enough. In his first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra. During the course of Paul's preaching in this city of Asia Minor, Paul healed a lame man. This startled the citizens of this city and they immediately considered Paul and Barnabas to be two of the gods that they worshipped and served. Under this erroneous conclusion, they prepared to make sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. Paul was determined to prevent them from committing such a terrible sin. The passage is part of Paul's efforts to stop them from their horrible idolatry.

Even considering the text in this context and attempting to find common grace in this text, one would, it seems to me, immediately wonder why in the world Paul used the doctrine of common grace to prevent the heathen idolaters from worshipping him. But, apart from that, the text says nothing at all about an attitude of God's favor and grace towards all men, but merely speaks, as I have emphasized more than once, that God gives good gifts to men. His gifts are always good and never evil. He is Himself a good God, infinitely good in His eternal perfections. He cannot give anything but good gifts.

You say, Yes, but God also sends floods, tornados, famine and earthquakes. Is He good when He sends these disasters? Yes, indeed, He is good also when He sends catastrophes, for in His infinite holiness and perfect hatred of sin He sends judgments on the wicked in order that His goodness may be vindicated and His hatred of sin revealed. And surely part of the sin that He hates is the dreadful sin that man commits of despising God's good gifts and using them to oppose God.

And, we may mention in passing that when God sends catastrophes upon His people, that also is good, for God uses all the sufferings of this present time to sanctify His people and prepare them for glory.

But the text in Acts 14 goes further. It gives a reason why God gives good gifts to men. That reason is not that God loves them and is kindly disposed towards them. The reason is that God does not leave Himself without witness. In the good gifts that He gives, God testifies of Himself. He even, Paul says, did this in the old dispensation when Christ had not yet come and when the gospel was not sent into the nations. Even in those days when the gospel was

proclaimed only in Israel, the heathen who never knew or heard the gospel, nevertheless, were given a strong and irrefutable witness of God. The Jebusites, Moabites, Philistines, Ammonites and all the other heathen nations of the earth received that witness from God through the good gifts that God gave to them.

Paul explains this further in Romans 1:18ff, and this point is sufficiently important to devote some time to it, but let it be established now that when God gave good gifts to men, He gave them to show all men that He alone is God, that He alone is good, and that He alone must be served and worshipped.

Paul appeals to that truth in Lystra, because he underscores the fact that the wicked from the beginning of time and including the idolaters in Lystra knew and know that God alone must be worshipped and served. The people in Lystra, therefore, must not offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, but to God alone.

This truth brings us to a discussion of Romans 1 and the truth of what is sometimes called general revelation. But all this must wait.

## **IS "GENERAL REVELATION" A MATTER OF COMMON GRACE?**

I mentioned at the conclusion of my last letter that the time has come for us to turn to the question of general revelation. I intend to treat this subject at this point because we are discussing the view of common grace that teaches that God reveals His love for all men in creation (rain and sunshine, for example), what has sometimes been called "general revelation," that is, God's revelation of Himself in creation in distinction of God's revelation of Himself in Scripture. And this general revelation, so called, is also common grace, for God gives evidence in the creation of His goodness, kindness, benevolence and grace. God speaks His Word of creation and providence in the world about us, expresses in it His greatness and glory and gives through it the knowledge of Himself. This knowledge of Himself is given to all men and is indicative of God's favor and love to all men. Indeed, the very act of revealing Himself to all men is indicative of His favor. But along with that revelation of Himself to all is a certain subjective grace that all men have by the power of which all men come to know God's love for them and kindness to them.

Herman Bavinck most clearly identifies common grace with general revelation. In his book, *Our Reasonable Faith* (tr. by Henry Zylstra from the Dutch work *Magnalia Dei; The Wonderful Works of God*; (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977). In discussing the differences between general revelation and special revelation, he writes: "The first (general revelation, HH) is directed to all men and, by means of common grace, serves to restrain the eruption of sin . . ." (37). "It is common grace (in general revelation, HH) which makes special grace possible, prepares the way for it, and later supports it; and special grace, in its turn, leads common grace up to its own level and puts it into its service." (38).

William Masselink wrote a book under the title, *General Revelation and Common Grace* in which he argues that God's revelation of Himself in creation and history constitutes in itself the common grace of God. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977). That is, the very fact that God reveals Himself to all men is, in itself, grace.

In a decision concerning the legitimacy of teaching evolutionism in Calvin College, it was argued that general revelation, because it is God's common grace, has to be taken into account in determining the origins of the creation and the age of the earth. The argument is

that God's common grace through general revelation gives man the necessary ability to discover in creation God's truth – also concerning the age of the earth. It is strange though that although Scripture teaches creation in seven days of twenty-four hours by the mighty Word of God, science, which supposedly teaches an old earth of billions of years of age and creation by long processes of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, is to be preferred over Scripture, and Scripture's teachings considered in the light of science, rather than science in the light of Scripture. This is the theistic evolutionist's position in spite of the fact that Scripture has as its Author, God, while science has as its authors, unbelieving scientists. That idea certainly ascribes to common grace a formidable power.

Prof. Ralph Janssen, professor in Old Testament studies in Calvin Theological Seminary in the early 20th century till his deposition in 1922, held to the idea that the miracles of Scripture had to be explained in scientific terms because of common grace. For example, the water from the rock when Moses struck it was not due to a miracle, but was due to a blow of Moses' rod on a thin layer of rock, which broke the rock and released the water already in it (Num. 20:7-11). He also taught that the monotheism of Israel's religion was gained in a certain measure by the adoption of the religions of surrounding nations. All this was possible because of the common grace given in general revelation, for, because all the heathen possessed common grace, they were able to discover and hold to certain truths concerning creation and God. And because scientists possessed common grace, they are able to understand general revelation and formulate certain scientific truths into which Scripture's miracles had to be fitted and in the light of which they had to be explained. (For a more detailed study of this subject see my Masters Thesis, *A Study of the Relation Between the Views of Prof. R. Jansen and Common Grace*, available from the Protestant Reformed Theological School in Grand Rapids, Michigan.)

But we cannot be side-tracked by attempts to destroy God's Word. We must move on to this question of "general revelation" and face the question whether so-called "general revelation" is common grace.

Before I examine this whole idea in detail, I have a caveat that is, it seems to me, important. The fact is, that for years I have been unhappy with the whole concept of general revelation. General revelation is usually interpreted to mean that, apart from Scripture, God reveals Himself through creation; and this revelation of God in creation is given to all men. This is why this revelation in creation is called "general." I have no problem with the idea that creation itself makes God known; my problem is with the word "revelation" as it stands connected to "general" and is applied to creation. It seems inevitable that such a conception leads also to a grace common to all those to whom God "reveals" Himself, for Scripture connects revelation with grace. I do not want to quibble about mere terms, but it is my conviction that we ought to abandon the term "general revelation" for the term itself implies something contrary to Scripture and has been used as proof of God's universal love and favor.

I have examined the many texts in Scripture where the term "revelation" is used in the sense of God's self-disclosure and I have been unable to find a single text that speaks of revelation as God's self-disclosure to all men. In the sense of God's revelation of Himself, the term is used strictly as revelation to the elect. Scripture's use of the term "revelation" limits God's revelation to His people. All Scripture follows the words of our Lord, when, after pronouncing terrible woes upon Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum for their unbelief, He prays: "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matt. 11:25-27; the emphasis is mine).

The same idea of revelation is underscored in Jesus' explanation of the reason why He teaches in parables. I refer to Matthew 13:11-16. Jesus' answer to His disciples' query (why does Jesus teach in parables?) is first of all, that to them (that is, the disciples; and the disciples in distinction from all others) is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. This knowledge is not, Jesus says, given to others, but is hidden from them (vs. 11). And so Jesus goes on to explain that His reason for teaching in parables is that the sovereign purpose of God might be realized in the salvation of the church and in the damnation of unbelieving Israel. He quotes Isaiah 6:9, 10 in support of His contention.

Many want to interpret these words of Jesus that parables are intentionally the method of instruction that Jesus chose because parables are riddles, enigmas, puzzles calculated to obscure. Quite the opposite is the case. Parables make clear, explain things, and teach concerning the invisible truths of the kingdom of heaven by means of visible and easily understood realities in this visible creation. Thus, everyone who hears them, knows exactly what Jesus means and what truths He is making clear. But that is not yet revelation, because God's purpose is that hearing many shall indeed hear, but not understand; and seeing they shall surely see, but shall not perceive. That they hear and see, but do not understand or perceive is due to the fact that the heart of the Jews was grown fat, and their ears dull of hearing, and their eyes closed so that they could not see (vss. 14, 15).

But, says our Lord to the disciples: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (vs. 16). Obviously the meaning of the Lord is that it is given to the disciples both to see and to hear (vs. 11). That is, revelation of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven is to the disciples alone, because revelation includes the spiritual ability to see that revelation. Revelation includes the subjective and gracious work of God to enable the spiritually blind to see and the spiritually deaf to hear. Revelation is sovereign and particular. Revelation is part of the work of salvation. Revelation is never, never to the wicked.

I can understand why revelation is linked to common grace in the thinking of the defenders of common grace. Even they realize that revelation involves grace, and so, if revelation is general to all men, grace is general to all men. And so, we have "general revelation" and common grace. But the Scriptures do not teach this.

That revelation is only for the elect is easily illustrated. The word "revelation" means "to uncover, to expose, to unveil." It brings to mind the public unveiling of a statue of some famous person in some park. A crowd is assembled, and, after appropriate speeches are finished, the time for unveiling comes and the drape covering the statue is removed. But now supposing that all the people assembled are blind and deaf -- is there any revelation? No one present can see a thing or hear a word. What revelation takes place? None.

The sinner is spiritually blind and deaf. He cannot see nor hear because he has no eyes and ears attuned to heavenly things. He is dead in trespasses and sins. The uncovering or unveiling of God when He speaks of Himself and all His mighty works cannot be to the unbeliever whose heart is fat, whose ears are dull and whose eyes are closed. Revelation is indeed grace. It is a grace that opens eyes and ears and instills faith. But the Lord God must be thanked that this same revelation is hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed to babes, for this is the Father's good pleasure.

Our conclusion is, therefore, that revelation is part of the work of salvation; part of God's undeserving gift to His people, part of the overflowing bounty of grace, and it is very particular.

That teaching of Scripture raises, however, some questions. The first question is: Is it not true that God does make Himself known to the wicked? Another question, closely related to this is: Why does Jesus nevertheless, speak of the wicked as “seeing,” even if they do not see, and “hearing” even though they do not hear? And, thirdly, is it not true that the wicked also know God? Does not Romans 1 teach exactly that?

In connection with these questions, one must recall that I talked in an earlier letter about the fact that not only saving grace, but also common grace, is not simply an objective attitude of God towards men, but is also a subjective infusion of spiritual power modifying and mitigating the severity of sin in the sinner. Applied now to this idea of revelation, does not general revelation, if it is common grace, bestow the spiritual ability to know God in the truest sense of the word? It certainly has to mean that, and the defenders of common grace and general revelation are ready (and even eager, one might suppose) to teach this.

But these questions, and especially an analysis of the teaching of Romans 1:18ff. are going to take more time than we have left in this letter.

## **GOD'S WRATH SHOWN TO THE UNGODLY IN CREATION**

When I wrote the last letter I introduced the subject of general revelation and common grace. As you recall, I said that even though general revelation is a concept that has had its own place in Reformed theology for centuries, I expressed uneasiness with the whole idea. My main objection was the fact that revelation, by virtue of the term itself, implies grace, and general revelation implies general or common grace. The major question is not one of terminology; nor am I interested in objecting to general revelation because some use it as proof of common grace: that latter reason would not be a valid one. One may not object to a term because it has been used wrongly. But I did show that Scripture, while also connecting revelation with grace, always speaks of revelation as God's self-disclosure, as part of the salvation of the elect. This assertion, I said, brings up some problems, the chief of which is the question: Does not God make Himself known also to the world in general? This, and related questions, is the one which I address in this letter. Our starting point is Romans 1:18ff.

First of all, let it be established beyond any doubt that indeed God does make himself known to all men through creation. (See Article 2 of the Belgic Confession.). God makes Himself known to His people in the creation, but, as Calvin puts it, we cannot see God in creation without the spectacles of Scripture. We may certainly call God's manifestation of Himself in creation to His people "revelation," but only in connection with Scripture and Scripture's power to convert the sinner and instill faith.

That God makes Himself known to the wicked in creation is clearly taught in Romans 1:19-21 and Romans 2:14, 15. (Romans 1:18ff. is too long a section to be quoted here; you are urged to take out your Bibles and follow in them.) But notice, in Romans 1:19 the expression "hath shewed" is used instead of the term "hath revealed." The term revelation is used by the apostle in verse 17 of the same chapter when he is speaking of the righteousness of God imputed to His people. Further, the same term is used in verse 18, but there it is used as the revelation of God's wrath, and grace cannot be found in God's wrath.

The entire passage in Romans 1 from verse 18 to the end of the chapter is an important one. It is important because it does speak of God making Himself known to all men. It is also important because Dr. A. Kuyper used this very passage as proof of common grace. Kuyper's argument (as Bavinck's) was, however, rather oblique. He appealed to the statement in

Romans 1:24, 26, “God gave them up”, as teaching common grace because, until such a time as God did give them up to their own lusts, He restrained their sin; and this restraint of sin is evidence of grace. But we wait with our discussion of this until we examine that aspect of common grace.

We ought to notice first of all, that the theme of verses 18–32 is most emphatically not: the revelation of God’s grace to all; it is rather: the wrath of God revealed from heaven. The revelation of God’s wrath from heaven is really the title of the entire section from verse 18 to the end of the chapter. That immediately rules out this passage as proof for common grace. Furthermore, the reason why God makes Himself known to all men is not to reveal His grace to all men, but “that they may be without excuse” (1:20). The word “that” in the AV introduces a purpose clause: “. . . in order that they may be without excuse”).

One may ask: Why is the word “revealed” used in verse 18? This is a fair question. But the answer is obvious. This term used here also refers to God’s self-disclosure. God reveals Himself as a God of great wrath against the wicked. He is indeed a God of love and mercy, but He is the holy God and reveals Himself as holy by the terrible wrath He has against all “ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (vs. 18). The whole passage talks of wrath.

It is this matter of holding the truth in unrighteousness, which is the apostle’s next concern. In order for one to hold the truth in unrighteousness, he must, in some sense, possess the truth.

How does a wicked man possess that truth that he holds in unrighteousness?

Before I answer that question from what the apostle says, I must say something about the wicked and their sin of holding the truth in unrighteousness. The word translated “hold” in the AV can be translated here, “suppress.” The wicked suppress the truth. And their suppression of the truth is because they are unrighteous and ungodly. Not only is the sin of suppressing the truth itself an unrighteous and ungodly act, but the wicked suppress the truth because they are unrighteous and ungodly. If their suppression of the truth takes place by means of their unrighteousness and ungodliness, they are an unrighteous and ungodly people to begin with. The former term, “unrighteous” refers to their deliberate and willing violation of what God commands them to do. They are to honor and keep the law of God who is their Creator and Lord. But they deliberately disobey. “Ungodliness” is a denial of God and a denial of the fact that God is their Creator and has every right to command them to obey Him. They deny that, deny any claim God may have upon them, and deny God’s right to tell them what to do.

To suppress the truth is to know it, but to refuse to acknowledge it as truth, or even to allow it to enter one’s consciousness. We are all past-masters at this sort of thing. We know some truth that gives us great pain; some memory of some event; something so traumatic that has happened to us that we cannot bear to think about it. Because of the pain associated with it, we suppress it. That is, we refuse to allow ourselves to think about it. We drive it from our consciousness the moment it is present in our minds. We bury it somewhere where it will not intrude on our thinking.

We may suppress some obligation we have towards someone. We may owe a man \$500.00, but we do not want to pay it for some reason. When it appears in our consciousness, we drive it away, because it bothers our conscience. We deliberately refuse to allow ourselves to be reminded of it, and when we are reminded of this debt by someone, we become angry and self-defensive.



So it is with God's demands on man. He comes with the demands that men serve Him and obey His law, but man refuses. He will not even allow himself to think about it, for he is immediately troubled by an accusing conscience. And so he suppresses the thought and fights desperately to keep it from entering his thoughts. He knows that God is God and that God's demands that men serve him are true. Everyone who has witnessed to an unbeliever has experienced that his word calling man to repent of sin and believe in Christ is rejected. The more often it is brought to a wicked person the more angry he becomes. Why is he so angry? Because he knows it is true, but refuses to forsake his sin and does not want to be reminded of his obligation towards God. Anger is the reaction of a guilty conscience. And it is well that we understand that we are the same way when confronted with sin in our lives.

But to suppress the truth of God the wicked must know that God is God and that He has every right to demand of men that they worship Him and obey Him. How do they know this? The apostle answers that question: "That which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead" (verses 19, 20).

Several points must be made in connection with these two verses. The first is that God is in Himself invisible. Man cannot see or know God apart from God's own self-disclosure. The things of God are the invisible things of an invisible God. Man has no knowledge of God unless God makes Himself known to man in a way man can understand.

Second, Paul does not use here the word "to reveal," for that would refer to revelation, always given in grace, as I said. The word used is quite different from the word "reveal." It simply means "to make known to another." Thus the apostle himself distinguishes here between revelation and a making known.

Third, God shows the things of Himself to man by means of the things that are made. God has showed the invisible things of Himself to the wicked so that the things of the invisible God are clearly seen and understood by means of the creation. Never is it possible for the wicked to plead ignorance. In the judgment day, they will not be able to say, "We did not serve you because we did not know you nor your demands on us." God will say, "I clearly showed these things to you in my creation." And they will have to admit that this is so.

Fourth, the apostle is even stronger. He says, "That which may be known of God is manifest in them." That is strong language. It is true that the Greek word used here can also mean "among". Then the meaning would be that this making Himself known is in the sphere where the heathen live. But the literal meaning of the preposition is "in," and that is the translation I prefer. God personally sees to it that what He says concerning Himself is sealed clearly and unmistakably on their consciousness. This interpretation is confirmed by what Paul says in 2:15, where the Gentiles are said to "shew the work of the law written in their hearts." To have the work of the law written in their hearts is the same as having God's speech in creation impressed upon their consciousness.

No earthly teacher can ever do that. A teacher may make a math problem clear to her students and even use the blackboard to demonstrate it, but she cannot make the pupils pay attention, nor can she make the poor student, who never can figure out what math is all about, to see it and understand it. God puts the truth that He makes known into the consciousness of men so that they are fully aware of what He says and who He is. The sky filled with stars, the birds that greet the dawn with song, the rose bush arrayed in all its beauty, point not to themselves, as Augustine expressed it in his Confessions, but point beyond themselves and say, "Look not at

me, but look to Him who made me.” This subjective Word of God that He seals upon the consciousness of every man is not the subjective bestowal of grace, as the text makes clear, but is instead the guarantee that the wicked indeed know God. And this work is undoubtedly accomplished by the Spirit of Christ who carries out all God’s purpose so that God alone, as the sovereign God, does all according to His counsel.

This inward sealing of the truth concerning God on the consciousness of man is sometimes called the *semen religionis* (seed of religion), or, *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity). It is a part of man’s created being. He knows he is dependent upon a power outside himself, that he is not autonomous, and that he cannot escape this complete dependence. He knows that he is a part of the creation and that the creation can be explained only in terms of God, the Creator who formed all things and who continues to uphold them. And, knowing this, he also knows that the Creator alone must be served and worshipped.

Fifth, this work of God in making Himself known is a work that is seen by all men. It is not a part of the gospel. It does not reveal Christ. It does not come with the promise of salvation to those who believe in Christ. It is God’s declaration that He alone is God. Thus Paul’s emphasis here is on those who, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, live outside the sphere of gospel preaching. Every man, woman and child, in every jungle and forest, in every isle of the sea, in every land under heaven, knows that God is God and must be served. No man is without that knowledge.

Finally, it is the knowledge given in creation itself: “the invisible things from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” So clearly are they seen that every man, from the creation itself, is confronted with the truth concerning God. God’s reason for this is “so that they are without excuse” (vs. 20). The wicked go to hell because they did not obey God when they clearly knew Him through His own creation. They suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

It is sometimes argued that Christ must be made known if men are to be saved (which is true), and that, therefore, God does not give all men an opportunity to believe in Christ, because He does not bring the gospel to all men. Because the work of making Himself known is limited to the creation, it is unjust of God to send those to hell who have never heard the gospel. Or, so it is argued, God’s revelation in creation itself is enough to be saved if only men would believe it and not suppress it. But this is exactly not Paul’s point. Paul is insisting that God is just when he comes in His wrath against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of the wicked even though they never heard the gospel and never heard of Christ, the One through whom alone is salvation. They know that God is God and that He must be worshipped and served.

You may argue that they cannot worship and serve God, because they have had no chance to hear the gospel, and because their total depravity makes it impossible for them to be saved apart from the Christ, whom they do not know. But we must not forget that they themselves are to blame for their inability to serve and worship Him. They sinned in Adam and their total depravity is the punishment of God upon the sinner for his guilt in Adam. This is also true of us. We stand under the righteous judgment of God for our sin and guilt in Adam just as all men stand under penalty of death for Adam’s sin. The truth of original sin, both original guilt and original pollution, is part of the foundation of the whole of the Reformed faith. Though it is rarely taught in today’s theologically insipid church, and although it is even flatly denied by modern evangelicalism, it is part and parcel of the faith once delivered to the saints. It is clearly taught in Romans 5:12-14.

The gospel makes God's way of salvation clear and the command goes out to all that all who hear the gospel must believe in Christ. When they who hear the gospel in turn refuse, their judgment is far greater than those in heathendom. It is more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for Chorazin and Capernaum, for Chorazin and Capernaum heard the gospel proclaimed Christ Himself. But the fact is that also the heathen who knew not the gospel are responsible before God for their sins, for they were created good and able in every way to serve God. But they lost their gifts to serve God through their cooperation with Satan when Adam agreed to disobey God and join forces with Satan in his wicked purpose. This is the reason for what Paul says in verse 1 of chapter 2: "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest."

Although I went to a Christian school in my grade-school days, chapel speakers would often urge on us the calling to go to the heathen with the gospel because the only reason the heathen did not believe was because they had not heard of Christ. We were told that, if we did not go and tell them of Christ, we were responsible for the millions that perish, millions who longed to be delivered, whose only fault was that no one ever told them about Christ, whose salvation was certain if only someone would go to bring them Christ. Paul puts all that nonsense aside in these verses.

The question remains, What do the heathen do when they suppress the gospel?

I shall address that question in the next letter, God willing.

## **THE WORKS OF THE LAW WRITTEN IN MAN'S HEART**

Our discussion was centered in the claim that God's general revelation, that is, His revelation in creation, is common grace. Romans 1:18 ff. is quoted as proof of that assertion, and I was examining that passage. That passage makes it clear that the heathen who have never heard the gospel are nevertheless the objects of God's wrath because they refuse to obey God and serve Him. They know through the creation that God is God alone and that He must be worshipped and served, but they suppress the truth in unrighteousness. The passage does not teach a general revelation that is evidence of God's common grace, but rather it speaks of God's wrath revealed from heaven. The purpose of God's making Himself known in the creation is "that they may be without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

The suppression of the knowledge of God of which all men are guilty is the refusal on the part of the wicked even to allow the knowledge of God and their calling to worship Him to enter their consciousness. Their hatred of God is so intense that they refuse even to think about Him. Or, if they think about Him, they do so in terms of their idols: Allah, Buddha, or other imaginary gods.

The way the wicked suppress the consciousness of God's demands on them is to make idols and worship them: "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened, Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things" (Rom. 1:21-23). We ought to notice how the verse emphasizes that the wicked did possess the knowledge of God. It states emphatically that they knew God, and knowing God, they changed the glory of God into a beast or bird or snake. To change something, one must know what he is changing.

So the idolatry of the heathen was not born out of ignorance of God; nor was it an expression of their longing to know God but ignorance as to how to worship Him (as many maintain, and as I was taught in grade school); it was a deliberate, conscious and willful alteration of Him whom they knew to be God alone, into a corruption of Him in an idol. In order to suppress something that one refuses to think about, wicked man finds this most easily done by altering the thing hated and feared. If a man refuses to worship God whom he knows through creation,

the best way to avoid doing this is to create a god of his own imagination and convince himself that his idol is the true God. If a man has committed fornication and his conscience drives him to distraction and he wants to drive the fact that he sinned from his consciousness, the best way to do it is to justify it by persuading himself that fornication is not sin, but a normal part of one's lifestyle. He knows fornication is wrong, but refuses to admit it and turn from it. So he justifies it by appealing to the misery of being married to a cold and unsatisfactory wife, by claiming the right of happiness ("A man has the right to happiness, does he not?"), and by convincing himself that in his case, the thing he did was the wise and best thing to do . . . .

The same is true of modern man who considers it silly to bow before an image, as do the Hindus and Buddhists. Today's Western man is too sophisticated for that sort of thing. But in his hatred of God the Creator of all and the One alone to be worshipped, man suppresses the truth of God by various heresies such as the godless theory of evolution. For God is substituted natural selection, alteration of the species through random genetic mutation and the survival of the fittest. And ultimately, man's idol is science itself, which, so men claim, is the only road to truth. Man today has other idols that he makes his own and that he serves: money, pleasure, possessions, large homes, expensive cars, huge yachts, fame and honor, drink and drugs. Even modern idols are concentrated efforts on the part of sinful man to escape his calling to serve and worship God and live in obedience to Him. Nor have I mentioned the false doctrines that abound by which God's glory is changed into an image concocted by sinful man: a god helpless to save, but worshipped by Arminians; a god who makes wealthy and delivers from the afflictions of this present time – if only one wants him; a god who changes his mind and can only react to what man does. Modern man's idols are abundant.

The dreadful part of this is that man's suppression of the truth is accomplished by committing the sin of intellectual dishonesty. Man argues that the truth, seared upon his consciousness by all the creation (and by Scripture in our modern "Christian" civilization) is, after all, not the truth at all. But to escape this truth and to suppress it, man changes the truth into a lie (evolutionism instead of creation; sexual immorality in the place of sexual purity, divorce and remarriage in the place of life-long marriage, pleasure in the place of self-denial, riches in the place of giving to the poor, heresy in the place of the truth) and convinces himself that the lie is truth and the truth is a lie. Suppressing the truth is dangerous business. Yet we all do it. We sin and when confronted by it, and knowing full well that what we have done is sin, we nevertheless, justify ourselves and attempt to prove to ourselves and others that what we have done is perfectly permissible.

The sad part of it is that we can be persuaded, and, if we persist in our intellectual dishonesty, we finally will succeed in persuading ourselves that we are right, that what God demands is wrong, that the truth is a lie, that the lie is truth, that our conduct is for one reason or another perfectly correct – at least in our case, and that what God says is a mistake. When we have succeeded in persuading ourselves of the fact that it is all right to change the glory of the incorruptible God into our own image of corruption and immorality, we are what Scripture calls "hardened" – as the heart of Pharaoh was hardened. Our consciences are seared with a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2). For such a one there is no repentance and confession of sin. Why should one confess as sin something of which he is persuaded that it is true and right? But for such a one there is no salvation. Suppression is a terrible danger and a dreaded sin packed with the threats of God's wrath in this life and in eternity.

This matter of suppression is so great a sin that Paul mentions once again the evil of it: "Who change the truth into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than ('rather than' is correct, HH), the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen" (1:25).

The only way to escape the spiritual bankruptcy of self-justification and hardening is through confession of sin – to God and one another. That is why Scripture extols repeatedly the blessedness of the one broken in spirit and contrite in heart. Confession of sin is a gift of grace.

Thus, this manifestation of God in creation, given to all men, is “That they are without excuse” (1:20). They are never, into all eternity, able to plead ignorance. They knew! God showed it to them.

Having said all this, the apostle also explains how the wrath of God is revealed to these sinners. It is revealed in a most terrible way. “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves” (vs. 24). And again, “For this cause (the idolatry of the wicked) God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature; And likewise the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet” (vss. 26, 27).

And then, once again the emphasis that such idolatry is conscious and deliberate: “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient” (vs. 28). In other words, God punishes sin with sin – more sin, greater sin, more horrible sin, the sin of homosexuality. That is the revelation of the wrath of God.

This is so-called “general revelation”. This is the common grace of general revelation. We do well to see that common grace is also an idol and that to believe in a god who loves all men and tries to save them is a changing of the glory of God into an image of man’s own devising. It is dangerous to suppress the truth. It is salvation to get down on our knees before a sovereign God who does all His good pleasure, and worship Him in awe and humility. It is salvation to live in obedience to God’s will and when we sin, not to justify ourselves, but to confess our sins and seek forgiveness in the cross. There, in the cross, is hope for us poor sinners.

The apostle says much the same thing in chapter 2:14, 15, He is explaining why the Gentiles, unsaved as they are, nevertheless do things in conformity with the external demands of the law. This was especially true in the Roman Empire, famous for its advances in jurisprudence. The wicked, even those who have not the gospel, keep these outward demands of the law because they really know the law. “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.”

Not all unsaved people commit fornication, steal from their neighbor, murder those whom they hate, seek divorce when they weary of their spouses. There can be found among unsaved people an external conformity to the law. These are the heathen who have no Bibles and have never heard of the law of the ten commandments. The gospel is foreign to them. Especially in Paul’s day, this ignorance of the gospel was true of most of the people within and beyond the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. And the law, given from the fire of Sinai, was unknown to them. How is it to be explained that they do by nature the things contained in the law?

Again, many explain this knowledge of the law and conformity to its external demands as being evidence of God’s common grace. But there is no mention of this in the text and we ought not to introduce that which God does not introduce.

The same reason for this phenomenon of an external conformity to God's law is given here as in Romans 1:19, 20. The wicked know the law of God even though they never heard of the ten commandments. The wicked have the works of the law written on their hearts. They do not, the apostle points out, have the law written in their hearts; this is salvation. But they do know what the law teaches and demands, namely that they must serve God. They not only know that they must serve God, but they know how to serve Him, that is, by keeping His commandments. They do not have the law as given from Sinai, but they do know what the law of God requires. God has seen to it that through creation itself every man, woman and child knows the difference between right and wrong. And all men know what is right and what is wrong in their relationships to their fellow men. This knowledge of the law is also made known through the creation, for it is imbedded in the creation as a creation ordinance.

That the works of the law are written on the hearts of all men is explained further by the fact that the text clearly states that men's consciences testify of the rightness and wrongness of a deed. Every man has a conscience. It is the subjective testimony in the consciousness of man of God's judgment upon every thought, word and deed he does. But that word of God in the conscience men suppress. That God is displeased with their sin and pleased with obedience is a truth they suppress. Yet they conform their lives outwardly to the demands of the law. This fact is proof that they know God's law and understand well what God requires.

But that they conform their lives in some measure to the outward demands of the law is also understandable. It does not take regeneration or grace, though it be common, to see that defiance of even the outward demands of the law leads to chaos. Thus they heed the voice of their conscience in an outward obedience, which is only evidence of man's desire to seek his own good. But if he could sin and get away with it, he will do it. Abortion is a case in point. The threat of pregnancy following fornication is a deterrent to sexual immorality; but given abortion and the removal of the deterrent, soon total moral chaos results. But these wicked who know the law and conform outwardly to its demands do not and will not love the Lord their God with all their hearts and minds and souls and strength. Apart from such love for God and the neighbor, there is no true keeping of the law at all.

This knowledge of this is not common grace; this knowledge is given so that men may be without excuse when God judges all men (2:16). The creation itself teaches that God is God alone and that because He is God, the Creator, He must be worshipped and served. That they know what is right and what is wrong is evident from and proved by their lives in which they maintain some outward conformity to the law. It is not grace that enables them to live lives in conformity with the law of God externally, but simply that even wicked man can see the social benefit of keeping the law outwardly. Society and life in society would be impossible if people stole and murdered without any restraint. It does not take regeneration or grace to see that laws defining what is right and what is wrong are necessary and that society is better preserved when law enforcement agencies are given the authority to punish violators of the law.

Dr. A. Kuyper and his followers claim this outward conformity to the law is common grace. But such is not the case. We will have to investigate this matter further as well as other matters, but for the present, I am content to demonstrate how Scripture speaks indeed of a general knowledge that all men have of God and of morality; that this knowledge is not common grace, for its sole purpose is to leave men without excuse; and that only by faith in Christ is there salvation.

## **MORE ON THE WORKS OF THE LAW IN THE HEART**

At the end of the last installment I was in the middle of a discussion of Romans 2:14, 15, which reads: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another."

I was commenting on this verse, because it stands closely related to chapter 1 verses 18 – 32. The point I was making was to show from these two passages that general revelation, so-called, is not common grace, though these are the two passages primarily quoted in support of the assertion that God shows His favor and grace to all men by revealing Himself to them in creation and by writing in their hearts the works of the law.

The points I was making were these: 1) The term "general revelation" is a misnomer. When referring to God's self-disclosure, Scripture uses the term "revelation" exclusively for God's work of grace in the salvation of the elect by which He gives them the knowledge of Himself. He does this by objectively revealing Himself to them, but also by giving them, through the work of the Spirit of Christ, eyes to see and ears to hear this revelation. 2) Romans 1 speaks of the fact that God does make Himself known through creation, not to show His love and grace to all men, but to reveal His wrath to them and to leave them without excuse (Rom. 1:18, 20). The clause, "So that they are without excuse" is a purpose clause and defines the purpose of God in making known the truth concerning Himself through the things that are made.

There is obviously no grace involved if God's sole purpose in making Himself known to the wicked is to leave wicked men without excuse. In the judgment day, when Christ sentences the heathen to hell, Christ will do this in complete justice. For they changed the glory of the invisible God into an image made like unto the corruptible creature. They will never be able to say, as an excuse for their sin, "We did not know that we were called to worship God," or, "We did not know there was a God who demanded that we serve Him. Our ignorance is our excuse." If such a plea were correct, Christ would indeed do injustice to them in sending them to hell. But such is not the case.



Further, there is here no common grace because God punishes the suppression of the knowledge of Him, which He gives with the further sin of homosexuality. It is impossible to find any grace in that.

This truth is very difficult for people, even in the church, to believe. Evangelicals face a dilemma here. They want all men to be saved, and they want a god who desires to save all men. But throughout the history of the world the gospel does not come to all men, and, in fact, the majority of men never hear it. Most men, therefore, are never given a 'chance' to be saved. One would indeed think that such a strange phenomenon would be God's fault, for He does not give everyone a chance.

A few comments about this are necessary and important.

Pelagians (already in Augustine's day; Augustine died in 30 AD) were bothered by the same problem, and so concluded that, after all, God's speech in creation was sufficient to save the heathen. The light of the gospel of Jesus Christ was not essential. The Arminians followed that idea and spoke of the "light of nature", that could be sufficient to save one who possesses it and never knows the light of the gospel. The fathers at Dordt, aware of this claim of the Arminians, included a paragraph in their Canons repudiating it. This can be found in Canons 3/4, B 5. The rejection of this Arminian error reads: "The synod rejects the error of those who teach that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (note the use of the term by the Arminian, HH) (by which they understand the light of nature) or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, viz., the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself. And that in this way God on his part shows himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since he applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion."

It ought to be clear that the heathen did not have the gospel, which alone could save them, because of God's deliberate purpose, for God is able to send the gospel wherever He wants to send it. It was God's choice that kept the gospel from the heathen. Yet the heathen are still without excuse when they are sentenced to hell. This is just and right – when God does this! How can that be? This is true because all the heathen know that the Creator of all things is the one true and living God. They know that God is their Creator and the Creator of all things. They know that God, therefore, imposes upon them the solemn obligation, upon pain of hell, to worship and serve Him alone.

They also know how they are called by God to obey Him, for they have the works of the law written in their hearts. So clearly do they know the law of God that their own consciences accuse or excuse them in their deeds. And the conscience is the voice of God in their consciousness that approves or disapproves their deeds. Yet the voice of God in the conscience is always connected to the objective Word of God, in the case of the heathen, the Word of God in creation.

But does not the doctrine of total depravity excuse the heathen? After all, their total depravity makes it impossible to worship the God who is made known to the heathen. They could not believe even if they wanted to do so. What good then is God's manifestation of Himself in creation?

But what is the answer of Scripture?

Interestingly, the answer of Scripture is stated with precision in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 4. I sometimes think that already in this early Lord's Day, Ursinus and Olevianus, the

authors of the Catechism, separated the truth of Scripture sharply and unmistakably from the Roman Catholic and Arminian error – although the Catechism was written almost 60 years before Dort met. But here is the point where the Reformed faith diverges from all Roman Catholicism and Arminianism and sets a true Biblical path to follow in all its development of Scripture’s truth. Let me quote the whole Lord’s Day.

“Doth God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in his law, that which he cannot perform?”

“Not at all, for God made man capable of performing it, but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own willful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts.

“Will God suffer such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?”

“By no means, but is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins, and will punish them in his just judgment temporally and eternally, as he hath declared, ‘Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things, which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’

“Is not God then also merciful?”

“God is indeed merciful, but also just; therefore his justice requires, that sin which is committed against the most high majesty of God, be also punished with extreme, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul.”

The point of the Catechism is that man, even if he never heard the gospel, is damned to hell; that the reason is his total depravity not only, but that his total depravity is his own fault. He has no one to blame for it but himself. Why? Because he sinned in Adam and is responsible for Adam’s rebellion; that his responsibility for Adam’s sin includes the guilt of Adam’s sin, imputed to him, but also the depravity of Adam’s nature. Guilt and depravity came upon him as the just punishment of God for his transgression in Adam.

Understanding that fundamental point of Scripture and the Reformed faith, we can have no trouble with the just punishment of the heathen who know God only through the creation.

Romans 5:12-14 is the key Scripture passage for this truth: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.”

Without going into detail in an explanation of this passage, the point is that death came on Adam for his sin, but that death also came upon all men, for that all have sinned in Adam. That this is the meaning is clear from the fact that we are conceived and born in sin (Psalm 51:5) – original sin and guilt being the death of which Paul speaks (Eph. 2:1). We do well, however, to remember the crucial importance of the last line in the passage, “Who was the figure of him who was to come.” Take away the imputation of guilt and the reality of death from the human race because of original guilt and original pollution, and you take away the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and the great work of sanctification for the elect..

I shall make a couple more remarks about this, though they are somewhat in passing, for they do not have direct bearing on the question whether there is such a thing as general revelation, and whether, if there is, that general revelation is grace to all men.

The passage in Romans 1:18 and following clearly states that God's temporal punishment on the idolater is an act of God in which He gives the sinner over to the terrible sin of homosexuality. Sin is punished with sin – more sin, greater sin. In this way God reveals His wrath from heaven.

If one understands these things aright, he cannot possibly slip into the error of common grace, for there is no room for any kind of common grace in this Biblical and confessional doctrine. Hence, to maintain common grace is, sooner or later, going to be the abandonment of these fundamentally Reformed truths. And so it is; the modern church is a wasteland, laid desolate by rampant Arminianism.

And finally, let this be a solemn call to all who still love the sacred Scriptures and cherish the truth of God's absolute sovereignty, to abandon the man-centered errors of Arminian theology, and find their hope and solace in God's sovereign and unchangeable purpose.

## **"GENERAL REVELATION" AGAIN**

There is one more aspect of this matter of so-called “general revelation”, to which I wish to call your attention. It is not directly related to our discussion of common grace, but it is, in my judgment, an important positive truth concerning the creation, which will give us, I think, a deeper appreciation for God’s world and a deeper understanding that God’s works in creation cannot possibly be common grace, but are for the benefit and blessing of the church.

Calvin in his Institutes of the Christian Religion has a very well-known passage in which he speaks of the book of creation as being almost illegible to the wicked, but which becomes an open book to those who put on the spectacles of Scripture. (See Book I, chapter VI, Section 1 for this metaphor.) This is an interesting and important metaphor that Calvin uses. It is true that the wicked can read, though barely, God’s Word in creation, but Scripture’s spectacles are needed to read what is really written at large in the things God has made. By the spectacles of Scripture Calvin refers not only to the Bible itself, but to that gift of faith that enables a man to believe all that God has revealed in the Bible. Even the wicked can read the Bible itself. One university I know of teaches a course in “The Bible as Literature 302”. This means nothing.

But we must remember that Scripture is the infallible record of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, we are able to see God’s truth in creation through faith in Christ; and further, when we see God’s revelation in creation, we see Christ Himself. I want to explain this a bit more. Hebrews 11:3 speaks of faith as the way we understand creation; and faith always has as its object Christ revealed in Scripture.

The wicked, though they see God’s eternal power and Godhead in all the things that are made, suppress the truth in unrighteousness and slam the book of creation closed with disgust and hatred – and fear. Or, even though it is for them all but illegible, they claim to read it and find in it things that are not there, but things that fit their own ideas, ideas which are always wrong. Their spiritual eyesight is very poor. These are the theistic evolutionists so-called. Their attitude towards Scripture is like an architect who searches through an ancient castle to learn the origin of the castle and how it was built. He finds, when he first enters the castle, a book written by the builder himself explaining exactly how he built the castle. But he throws the book into the moat as irrelevant and untrustworthy, and goes instead to one of the high towers, to put a handful of dust in his bag in the firm conviction that a careful study of the dust will enable him to learn how the castle was built. So man sends explorers to the moon, so they

can return with a few rocks, from which will be learned the origin of the universe. But the book by the Builder is mocked and discarded.

The tragedy of it is that men who call themselves Christians (and even Reformed) claim that evolutionistic theory of the origin of things is correct, while Scripture's account of the origin of things is wrong. They justify their twisting of Scripture by saying that they can be evolutionists and still believe in Christ, for Scripture's teachings concerning the origin of things is something entirely apart from the gospel. Creation has nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That assertion is as false as it can be. Creation has everything to do with Christ. The whole of Scripture, from Genesis 1:1 to the last verse of Revelation 22 is God's revelation of His work of salvation in Jesus Christ. Hence, the believer, who puts on the spectacles of Scripture, sees God in Christ throughout creation.

There are basically two reasons why wicked man cannot see God in creation in the pristine beauty in which God made Himself known in Paradise and of which He speaks in Scripture. The creation Adam saw did not reveal Christ to Adam, for sin had not yet entered the world and there was no need for a Savior. But, though God makes Himself known to all men through creation, it is a relatively dim knowledge of God that the wicked have. Calvin speaks of the fact that apart from the Scriptures it is possible to see God in creation only in a very dim way ("For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book, however fair, is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written, are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words . . .").

The first reason for the difficulty in reading the book is that the Word of God by which the creation was formed is almost drowned by the Word of the curse. Because man fell, the Word of God's curse came upon the creation (Gen.3:17). This word of the curse is seen and felt in the death that comes upon all creation. Animals and man die; flowers and trees die; all things do not continue as they were from the beginning of creation (II Pet. 3:4) as the evolutionist contends. The curse is violent and terrible. It is God's Word of the curse that sends tornados, tsunami waves, typhoons, earthquakes and all kinds of natural disasters, Nature is, as the poet said, "red in tooth and claw." Any other word than the word of the curse can scarcely be seen and heard – except through the eyeglasses of Scripture.

The very fact of the curse itself demonstrates to the wicked that God brings the fury of His wrath upon all those who will not worship Him.

The second reason why the Word of God's creative power is not clearly heard anymore is the sinfulness of man. The curse has come on him as well, darkening his understanding, blinding him to the truth, making it impossible to see clearly, and robbing him altogether of his spiritual sight. He holds the truth in unrighteousness. This paucity of knowledge that man possesses is his blindness. Sinful man is not only blind spiritually; he is also nearly blind in his powers of mind. He thinks he knows so much and boasts of his accomplishments. But in fact he knows very little of the creation and there are untold mysteries that he cannot solve.

Only Scripture enables a person to see God in creation. Scripture, as the revelation of Christ, gives eyes to see and ears to hear. Scripture works faith in the hearts of God's people. To put on the spectacles of Scripture is to have faith, by which one holds for truth all that God has revealed in His Word, for "through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Heb. 11:3). The object of faith, which is first of all the sacred Scripture, is also Christ. Faith lays hold of Christ. Faith sees Christ and clings to Christ. And so, putting on the spectacles of Scripture, we see Christ revealed also in creation. This is a great blessedness. That evidence of Christ in

the creation sounds loudly to the believer so that the awful word of the curse is no longer so loud.

In a certain sense of the Word, the original creation in which Adam lived for a time was already adapted, according to God's plan, to God's purpose in Christ. A few instances of this are the following. The creation of Paradise pre-figured the plan of the temple: the land surrounding Eden was comparable to the outer court; Paradise in the east of Eden was comparable to the Holy Place; and the tree of life in the midst of the garden was comparable to the Holy of Holies. It was at the foot of the tree of life that God came to Adam and had fellowship with him.

Adam was already created with an immune system – though he did not need it. Carnivorous animals were created with a digestive system that could eat and digest flesh, although they did not eat other animals before the fall, for there was no death. The fall did not happen outside God's plan. The first Paradise was the building of the "stage" on which was to be enacted the drama of sin and grace, damnation and salvation in Jesus Christ. God saw all that He had made and behold it was very good. That is, God did not only see that the creation was morally without defect; God saw that the entire creation was perfectly adapted to serve His purpose in Christ.

And so Christ is revealed in the creation. It is true that one cannot see Christ without believing in Him as revealed in the sacred Scriptures, what Calvin called the eyeglasses of Scripture. But putting them on, Christ is evident in all that we see.

This truth is the reason why Christ Himself is given names taken directly from creation. He is the Bright and Morning Star that announces the dawn of the perfect day (II Peter 1:19, Rev. 2:28). He is the Lion of Judah's Tribe (Gen. 49:9, 10). He is the Lily of the Valley and the Rose of Sharon (Song of Solomon 2:1). He is the Sun who runs His course in the Heavens as the Bridegroom coming forth to meet His bride, the church (Psalm 19:4-6). And He is the Sun of Righteousness who arises with healing in His wings (Mal. 4:2). And so we could go on. I once heard a Christmas all-school program of one of our Christian schools in which a dear friend of mine, one of the teachers, prepared the entire program around the many names taken from creation and given to Christ. It was profoundly moving.

There are many Psalms that sing of the creation itself praising God, but always in the context of God's people singing the praises of the great Creator (Psalms 147, 104, 145, 148, 29 and many more.). He who sees God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ through the Scriptures, is then in all creation moved to the depths of his being by God's marvelous works. Even the events in the creation (earthquakes, destructive pestilences, floods, and all the other judgments God sends on the earth) are signs of the coming of Christ, for Christ comes through all history in judgment on the wicked and for the salvation of the church: Zion is redeemed with judgment (Isaiah 1:27). Christ is coming again; the whole creation groans and travails in pain waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the children of God (Rom. 8:19-22).

God's creation is a marvelous place in which, with the spectacles of Scripture firmly in place, one sees God's power and majesty; and bows in humble worship with the words on his lips: "My God, how wonderful thou art."

Creation is not a revelation of grace to all – only to those who by faith lay hold of the Christ of the Scriptures.

## **COMMON GRACE: THE "RESTRAINT OF SIN IN ALL MEN"**

Greetings to all our readers as we close an old year and begin a new one. May your confession be, as we face the uncertainties of another year, the confession of Asaph: "Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with they counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (Psalm 73:13, 14).

With this letter I begin to deal with another of the four doctrines that are included in the doctrine of common grace. Common grace teaches in general that God's favor and love is towards all men and not only towards His elect. This second doctrine teaches that God's universal favor and love to all is revealed in a restraint of sin in the hearts of all men by the Holy Spirit.

It must be emphatically understood that the subject with which I now deal, the restraint of sin in the hearts of the unregenerate, is also a manifestation of God's general attitude of love and favor towards all men. We are talking, after all, about grace, or more particularly, common grace. Grace includes all God's communicable attributes: love, kindness, benevolence, mercy, lovingkindness, and more. This grace, manifested to all, is given to men in different ways. When one stops to think about it, it actually includes many very important gifts that seem to rival the gifts of salvation to the elect.

One such gift, as we noticed in the last letters, is the gift of rain and sunshine, fruitful years, health and strength, riches and luxuries in the world, and prosperity in an earthly sense. But now, in the next series of letters, I am going to talk about another blessing of God's general attitude of favor, a blessing that is also considered a gift of God's common grace. I do not say that all defenders of common grace hold to this doctrine of common grace, but many do.

In a much earlier letter I reminded our readers of the fact that God's grace towards the unregenerate is not simply an attitude of love and favor – of which the objects of that favor know nothing; it is also the actual bestowal of some gift of God upon the recipient, so that the sinner knows God's favor towards him – even though he ultimately spurns it.

In this and subsequent letters I intend to deal with that “blessing” of common grace called the restraint of sin in the hearts of the unregenerate by the work of the Holy Spirit.

While the idea of a certain attitude of God’s favor towards all men was fairly common in the Dutch Reformed Churches from the late 18th century on, this idea of the restraint of sin did not appear in theology, either in the Netherlands or anywhere else in any developed form, until the time of Dr. Abraham Kuyper. He was the first to develop this idea and to popularize it.

But Kuyper did have ulterior motives in developing the doctrine of the restraint of sin. It might be well to know a bit of that history. I have mentioned some of these historical facts before, but repeat them here so that they may be before our minds.

Kuyper graduated from the university, ready to be ordained into the ministry of the gospel in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, as a theological liberal. He was really brought to any understanding of the Reformed faith by a simple housewife in his first congregation, who would not shake his hand because he was not reformed in his preaching. She pointed him to the Reformed faith as the truth of Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

In the first years of his ministry and after his conversion to the Reformed faith, he did battle with modernism and liberalism in the churches. In fact, he wrote an important book, “The Particularity of God’s Grace” (It has been translated by Marvin Kamps under the title, *Particular Grace*; it has been published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association and is available from them.). In this book Kuyper followed a strictly Reformed line and defended sharply the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace – even against the pernicious doctrine of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer to all.

But Kuyper had what to us is a strange view of a national Church. The Netherlands had for many years only one sanctioned and government supported national church, called *De Hervormde Kerk* (Reformed Church). It was Kuyper’s dream that the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, supported by a Reformed government, would be a fountainhead of the Reformed faith from which would flow the mighty stream of the Reformed faith to all parts of the world.

I might mention, in passing, that in the late 17th century and 18th century this dream seemed possible of realization, for the Dutch East Indies Trading Company and the Dutch West Indies Trading Company sent their ships to all parts of the world and established colonies in the Indonesian archipelago, the West Indies, North America, South Africa, Malacca and elsewhere. Ministers went along with these trading ships and when colonies were established, these colonies had ministers to organize Reformed churches and serve in them. They became centers of missionary work among the natives.

In order to implement this dream and guarantee a Reformed government, Kuyper resigned from the active ministry and formed the Anti-revolutionary Party, a political party primarily representing the Reformed Churches. Kuyper himself was elected to the Lower House, but aspired to the office of prime minister. His party, however, never succeeded in electing sufficient members to the Lower House to form a majority government. And so, in order to achieve his purpose of sitting in the prime minister’s seat, Kuyper had to form a coalition with the Roman Catholics. But such a bold and uncharacteristically Reformed move had to be justified. Kuyper developed his ideas of common grace to justify this coalition.

Kuyper succeeded in attaining the office of prime minister, but held that office for only two years. He never attained his ultimate goal, although Reformed Churches were established



throughout the world. The Neo-Kuyperians in our day have never forsaken Kuyper's dream and are still intent on so influencing government, as well as every other sphere of life, that these institutions of society become Reformed.

Kuyper never abandoned his insistence on the particularity of grace. While the idea of common grace (a general attitude of God's favor towards all men) was prevalent in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Kuyper wanted no part of it – if it included the teaching of a well-meant and gracious gospel offer. He even went so far as to make a distinction in the terminology: *Algemeene genade* was common grace that taught a gracious and well-meaning offer of salvation to all. Kuyper spoke rather of *gemeene gratie*, or general grace, a name given to his own particular brand of common grace. Nevertheless, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" and grace by any name is still grace. Kuyper's grace was emphatically grace. And grace is God's attitude of favor and love.

This is the common grace that fires the imagination of post-millenarian dreamers who look for some sort of worldwide conquest of all society's institutions by the Reformed so that the Reformed faith can bring about the establishment of the kingdom of Christ here in the world. It has produced that insidious idea that our calling as Calvinists is to make this world a better place to live – in the sense of transforming society to conform to the kingdom of Christ.

Two more remarks have to be made in this letter.

Kuyper's view had a broader purpose than a coalition with the Roman Catholics in order to capture the reins of government. The fact was that although the Reformed Church was a national church, and although technically all the citizens of the Netherlands were members of the church and were required to be baptized, married and buried by the church, not by any means all within the church were true believers. Yet these unbelieving members had to become a part of the enterprise to bring the Reformed faith to all parts of the world. On what doctrinal basis could that be done? Kuyper found the answer in his theory of general grace. Sin was restrained in all men by this general grace, with the result that all men were capable of doing good. Thus all, believers and unbelievers alike, could labor together for this common cause of bringing the Reformed faith to all parts of the world.

The second remark that needs making is this: the restraint of sin resulted, according to Kuyper, in the ability of the unregenerate to do good works, which could be used in the service of the cause of the establishment of the kingdom of Christ here in the world.

While, therefore, these two ideas of a general restraint of sin and the resulting ability of the unregenerate to do good works belong together, we are going to treat them separately.

## **THE VIEW OF "RESTRAINT OF SIN IN NATURAL MAN"**

The common grace doctrine of the restraint of sin originated with Dr. Abraham Kuyper. Prior to his work in this area little or nothing was ever said concerning such an evidence of common grace in the hearts of men. But the Christian Reformed Church, in 1924, took over this doctrine from Kuyper and included it in its official statement concerning common grace.

The history is briefly this. In 1834 a separation took place in the one National Church in the Netherlands called De Hervormde Kerk (The Reformed Church). A number of those who were a part of this otherwise sound, separating movement held to the doctrine of the gracious offer of the gospel. When immigrants from the Netherlands, who had belonged to the churches of the Separation (De Afscheiding), came to this country in the 19th century some of them took with them the idea of a gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel. These churches, when established in America, became the Christian Reformed Church.

Kuyper led another secession from the State Church, independent of the churches that had separated from the State Church (Hervormde Kerk) in 1834. His separation took place in 1886. People who were followers of Kuyper also came to America. But they came, not with the notions of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer, but with Kuyper's version of common grace. Most of them also became a part of the Christian Reformed Church. They, under the spell of Kuyper, were excited about making America a Reformed country by permeating all the institutions of society with the Reformed faith.

Their presence in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) created strong divisions in the CRC between the older immigrants and the Neo-Kuyperians. When I was in Calvin College in the late Forties and early Fifties, I had a Dutch teacher who had lived through that conflict and who was still fighting that decades-old battle. He was a Neo-Kuyperian and had no use for the older immigrants who held only to a gracious offer of the gospel to all who heard it. He told us that the CRC came very close to a split at the time the controversy raged most fiercely.

The height of this controversy came about at the same time Herman Hoeksema was criticizing the whole idea of common grace. He had entered the ministry early in the first years of the

controversy and, under the pressure of other circumstances, had paid close attention to the debate. He had come to the conclusion that Neo-Kuyperianism was contrary to the Scriptures, but that also the idea of a gracious offer of the gospel was a perilous introduction of Arminianism into the churches.

Hoeksema, a contributing editor of *The Banner* (the official church paper of the CRC), wrote against common grace, especially the Neo-Kuyperian brand. When he began his writings, no one took issue with him. But this changed when he was instrumental in forcing from his position a professor in the Seminary who openly taught higher critical views of the Bible (especially the Old Testament, his specialty) and did so on the grounds of Kuyperian common grace. While the professor (Dr. Ralph Janssen) was relieved of his position in the Seminary, the many followers of Janssen, some of whom Janssen had taught, were furious with Hoeksema for the role he had played in ousting Janssen. Their support of Janssen was, in large measure, rooted in their delight with Kuyper's views on common grace. And so, imbued with these notions of common grace, they determined to drive Hoeksema from the denomination. They made common grace an issue in the church.

Other leaders in the church saw the controversy between Kuyper's common grace and the older brand that emphasized a gracious gospel offer as a splendid opportunity to bring peace between the two warring factions. And so, when the case against Hoeksema for denying common grace came to the Synod of 1924, three doctrinal statements were drawn up, which, when adopted, included both the gracious gospel offer and Neo-Kuyperian common grace. The first point of the three points defines and officially states as Biblical and confessional doctrine the old ideas that date back to the Afscheiding (Separation) of 1834. It taught a general favor and love of God for all men made known especially in the gracious gospel offer. The second and third points define and claim as Biblical and confessional truth the restraint of sin in the hearts in the unregenerate and the subsequent good these unregenerate are now capable of doing because of the restraint of sin. So the 2nd and 3rd points brought Kuyper's common grace into the official theology of the CRC.

The decisions in 1924 on common grace meant that the battle between these two viewpoints in the CRC was over and peace between the two camps was made – but at the cost of a serious and dangerous departure from the truth.

The second point of the three points, that deals with the restraint of sin, reads: "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 Confessions. 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."

The decision, as I said, solved the problem of the violent disagreement within the CRC; but at a cost too high to pay. On the other hand, the subsequent deposition of Herman Hoeksema became the immediate occasion for the establishment of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

The fact is that there were many in the CRC who did not agree with either the gracious gospel offer or with the common grace of the Neo-Kuyperians. They were solid and staunch defenders of the sovereign and particular grace of God, given only to God's elect. Some, if not

a majority, were followers of the Kuyper of particular grace and wanted no part of the Kuyper of general grace. And so, while the decisions adopting common grace brought unity to the warring factions in the CRC, these decisions also had the beneficial consequence, in the wonderful providence of God, to unite the orthodox under Hoeksema's teachings, so that a new denomination could be formed that held to the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace.

We turn now to Kuyper's teaching concerning common or general grace. (These teachings can be best studied in English in Henry Van Till, *The Calvinist Concept of Culture* [Baker Book House, 1959], Henry Meeter, *The Basic Idea of Calvinism*, 6th edition, revised by Paul A. Marshall [Baker, 1990]; Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Foundation Lectures* [Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company] 1943.)

Kuyper began with the fall of Adam and Eve. It was his judgment that the common grace of God became manifested immediately after the fall. He claimed that the consequences of the curse upon Adam and upon the creation would have been so dreadful that, if it had not been for common grace, this world would have been uninhabitable and man would have become a beast or a devil. Hoeksema describes Kuyper's view in these words – a summary of Kuyper's teachings on this point in Kuyper's work, *De Gemeene Gratie (General Grace)* : "He (Kuyper) explains that such a restraining, checking, preserving operation took place upon the nature of man from the moment of the fall in Paradise. If there had not been such a restraining operation of common grace, immediately after the fall or concomitant with the fall of Adam and Eve, man's nature would have been totally corrupted there and then. Adam would have turned into a sort of a devil and the earth would have been changed into hell. The life and development of human society would have become an utter impossibility. But the Spirit intervened at once by his restraining grace. He did not permit human nature to become wholly corrupt. He left a seed of his original goodness in man's nature. He stemmed the tide of corruption in man's heart. Man did not become wholly darkness. He did not fully die. Some light was left him. Some life remained in him. And thus it is to be explained that in things natural and civil man lives a relatively good world-life that he strives for truth, justice and righteousness. He is able to do good in this present life" (Herman Hoeksema, *A Triple Breach: in the Foundation of the Reformed Truth. A Critical Analysis of the "Three Points,"* adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Churches in 1924 [Grand Rapids: The Reformed Free Publishing Association; reprinted, 1942] 53, 54).

In a footnote to the paragraph quoted above, Hoeksema writes: "Dr. Kuyper employs here the well-known figure of a person that swallowed a dose of Prussian blue and whom (sic) is given an antidote. When God said in Paradise; 'the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,' this must not be understood as a threat and announcement of judgment, but as a friendly warning. Man, however, eats of the tree. Now, as someone gives his friend, whom he warned, but who nevertheless swallowed the Prussian blue, an antidote to save his life, so the Lord gave man the antidote of common grace, so that he partly vomited out the corruption of sin and death and did not become wholly depraved" (Idem).

An interesting question is: Where in Scripture is such a dire description of the consequences of the fall found? Without common grace, man turning to a devil? Without common grace this earth becoming a hell? But that must wait for a later discussion.

Louis Berkhof, one of the authors of the three points of common grace, wrote shortly after the controversy a paragraph explaining what was meant by the restraint of sin. He writes: "In the restraint of sin the general operations of the Holy Spirit are fundamental in importance. They (fallen men) maintain the glimmerings of natural light, that remain in man since the fall and

through which he retains 'some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. They cause the seed of external righteousness to bear fruit, but do not implant into the heart the seed of regeneration. This operation of the Spirit is not a creative operation but assumes the character of moral suasion. It makes man to a certain extent receptive for the truth in as far as it (the truth) still influences him from his own consciousness. It presents motives to the will, impresses his conscience, makes use of inclinations and desires that are present in the soul, and causes the outward good that is still remaining to come to development" (This quotation is from Louis Berkhof, *De Drie Punten . . .* page 37. I am using the translation found in Hoeksema, *The Triple Breach . . .*, page 49, 50).

It is worth noting that, according to Berkhof, the work of the Holy Spirit in His restraint of sin, also works some positive good things in the nature of the sinner – although never regenerating him.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE SECOND POINT OF COMMON GRACE**

In my last letter I explained what is meant by the common grace that is a restraint of sin in the unregenerate. I did this by quoting Louis Berkhof who was a defender of common grace, and one of the chief authors of the formulation adopted by the CRC in 1924.

Before we move on, I need to make a few more remarks about what the restraint of sin means.

In the first place, I remind you once again that this restraint of sin is emphatically called grace. That is, this restraint of sin is a work which God performs in the hearts of the unregenerate because He is gracious to them, loves them, is merciful to them and earnestly desires their salvation.

Second, this restraint of sin is worked internally by the Holy Spirit. The result is that the unregenerate and unbelieving sinners have the Holy Spirit in their hearts as well as the people of God. While the second point of common grace makes this internal work of the Holy Spirit explicit, the same internal work of the Spirit and the subjective bestowal of grace is the teaching of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. Although I intend to discuss this in more detail at a later date, it is worth mentioning now that grace, whether common or particular, always implies a subjective bestowal of spiritual benefits. In the gracious and well-meant gospel offer, this grace is a power within the unregenerated sinner that enables him to make a choice for or against the gospel offer. He is in a spiritual position to make up his own mind as to God's offer of salvation whether to accept it or reject it.

This is then the relationship which exists between the doctrine of the restraint of sin and the doctrine of the gracious gospel offer. God so restrains the sin in the hearts of the reprobate and bestows on these reprobate blessings that enable them to accept the gospel – if they so will.

Third, this work of the Holy Spirit not only impedes the progress of sin or restrains its outbreak in the lives of the individual, but it also has a good effect on the nature of man so that he is

morally better than he would be without this common grace. The work of the Holy Spirit does not actually regenerate a man; that is, the Holy Spirit does not actually give to the sinner the life of Christ and a new heart, but God does, in His internal work, alter the nature of man for good. That is, a totally depraved nature is made less than totally depraved by God's common grace given through the Holy Spirit.

Those who hold to common grace and also profess to be Calvinists feel constrained to defend the doctrine of total depravity, one of the five points of Calvinism. In order to accomplish this extremely difficult, if not impossible, task of harmonizing the good change in the nature of the unregenerate with the doctrine of total depravity, they make a distinction between "total" depravity and "absolute" depravity. The latter means depraved completely. And sometimes is added, "beyond salvation." The devils are described as being absolutely depraved. But "total" depravity, in distinction from "absolute" depravity, means that a man is depraved in every part of his nature (body, soul, mind, emotions and will) but not completely so. Each part of his nature is partially depraved, but also partially good. This, it seems to me, is playing with words and with Biblical truths. But, of course, the proponents of this restraint of sin have a difficult time of it when they try to explain how, as Calvinism insists, a man can be totally depraved and yet be able to do good by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, it is this restraint of sin that makes possible an area of cooperation between the believer and the unbeliever. This was, originally, Abraham Kuyper's intent. If the Netherlands was to be the fountainhead of a stream of Reformed teachings that would spread throughout the world, with Kuyper himself the prime minister, he had to make some sort of theological ground for such cooperation between believers and unbelievers that would make his dream a reality. After all, the majority of the population in the Netherlands was unbelieving.

The result is that the current thinking on this subject is this: because of this so-called "neutral" area occupied by both believers and unbelievers, created by grace, believers and unbelievers are able to unite in common causes. For example, Reformed churches permit union members to belong to the church, because, though membership in unions involves cooperation with unbelievers in the common cause of protecting the worker from rapacious owners of businesses, the unions, though composed mainly of ungodly men, are seeking the welfare of the laboring man. Christians may cooperate with these ungodly men, because these unions are "neutral."

I recall that many years ago I received a call from the national headquarters of the Right To Life Movement, with headquarters in Washington D.C. I was asked to cooperate with the Right to Life Movement to prepare a petition to be delivered to the president in which a plea would be made to stop abortions in this country. I responded that I would be willing to work on such a petition, for I was opposed to the dreadful sin of murdering unborn babies, but, because the Right To Life Movement is a humanistic organization, I reserved the right to protest this sin of abortion on strictly Biblical grounds. His response was, "I will call you again some time."

In other words, the whole idea of the restraint of sin breaks down the wall of the antithesis and makes cooperation possible between what one of my professors in college called, "the marriage of Jerusalem and Athens." But I wish to discuss this a bit more when we examine the "proof" for this position.

This view of common grace, namely that God restrains sin in unbelievers, leads to some very unbiblical positions. Dr. Janssen, professor of Old Testament in Calvin Seminary was, in 1922, relieved of his position in Calvin Seminary because he taught higher critical views of Scripture. He denied some of the miracles, believed and taught that Israel received parts of its religion

from the heathen and that some of the incidents described in Scripture, such as Samson's exploits, were myths and fables invented by the Hebrews who wanted myths like the Greeks and Romans. He did so on the grounds of common grace; particularly the restraint of sin and the consequent good that sinners do. It was his contention that common grace operating in unbelieving higher critics, led these higher critics to set down truth. It was the church's obligation to recognize these "good" views of unbelievers, for they were the fruit of God's grace. This view of common grace lies at the bottom of today's church's compromise with higher critical views of Scripture, views that deny infallibility. (See also D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008. See especially pages 49, 73, 168 as examples.)

Janssen also denied some of the miracles because they contradicted scientific findings. But again he justified his position on the grounds of the restraint of sin in scientists, who were able to discover truths concerning creation, by common grace. Later, the CRC did the same when it approved the teaching of theistic evolution in Calvin College.

There is a vast neutral area in which believers and unbelievers can work together for the good of mankind and the betterment of the human race. In this neutral area there is a sharing of ideas, a unity of effort and a benefit to be derived from such cooperation, for even an unbelieving man can discover truth.

Thus common grace becomes a bridge across the chasm of the antithesis on which unbelievers can come over to help the church and church members can cross to solicit the cooperation of wicked men and join with them in various endeavors.

These remarks are, of course, my criticism of the second doctrine of common grace. And it is better to wait with a criticism until I can bring all the objections together. But it is important to understand precisely what the gracious restraint of sin actually is and how it works out in the life of mankind and of the church. The gracious restraint of sin is, after all, a world-and-life view. And if it is not that exactly, it carries in it the seed of a world-and-life view that is quite contrary to Scripture.

I think it better at this point to deal with the "proof" for this view. But I shall wait with a discussion of the proof until the next letter.



## **SCRIPTURAL "PROOF" FOR THE SECOND POINT OF COMMON GRACE**

I have described that aspect of common grace, which teaches the restraint of sin in the hearts of the unregenerate. In this letter I intend to begin to deal with the proof that was offered by the defenders of this view from Scripture and the Netherlands Confession of Faith. It is true that the latter is a Confession of the Dutch Reformed Churches, and is not of any confessional relevance to Presbyterians. But the teachings of the two articles quoted as proof bring up some interesting points that are worth discussing in connection with this error of an inward restraint of sin. We will look at the Biblical proof first of all.

The first text used for proof is found in Genesis 6:3: "And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man." This text is found in the context of the apostasy that took place from the covenant line of the seed of the woman and the consequent terrible wickedness that was found in the pre-deluvian world. It is recorded in Scripture as the introduction to God's announcement of His judgment on a world that had filled the cup of iniquity. This word, therefore, paved the way for God's instructions to Noah "who found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen. 6:8) to build the ark.

If this text is to be quoted in favor of an inward restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the unregenerate, then the meaning of the text is this: for a long time, perhaps nearly a millennium and a half, the Holy Spirit had struggled in the hearts of those who belonged to the line of Cain to keep these wicked people from being as sinful as they were determined to be, but that, at last, the Holy Spirit, apparently failing in His efforts to restrain sin, withdrew from the wicked and God ceased from restraining their sin by His Spirit. It is an argument based on a strange assumption (The Holy Spirit had worked mightily for over 1000 years to restrain sin but had failed), and it is deduced from a negative statement ("My Spirit shall not always strive with man") and made to mean a positive doctrine of an inner work of the Spirit in the reprobate that changes their nature for good, but does not save.

But, of course, the text does not say anything even faintly resembling such an idea, and, in fact, the picture drawn for us in Genesis 4 and 5 is quite different. One is hard-pressed to find

any restraint of sin of any kind in the hearts of these wicked people; one finds, rather, a frightening development of sin that within 1650 years or so almost destroyed the church and made the world ripe for judgment.

Cain was guilty of fratricide and the blood-soaked ground under Abel's body cried out for vengeance (Gen. 4:8-12). When God pronounced the curse upon Cain (Gen. 4:11), Cain, and subsequently, his descendants, moved away from the church, where the seed of the woman "began to call upon the name of the Lord," (Gen. 4:26) to find their way in the world apart from the church.

Lamech, from the line of Cain, was apparently the world's first bigamist and defied God's creation ordinance for marriage. He also took it upon himself, not only to murder one of the people of God, but to compose a song to celebrate his dastardly deed (Gen. 4:23, 24); and he dared God to punish him for committing such a terrible sin: "If Cain shall be avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech seventy and seven fold" (Gen. 4:24).

In chapter 6 we have that chilling description of the dreadful sins that took place when those of the line of Seth sought cooperation with those of the line of Cain: ". . . the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. . . . There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:2-5).

But the sin to which we are pointed in these chapters of Genesis, which was the worst of all, was the sin of the persecution of the church. It began early with the murder of Abel. It continued with Enoch who was taken to heaven, because he was being hunted by wicked men (Gen. 5:24, Jude 14, 15, Heb. 11:5, 6. Note in Hebrews 11: 5 that the text says that "he was not found," indicating that he was being hunted, but was delivered by a miracle of translation to heaven without dying.). The entire church in a world that must have numbered millions was reduced to eight people at the time the flood came. If the flood had not come when it did, no church would have survived.

All of these things do not speak of an inward restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit, but just the opposite: a violent and rapid development of sin so that the world became ripe for judgment in a relatively short time.

But we must still explain what the text does mean. The text can only refer to the preaching of the gospel that took place prior to the flood. This is evident, first, from the fact that the preaching of the gospel is always accompanied by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit never works independently of the preaching, but He always works where the preaching takes place – whether that work is to save or harden. Second, we know that prior to the flood God had His preachers in the world. Two are mentioned in Scripture: Enoch who "prophesied of these (wicked men who 'went the way of Cain', HH) saying, Behold the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him" (Jude 11, 14, 15). Noah also is said in II Peter 2:5 to be a "preacher of righteousness." It is clear from the description of Enoch's preaching, found in Jude 15 and of Noah's preaching found in II Peter 2:5, that the preaching contained all the elements of true preaching: the command to repent from sin, the warning of certain judgment on unbelievers and the call to believe in Christ and the gospel of

salvation in Christ. That Noah preached salvation in Christ who was to come is evident from the fact that Noah was a preacher of righteousness as Hebrews 11:7 makes clear. Both Noah and Enoch not only preached the gospel that righteousness could only be found in the Seed of the woman who was to come, but both also called to repentance and warned against coming judgment. For this they were persecuted.

This powerful preaching was mocked, opposed and hated. And so God said He would withdraw this preaching and its accompanying work of the Spirit – as He always does to apostate churches and as He did to wicked Israel (Amos 7:11, 12). In churches where the gospel is no longer preached, the Spirit is withdrawn. The work of the Spirit is no longer present. The striving of which the text speaks is, therefore, the preaching of repentance from sin, which the preachers of the pre-deluvian world proclaimed, and that truth of the gospel impressed on the consciences of men by the Spirit. It all is a warning to today's rapidly departing churches that the Spirit is no more present where the gospel is perverted. And the sound of the gospel is no longer heard in nations in which these apostate churches are found, and which have rejected the gospel.

If you ask: What was the work of the Spirit that accompanied the preaching, the answer is that the Spirit convicts of sin, reproving sin in the consciousness of the wicked and impressing upon the wicked the certainty of judgment (John 16:8-11). When God takes His Spirit from a church, or nation, or person, such are not longer even warned of their sin and impending judgment and the consciousness of their sin is lost. This is dreadful.

Additional proof offered for the restraint of sin in the hearts of the unregenerate is a group of texts that speak of God giving man over to sin. It might be well to quote the texts here.

"But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would have none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lusts: and they walked in their own counsels" (Psalm 81:11, 12).

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

"Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves" (Rom. 1:24). The same expression is found further in this passage in verses 26 and 28.

It is difficult, if not impossible to see an inward restraint of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the unregenerate in these verses. Presumably, the argument is that if God gives a man over to sin, God must first of all restrain sin, and only after failing to restrain sin, God ceases His restraint. Yet no Reformed man would ever talk in a way that implies a frustrated God who cannot accomplish what He intended, nor can a prior restraint of sin be dug out of a passage that speaks of God's work of giving man over to sin.

The meaning of these texts is rather, as I explained in connection with our discussion of Romans 1:18-32, that God punishes sin with sin. God's wrath is revealed in His terrible judgments upon the wicked. One of those judgments is that God pushes as it were the sinner into greater sin. Romans 1 uses the language, "gives them over." Idolaters who change the glory of God into an image made like unto corruptible man are punished by being given over to homosexuality. History is replete with examples of this. God is, after all, sovereign. He gives the sinner over to the sin that his wicked heart craves. Sin multiplies and becomes worse. And

all this takes place until the cup of iniquity is filled. But all this has nothing to do with any kind of inner restraint of sin in the hearts of the wicked.

I shall say no more about this for the present, for I intend to discuss this further a bit later in another connection. But it ought to be clear in any case that it takes considerable exegetical legerdemain to extract from these passages an inward work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the ungodly that alters the depraved natures of the wicked and results in good works, but does not save.

## II THESS. 2:6,7 & BELGIC CONFESSION, ARTS. 13, 36

In talking about that aspect of common grace that is called “the inner restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the unregenerate.” I was talking about the Scriptural proof offered to support this idea. I continue an investigation of this proof.

Another passage of Scripture quoted in support of this idea is II Thessalonians 2:6, 7: “And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery doth already work; only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.”

As far as the text itself is concerned, this is a very difficult passage for various reasons and many interpretations have been offered of it. It is not my intention to mention all these various interpretations and to exegete the passage in detail to learn what the Holy Spirit has in mind in this verse. My intention is simply to ask and answer the question: Can this text in any way support a doctrine of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the unregenerate that enables them to do works pleasing to God? And the answer to that question is certainly a negative one.

If one is to find in this passage a reference to the gracious restraining power of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the unregenerate, then some sort of interpretation similar to the following would have to be given. The apostle is speaking here of the rise of antichrist at the end of time. Antichrist is called “the man of sin” in the context. He is part of the “mystery of iniquity” that is present in the world (I John 2:18). But this rise of antichrist is graciously restrained by the Holy Spirit, for that which “withholdeth” is supposed to be a reference to the gracious operations of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will graciously restrain sin in the hearts of the reprobate, particularly in the antichristian development of antichrist in history, and enable those who stand in this historical development of antichrist to do good throughout most of the new dispensation until the man of sin, the antichrist, is revealed “in his time.”

This is strange exegesis indeed. The objections against such a view are compelling.

1) The apostle tells the Thessalonians that they knew that which was withholding. Now if the reference is to the gracious inner working of the Holy Spirit in the unregenerate, the apostle could not have said that the Thessalonians knew of this work of the Holy Spirit. How could they? In all the apostle's writings there is no other mention of any such thing. Apart from the fact that this expression, "what withholdeth" is a strange way to speak of the Holy Spirit, found nowhere in Holy Scripture, this interpretation presupposes that the Thessalonians knew about common grace and knew about that aspect of it that involved the restraint of sin almost 2000 years before it became a doctrine sanctioned by the church.

2) The idea of the restraint of sin emphasizes that this restraint is in the hearts of all men in general to restrain all kinds of sin and to enable sinful man to perform good works. But here in this text the expression is limited to the development of the antichrist. In fact, it would seem to me to follow that this restraint of sin is to be found in Antichrist himself, that he is the object of grace, that the Spirit graciously restrains him, and that he is able to do good in the eyes of God.

3) If the Holy Spirit and His work is the reference here, then the last line of the text would have to read this way: "But the Holy Spirit who restrains sin will continue to restrain sin until "he be taken out of the way." The cessation of the work of the Holy Spirit is ended when the Holy Spirit is "taken out of the way." What a strange and unbiblical way to speak of the Holy Spirit. It ought to be clear to anyone with a modicum of understanding of Scripture that this interpretation cannot possibly be correct.

It would have been extremely helpful if the texts cited in support of common grace had been exegeted and explained by the Synod that adopted these doctrines. But one looks in vain for any explanation; it seems to have been considered sufficient merely to quote texts without any explanation.

Whatever the apostle may be referring to in the text, someone or something, known to the Thessalonians, was preventing a premature appearance of antichrist and would be taken out of the way at God's time, that is, when in God's time the time of Antichrist had come. And, therefore, no restraint of the Holy Spirit can possibly be referred to. Such an interpretation of the text is foisted on the text in such an unnatural way that no one can accept it as true.

We turn now to the articles in the Belgic Confession (Sometimes called The Netherlands Confession of Faith, or simply, The Confession of Faith).

Two articles were referred to. The pertinent parts of the articles read as follows: "This doctrine (of divine providence, HH) affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father, who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under his power that not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow, can fall to the ground, without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that he so restrains the devil and all our enemies that, without his will and permission, they can not hurt us" (Article 13; Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 3 [Baker Book House, 1983] 397).

Berkhof tells us why, in his opinion, Article 13 is relevant. "The doctrine of providence is thus comforting for God's people. It contains among other things this comfort especially, that God controls their enemies with a bridle. In their anger, these enemies cannot go further against the church than God permits. They are under the rule of the heavenly Father and are controlled by Him" (Louis Berkhof, *De Drie Punten in Alle Deelen Gereformeerd* [The Three Points Reformed in Every Part] {Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1925} 40. The translation is mine.)

Berkhof is aware that some critics of this proof have said that, according to Article 13 of the Belgic Confession and the interpretation given it by the CRC, God also gives his common grace to the devils, for the article speaks of God's restraint "of the devil and all our enemies." Berkhof, of course, repudiates this interpretation, although he does not make clear why he can exclude the devils as objects of common grace, if this article in the Belgic Confession is proof of common grace.

The proof which was offered for an inner restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all men indicates how meager and contrived the proof from the confessions really is. Berkhof himself spends almost no time in showing how this article proves an inner, divinely-worked restraint of sin, but spends his time, other than the quote given above, trying to free himself from the charge that the devils must also be the objects of common grace.

No Reformed man who believes in the sovereignty of God has ever denied that God restrains sin. No Reformed man has ever denied that included in God's sovereign control are Satan and his black hosts from hell. Even while our Lord was on earth, the devils who were cast out of devil-possessed people, were subject to the Lord's will. They could not even enter the pigs without the Lord's permission (Mark 5:1-17). This profound truth of God's sovereignty is taught in Article 13 of the Belgic Confession. But there is absolutely no mention made of an inner work of the Holy Spirit who restrains sin from within a man by changing man's nature so that he can do good. Appeal to this article is an unwarranted twisting of the article on God's providence.

The other article referred to is Article 36, which is titled "Of Magistrates." "We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, hath appointed kings, princes, and magistrates, willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; 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, for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well" (Italics are in the original because the quotation is from Scripture. Article 36.[Idem, 432]).

Berkhof's justification for an appeal to this article is: "These words speak for themselves. God demonstrates His goodness in this that, because of sin, He ordains a magistrate and gives him the sword. And the purpose that He has in mind with this is that the lawlessness of men is restrained, and with respect to human affairs, everything goes well." (Idem., 41. The translation is mine.)

Who can disagree with that explanation? Again, it is clear to every Reformed man that indeed God ordains magistrates to keep order in society. But as one man once put it to me, "The second point (of common grace) confuses the Holy Spirit with the policeman" – or makes the sword of the magistrate the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to derive from this article anything even remotely resembling a work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all men, bringing to these men God's grace, and restraining man's sin by these gracious internal influences. It is no wonder that Berkhof apparently felt such an appeal to Article 36 to be poor proof, for he makes only two or three short sentences in explanation. It is well that he adds, "These words speak for themselves." It reminds one of a preacher who is somewhat doubtful about the correctness of what he wants to say from the pulpit, and so intersperses his remarks with comments such as: "This is as clear as the sun in the heavens." Or, "Anyone can see how true this is."

We need not delay ourselves with further argumentation on this matter of the proof for the restraint of sin. It is quite clear that there really is none.

Yet, the idea, first propounded by A. Kuyper, is one that has taken hold of many. It is well to notice this in passing. But there is also a positive truth set forth in Scripture that runs counter to the teaching of the idea of an inner gracious restraint of sin and we do well to note this truth. I shall deal with this in a future installment, God willing.



## **SUNDRY ARGUMENTS FOR "GRACIOUS RESTRAINT OF SIN"**

In my examination of the proof that has been offered in support of a common grace of God that is given men by a gracious operation of the Spirit of God in the hearts of all men, which restrains their sin, I demonstrated that the proof offered is not adequate to support such a theological doctrine. The simple fact is (and it can hardly be disputed) that no Scriptural or confessional proof can be found for such a preposterous teaching. Anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures will immediately find such a teaching at odds with the whole body of Scriptural truth

There are other objections to this view. I bring them to your attention for your thoughtful analysis.

One objection is the supposition of Dr. Abraham Kuyper (who first promoted this view) that the fall would have resulted in Adam and his posterity becoming beasts or devils if God had not intervened with His common grace. There is not a shred of evidence in Scripture for such a supposition, not even in the narrative of the fall of Adam and Eve as it is described in Genesis 3. But let us take a look at this supposition. It is obvious, first of all, that man would not and could not have become a devil. Man is of this creation, a part of the material world, made from the dust of the earth. It would be impossible for him to become a creature who is not material nor made from the stuff of this world. His very essence would have to be changed to something like the essence of angels, in which event he could no longer live in this world. Or, if as Kuyper sometimes said, man would have become a beast when he fell if God did not intervene, I think I would consider this preferable to remaining a man. A beast cannot go to hell. When a beast dies, that is the end of it: it has no existence beyond death. Adam remained a man; that is the tragedy of the fall.

In any case, the Canons of Dordt repudiate such speculation when in 3/4.16 the fathers write: "But as man by the fall did not cease to be a creature endowed with understanding and will, nor did sin, which pervaded the whole race of mankind, deprive him of the human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death; so also this grace of regeneration does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks . . ." (Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* Vol. III

[New York: Harper & Brothers, no date] 591.) It is difficult if not impossible to imagine how Dr. Kuyper, sworn to loyalty to the Confessions and fully aware of this article, could teach what he did.

The terrible part of the fall is that man remains man. He is still a rational and moral creature, answerable to God for what he does, subject to terrible punishment when he, by a choice of his own will, defies God.

A second objection to this so-called inner and divine restraint of sin is its denial of the total depravity of the natural man. The inner restraint of the Holy Spirit in all men does deny total depravity in spite of the protestations of the supporters of common grace. It is a gracious work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men that alters morally the nature of man. This is a denial of the total depravity of the natural man apart from regeneration, and therefore a sacrifice of a crucial part of Calvinism. Hence, the question and answer found in Lord's Day 3 is denied: "Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God" (question and answer 8). The defenders of common grace would have to answer the question by saying, "Indeed we are except we are regenerated by the Holy Spirit or have the Holy Spirit working in our hearts to restrain sin, though never saving us." If Calvinism no longer teaches the total depravity of the natural man, then salvation is not entirely the work of saving grace, but involves man's cooperation.

But there is an interesting aspect to this whole question, which is frequently overlooked. The inner working of the Holy Spirit in the natural man is, after all, said to be grace. It is one gift of God's favor upon the natural man. Though he is not an elect of God, and, presumably, though Christ did not die for him, and though he will not go to heaven with this kind of grace, it is a grace that changes his nature from one of total depravity to one that is partly good and partly bad. The reason for this is that even this work of the Holy Spirit puts man in much more favorable position to be saved. This kind of grace, an improvement over his totally depraved state, enables him to do some good, namely to accept or reject the offers of the gospel. The gracious and well-meant gospel offer is also a work of common grace to a sinner who already has the grace of the restraint of sin and the resultant change of his nature for the better.

All this is Arminian language and a denial of the sovereign grace of God in the work of salvation. It is a theological heresy that is specifically mentioned in the Canons of Dort as a doctrine that needs to be condemned. Canons 3/4.B: Error 5 reads: "We condemn the error of those who teach that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which they understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, namely, the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself. And that in this way God on His part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since He applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion."

"Rejection: For the experience of all ages and the Scriptures do both testify that this is untrue. He showeth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his ordinances unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his ordinances, they have not known them (Ps. 147:19, 20). Who in the generations gone by suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways (Acts 13:16). And: And they (Paul and his companions) having been forbidden of the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia, and when they were come over against Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit suffered them not (Acts 16:6, 7). (\_\_\_\_\_, *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* [Published by the Protestant Reformed Churches, 2005] 171, 172. The rejection of errors, an important part of the Canons, is not found in Schaff, *The Creed of Christendom*).

Thus common grace, though taught by professing Reformed men, militates directly against the Canons of Dordt. This is inexcusable and culpable conduct.

Also serious is the claim that the inner restraint of sin destroys the Biblical truth of the antithesis. Already in 1924, Rev. Herman Hoeksema warned the Synod that adopted the three points of common grace that the error of an inner and gracious restraint of sin in the hearts of all men would destroy the antithesis and open the way for a flood of worldliness that would pour into the church. And so it has happened. While worldliness is a grave danger against which we all have to fight and which has had its own influence on our lives, the difference is that a true church fights against it and condemns it, while churches that adopt such a view as common grace officially justify it, for these churches have given worldliness a doctrinal foundation.

It is not my purpose to enter into the question of the antithesis at this point. But a few remarks would not be out of place.

The antithesis is most clearly expressed by Paul in II Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1: “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? Of what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

The apostle uses the figure of two animals being yoked together to make his point. Two animals bound together by the same yoke will be of no value if they are unequal; that is, if they are a young antelope and an old ox yoked together, or if they are of two different minds so that one refuses to pull, or if each is determined to go a different direction. Being yoked together will work if they are both of approximately equal strength and are both working for the same goal – to pull a plow exactly where the farmer wishes them to go. They must have the same purpose. But the believer and unbeliever have two separate and distinctly different purposes in life and every effort to unite them in a common purpose will fail. The believer pulls in the direction of God, the unbeliever pulls in the direction of sin.

The totally depraved wicked are under the control of their master Satan and the hordes of demons who are subject to Satan’s will. As they work in this creation, which God created and still upholds, they have as their purpose the goal of using God’s world to serve their own wicked pleasures and satisfy their own evil lusts. The believers are, by nature, the same, but through the work of regeneration, they are made servants of Christ, representatives of God’s covenant in the world and are called to live according to an entirely different rule of conduct than the wicked. Their book of conduct is the sacred Scriptures, which calls them to use all things to the glory of God’s name through the use of God’s world to advance the cause of the preaching of the gospel and the gathering of the church.

Scripture uses different ideas to indicate the place and calling of believers in this world. They are pilgrims and strangers in the earth, because the wicked rule and dominate and the righteous have their home in heaven towards which they bend their footsteps as they travel their spiritual journey (I Peter 1:1, 2:11; Heb. 11:13; Psalm 39:12. The wicked seek to make this

world the kingdom of darkness, while the people of God are citizens of another kingdom that shall only be established when “the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ.” (Col. 1:13, Rev. 11:15). The wicked have Satan as their father (John 8:44); while the righteous have God as their Father and Christ as their elder brother.

Both do have one thing in common: this creation. They both live in the world. They both are citizens of an earthly country. They both must earn their daily bread by means of their occupation. They both eat and drink what the creation provides. They both marry and have children. They both make use of the powers of God’s world: wind, rain, sunshine, electricity, as well as automobiles, TVs, radios, airplanes, clothing, cell phones and the money they earn.

Yet, they do not have grace in common. And so the wicked live out of the principle of their totally depraved natures in their use of the things of this world, while the righteous live out of the principle of a regenerated heart. The former seek the things that are below, the latter seek the things which are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1-3).

And so the antithesis cuts through the whole of life: truth versus the lie, right versus wrong, what is proper conduct in the world and what is in obedience to the law of God; how one dresses and what one reads; what music one listens to and what art is God-glorifying; why one weeps and laughs, though both do the same; what is one’s goal in life and what ends does he pursue; what organizations does he join and what organizations does he abhor; how he uses his computer and electronic wizardry and for what reason he drives his car; why he marries and has children, and why he spends the Lord’s day in church rather than out on the beach. In short, the antithesis involves principally different world-and-life views that affect the whole of his life and every part of it; they are contrary to each other.

The doctrine of the restraint of sin gives to believers and unbelievers a certain area of life that both have in common. It is a morally neutral area in which there are no rights and wrongs. It is a “playing field” where righteous and unrighteous play by the same rules. It is a place where Christ and Belial (to use Paul’s expression) can sit in front of the fireplace, enjoy one another’s company, and have fellowship in a common life. It is an important area of life in which those who belong to the temple of God can work with those who belong to the synagogue of Satan. It is a “yoking together” which drives both to work towards a common purpose – the establishment of a kingdom of Christ in the world, a better place to live, a wholesome atmosphere in which to bring up children.

It is understandable and inevitable that in this sphere where evil men and godly men work together that godly men are going to join in promoting the goals of evil men. Evil men are totally depraved; godly men have only a small beginning of the holiness of God. From working together to build the same house, they drive together to the local pub to “have a beer.” From the local pub they go to each other’s home to enjoy each other’s company. But the evil man is not going to budge an inch in his pursuit of sin, and the godly man is going to put himself into areas in which his sinful nature will drag him into the camp of the enemies of God. It’s hard enough to live a godly life without companying with wicked men who do only evil.

Common grace says, “Yes, all cooperation and fellowship are possible for all have grace.” No wonder the world overwhelms the believer and worldliness engulfs the church. But those who believe and hold to the truth of particular and sovereign grace heed the call of Christ: “Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (II Cor. 6:17).

I must mention one more serious objection to the idea of a gracious and inner restraint of sin. The objection is this: Such a view leads to a post-millennial view of the kingdom of Christ. I have no evidence that Dr. Abraham Kuyper was a post-mil – as the Neo-Kuyperians claim, but his view leads directly to such a post-mil conception of the kingdom of our Lord. If Kuyper wanted the Netherlands to be a fountainhead of the Reformed faith, the water of which would flow into every country on earth and establish the Reformed faith as the dominant faith in that country (as was the case in the Netherlands) this could only be because the kingdom of Christ would be attained here in the world. This was the main point of Kuyper's book, *Pro Rege* (For the King). All creation and all institutions of society had to be subjected to the rule of Christ. When this should happen, as Kuyper confidently expected that it would, the kingdom of Christ was realized in this world.

It is with some justification that the Neo-Kuyperians who have become thoroughly post-mil, appeal to the Kuyper of common grace for their support. But post-mil is a serious error, and the spiritual danger of post-mil theology is that the people of God identify the kingdom of Antichrist with the kingdom of Christ, for Antichrist brings peace to the nations, solves the world's ills, and claims himself to be the Christ.

Over against this serious departure from the truth, the Scriptures set another doctrine, which, in Reformed theology, has come to be called "The Organic Development of Sin." To this positive truth we will give our attention in the next letter.

### **DOES GOD 'RESTRAIN SIN'?**

I have shown that the doctrine of the gracious restraint of sin is a heresy that holds dire consequences for the church that adopts it. The truth that Scripture teaches is exactly the opposite of a gracious restraint of sin. Scripture teaches that the world gets worse in its sin as time goes on, and that the sinfulness of man climaxes in the man of sin, Antichrist. To this truth I devote this installment.

Before I proceed any further in our discussion, let me emphasize that Scripture most emphatically teaches a restraint of sin. My opposition to this doctrine of common grace is not that God never restrains sin. He does. My quarrel is with the idea that the restraint of sin is a gracious operation of the Spirit of Christ in the heart of the natural man that changes the moral character of a man's depraved nature, but does not save him.

God does however, restrain sin. He restrains sin by His providence in such a way that a sinner is limited in the expression of sin by the circumstances of life in which God's providence places him. Man is totally depraved apart from the work of regeneration. He is as bad as he can be. Nothing at all alters the total corruption of his nature. He is completely incapable of doing anything morally good and pleasing in the sight of God. Everything that proceeds from his evil nature is contrary to God's moral will. It is not only a matter of passively having a corrupt nature, but that nature expresses itself in his thoughts, words, deeds, desires and activity. All the expression of his corrupt nature is actively opposed to God. Scripture paints a picture of man that is dreadful to contemplate.

A clear instance of God's providential restraint of sin is found in Genesis 11:1-9. To prevent a premature realization of the one-world kingdom of Antichrist under Nimrod, the Lord divided the people into nations, races and languages, for if a one-world government had been formed then, the elect church of God could not have been gathered through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the truth of total depravity stands.

If we doubt the Biblical teaching on this doctrine, then we need only consult Paul's scathing description of the natural man in Romans 3:10-18, where the apostle affirms the teachings of

the OT Scriptures by quoting them with approval. We may also take seriously what Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1, in which passage he describes the sinner as “dead in trespasses and sins.” The sinner exists in the world, but he is morally and spiritually dead and is as incapable of doing anything good as a corpse is incapable of any signs of life. It is easier for a corpse to raise its head and talk than for a totally depraved sinner to do good.

But man is limited by the all-comprehensive providence of God from expressing his sin. It is in this area that sin develops. God is sovereign in all this creation. He is sovereign also over sinful men and devils. He does all His good pleasure according to His eternal determination of all history in His eternal counsel. Such sovereign control extends also to the development of sin in this world.

Several points have to be made in connection with this development of sin.

The history of the pre-deluvian world was an illustration of such development. I discussed this at some length in an earlier installment and will not repeat what I said then. But all the elements of the development of sin from the flood to the end of the world were also present in that world that was destroyed by the flood. And, the chief point is that God destroyed that old world with the flood because it had filled the cup of iniquity. That is, the depraved nature of man had manifested itself in every possible sin when the flood came. The world could not have gotten more sinful than it was at that time. It was filled with totally depraved men not only, but the depraved nature of man had expressed itself in every possible sin that could have been and was committed. Chiefly, this was true because the line of Cain developed the creation to its fullest extent and used all the powers of creation in the service of sin. In addition to this remarkable development, the world so persecuted the church that the church was reduced to one family of eight members. Divine judgment at that time was necessary to preserve the church. The ultimate sin is, therefore, the persecution of the church.

But let me go back a bit. I said earlier in this installment that God restrains sin by providentially controlling the circumstances of people in their life in the world. A poor man with little possessions cannot sin as a Rockefeller can sin. A man who works on an assembly line cannot sin as much as a man who owns ten prosperous companies. A mere citizen cannot sin as much as a politician. A quadriplegic cannot sin as much as a Tiger Woods. A man in the jungles of Mindanao cannot sin in the same way that an inhabitant of New York City can sin. God determines all the circumstances of a man's life, including every detail. And so, while all men are equally depraved, the expression of their depravity is limited by God's providential determination of the circumstances of their life. The time and age in which they live (whether the fifth century or the twenty-first century), the country of which they are citizens, the position of power that they hold in politics, the economy (whether prosperous America or poverty-stricken Zimbabwe) and in the use of their earthly possessions – all outside their control – determine the sins they commit.

God also restrains sin because He gives all men a knowledge of right and wrong. We discussed earlier the passage in Romans 2:14, 15, which clearly teaches that all men know what is pleasing to God and what is displeasing to Him. This knowledge of right and wrong that the wicked possess is not an evidence of God's grace to them (why should it be?), but is God's way of leaving the wicked without excuse. They sin and know that they sin. For this they go to hell.

But in the lives of some in the world these wicked men see clearly that law and order ought to be maintained in the world, because without it society cannot survive. And man sees too that an outward observance of the ten commandments is the way to maintain law and order. This is un sanctified common sense and it does not require regeneration or common grace for

anyone to see this. If the sixth commandment is not enforced by the magistrate and murder becomes commonplace, society disintegrates and becomes a jungle. Even an unregenerated child can see that.

Job teaches us that God even restrains the devil. When God gave the devil power to take away Job's possessions and his health, God told Satan that he would not be able to kill Job (Job 2:1-6). God's sovereign control, even of devils, is so total that all the wickedness of man is overtly expressed only as God wills it.

But even then, the fact is that if man can break the commandments of God and to all appearances "get away with it," that is, not suffer the consequences of it, he will do so. He violates the Sabbath with impunity. While piously prolonging life of aged people, some of whom have lost their powers of rationality, he murders unborn infants by the millions. He will manifest his sin as much as he dares without jeopardizing his own comfortable place in life.

But more than this, increasingly he will blind himself to the consequences of his sin in order to justify his continual pleasure in the sin. It is evident to all that homosexual practices lead to sexual diseases including the HIV virus. Does this curb homosexual practices? No. The solution to the problem, according to the world, is not to refrain from sin, but to find a cure for sexual diseases. And anyone who dares to say that the prevalence of HIV is God's judgment on the sin of homosexuality is in danger of being tarred and feathered, if not worse. Though divorce and remarriage lead to badly hurt children and open fornication, still man closes his eyes to the terrible consequences of such immorality and approves of the practice, even legalizing it. What is worse, the church itself approves.

This too is the development of sin. As wicked man thinks he can sin without having to suffer sin's consequences, he indulges the more readily in his corruption. When he knows that fornication could result in an unwanted pregnancy, his fear can be assuaged by the knowledge that obtaining an abortion is not difficult – and that the government may even pay for it; and so he continues in his fornication and, indeed, becomes increasingly promiscuous, because he fears no unwanted consequences.

One more element must be considered in connection with the development of sin. Man was given the so-called cultural mandate prior to his fall. He was to be fruitful and multiply, and he was to subdue the earth. Now it is that last part that is of interest. To subdue the earth means to use the whole creation and all its powers in the service of God and to the glory of His name.

When man fell, the cultural mandate remained in effect and man remained able to keep it insofar as subduing the earth is concerned. Man was still called to subdue the earth. And he eagerly assumes responsibility for doing this. But what he does not do is use the creation in the service of God and to the glory of God's name. Rather, he uses whatever powers he discovers in the creation and whatever contraptions and tools he can make to increase his means of expressing his sinful nature. He harnesses these powers in the service of sin. He is bent on forcing all these powers into the sinful use of them to satisfy his own lusts, and to promote his own false theories of evolution.

This is a major contributing factor in the development of sin. Cain could not sin with a Lexus sports model and Nimrod could not sin with a TV set. People in bygone years could not sin with our modern inventions and pornography could not become so all-pervasive without the internet and cell phones. Or, to put it a little differently, with every modern invention man has a new way to express his depravity, something he is bound to do. The sleaze and filth that have become so much a part of our modern culture would be impossible without modern



technology. The creation is God's and its powers are marvelous, but every one of these powers in the hands of the wicked has become a new way to sin.

It is true, of course, that modern inventions can be used for good purposes. The miracles of modern medicine can and do prolong life. (Whether this is always good is quite another thing. It doesn't take too many visits to nursing homes filled with doddering and irrational people to make one wonder whether long life is a good thing.) Communications bring people closer together. The power of the atom can generate electricity and drive ships over the seas. But all these "good" things only prove that there is no evil in the creation itself nor in the powers that man discovers; but sinful man uses them to sin and to satisfy his own lust for pleasure and prolong his life out of fear of death and the judgment.

This doctrine deserves more extensive treatment, but I reserve further discussion until I discuss the doctrine of common grace that teaches that the unregenerated man can do good.

As man discovers the powers of creation and puts them to his use, his sin becomes worse, even though man claims that by these powers he is solving the problems of society and bringing prosperity to the world. As a matter of fact, he will undoubtedly be successful in this endeavor as well. He will, according to Scripture, attain to a kingdom of universal peace and prosperity. It will apparently be such a "wonderful" kingdom that people will be duped into thinking that Christ's kingdom has indeed been realized here in the world and all the promises of Scripture brought to reality by the might and ingenuity of man. But in fact it will be the kingdom of the Antichrist who claims that he is Christ (II Thess. 2:3, 4).

In that kingdom I have no doubt but that all the powers of the creation will have been discovered and put to man's use. The earth will have been entirely subdued and man can expect no more inventions, for he has attained his goal. But it will be a kingdom of great sin, for Antichrist is called in Scripture "the man of sin" (II Thess. 2:3); that is, he will be the total embodiment of all sin that preceded him and that reaches its culmination in him.

But in that kingdom there is no room for the faithful people of God (Rev. 13). The Antichrist, with the full cooperation of the wicked world, will commit that greatest sin of all, the extermination of the church. It is the same world that crucified Christ that now vents its hatred of Christ by destroying Christ's bride. No greater sin can be committed. The church is Christ's bride, the object of His love, the bride for which He gave His own life. His one great concern throughout all history is the salvation of His bride, which bride is His reason for His universal rule. His love for His bride is so great that He will do anything at all for her. That bride the world spits on, slaps in the face, mutilates and abuses, mocks and scorns, and finally kills. Does anyone think that Christ will witness this dreadful treatment of His bride without being moved to the fiercest of anger? With such a great sin, the cup of iniquity is filled and judgment is no longer restrained.

The mighty and apparently glittering kingdom of Antichrist will be shown to be a house of cards that collapses by its own internal rot, and judgments come both swift and terrible.

Such is the teaching of Scripture. Any one who cannot see this happening in the world around him is one who deliberately shuts his eyes to reality. The world getting better and better? It takes some powerful self-delusion to convince one's self of the truth of this notion.

I close with a personal experience. In a time when I corresponded at some length with an ardent post-millennialist, I asked him how he could justify his position that the time would come when the world accepted the Reformed faith – how he could maintain this in the light of

every day experience. One need only read the newspapers and their sad tale of sinful horrors to abandon that position. His response said something to the effect that, yes, the world was getting worse, but this would continue until the world itself realized that it had made a mess of things and that solutions to the world's woes were to be found elsewhere. The place where the world would find solutions to its problems would be, he claimed, in the Reformed faith, and to it the world would turn out of sheer desperation. That idea is not much on which to pin one's hope for the future.

## WHAT DOES THE SPIRIT WORK IN THE REPROBATE?

Before I continue our discussion of the restraint of sin and the good the wicked do, I ought to answer a few questions that I received from one of the forum members. These are the questions.

To what extent does the Spirit of God work in the heart of the reprobate?

While never gracious, what is the nature of this work? To what purpose does it serve?

Scripture gives us accounts of the Spirit's work of hardening hearts (Pharaoh) and restraining sin (Abimelech) in wicked men. How would you further distinguish and explain these two aspects of the Spirit's work in the lives of the reprobate?

Is it accurate to say that God controls sin by hardening and restraining it in the lives of wicked men until He alone decides when the cup of iniquity is filled?

These questions came from one of our foreign readers. The questions indicate clearly that many throughout the world are interested in holding firmly to the truth of God's absolute sovereignty. This is encouraging and reason to give thanks to God.

It is indeed true that the questions arise out of a deep sense of the truth of God's sovereignty. And they cannot be answered in any other way than out of a profound commitment to the truth of God's sovereignty in all things, including evil. Some years ago when I was still teaching in the Seminary, I and one of my colleagues were discussing how little was the truth of God's sovereignty maintained in today's churches. There were many, so he went on to say, that claimed to be Calvinists, but who refused to confess God's sovereignty in crucial doctrines. The ultimate test, so my colleague stated, of whether a man is truly committed to the truth of God's sovereignty is: Does he hold to the doctrine of sovereign reprobation?

The questions quoted above have to do with the doctrine of reprobation. But the questions force us to think of sovereign reprobation in a broader way than I have, up to this point, discussed it. I have more than once mentioned reprobation and pointed to its significance in our on-going discussion concerning the question whether God's grace, in any sense of the word, is general or common, or whether it is only for the elect. These questions suggest an

additional aspect to the subject. Granted that God's sovereignty is also exercised in His control of sin and in His execution of the decree of reprobation, is it Biblical to say that this aspect of God's sovereignty is effected by the operation of the Holy Spirit?

The two instances the reader brings up are the cases of Pharaoh and Abimelech. The reader who asked the questions referred not to Abimelech, the son of Gideon, but rather the Abimelech who was king of a people in the southwest part of Canaan. Abraham sojourned there for a time during his wanderings in the promised land, but he employed the same ruse here as he had done earlier in Egypt. He told Sarah his wife to tell all they met that she was Abraham's sister and to keep secret the fact that she was his wife. Abimelech, in the integrity of his heart, determined to make Sarah his wife, but was prevented by God from doing this. God warned him of the sin of marrying Sarah. Abimelech obeyed God, but protested his own innocence. God recognized that Abimelech was indeed innocent, and said to Abimelech, "Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her" (Gen. 20:6).

The questioner asks whether this is a special operation of the Holy Spirit in the reprobate wicked that restrained the sin of Abimelech. It is my judgment that Abimelech was not a reprobate, but a true elect believer. While the text does not say this in so many words, the entire narrative in Genesis 20 very strongly suggests that.

Nor is this necessarily surprising. After Babel and the division of mankind into races and nations, the true religion continued for some time in various places. Although God narrowed this true religion to the descendants of Shem, He did this over a period of many years. Pockets of the true worship of God could be found. Examples would include Job in the land of Ur, a contemporary of Abraham, Melchisedek, king of Salem, a type of Christ's office of king-priest, Jethro in the wilderness of Sinai, later to become Moses' father-in-law, and probably Abimelech who seemed on very intimate terms with God in his conversations with God in his dream.

There is no question about the fact that God, by His Holy Spirit, restrains sin in the lives of His people, even sins of ignorance. It is a part of their salvation.

Nor, so far as I know, is the Holy Spirit mentioned in connection with the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.. Scripture certainly makes a point of it that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. This is mentioned no less than ten times. It is also said in Scripture that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but, strikingly, a different Hebrew word is used and that only four times.

That God hardened Pharaoh's heart brings up the question: Did God harden Pharaoh's heart by the Holy Spirit? If not, how was this accomplished sovereignly by God?

I do not think that the question can be answered with any certainty. I do not know of any passage in Scripture that teaches explicitly that the Holy Spirit is the means God uses to accomplish His purpose in the ungodly.

Having said that, however, the fact seems to be a necessary conclusion from other teachings in Scripture.

As I noted in an earlier installment, Romans 1:19 reads literally, "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them" It would seem to me that it is not at all doing violence to the text to interpret that phrase "in them" to mean that God seals the consciousness of His power and glory upon the wicked by the Holy Spirit. The same is

true of Romans 2:15: “Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts . . . .” The wicked, totally apart from grace, know the difference between right and wrong; and they know that God is the One who determines right and wrong. While all these things can be and are known through the creation, it is very well possible that God seals this knowledge upon on the hearts of the wicked by the operation of the Holy Spirit. This is at least implied in what we are told: that God makes Himself known that the wicked may be without excuse.

Further, all God’s works are works which He performs as the triune God. We must never ascribe some works to the first person of the trinity, some to the second person, and some to the third person. That is a sort of tri-theism, which the church has never taught. All that God does, He does as the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But in all the works of His hands, God makes Himself known. God makes known His own Trinitarian life in such a way that He works as the triune God, through Jesus Christ, and by means of the Holy Spirit. God executes His will sovereignly in all the works of His hands, and does so, according to His eternal determination, through Jesus Christ, His own Son, and by the Holy Spirit given to Christ at Christ’s ascension. Even in the OT there were manifestations of Christ in the Angel of Jehovah (whom Scripture calls God, Gen. 32:30, Gen. 19:24, etc.) and of the Holy Spirit of Christ with whom the office bearers were filled in their work, and by whom the OT Scriptures were written (I Peter 1:11).

If God is sovereign in all He does, including His control over the wicked, surely He does this in the same way He does all His works. If one would consider, for example, Proverbs 21:1 “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will,” it surely makes no essential difference whether God triune acts directly on the heart of a king to turn it, or whether God turns the heart of a powerful monarch through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture strongly suggests this same truth in connection with the preaching of the gospel. In II Corinthians 2:14-17, Paul says, “Now thanks be unto God which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.”

The apostle is clearly saying here that he gives thanks to God when the response to his preaching (which brings the savour of the knowledge of God to men) is a rejection of the gospel, as well as the fact that he gives thanks to God when his preaching is received by faith. He gives thanks to God in both instances, because God’s purpose is accomplished in both the reception of the gospel by faith and the rejection of the gospel in unbelief. Both reception and rejection are a sacrifice whose odor is pleasing to God. In both God’s purpose is accomplished. So God works faith that saves, but also works unbelief that rejects the gospel. The cross of Christ, set forth in the gospel, is the means of working faith, but also of working unbelief.

The text does not specifically say that unbelief is worked by God through the Holy Spirit, but it makes no difference whether God does this by a direct work on the hearts of men or by a work He performs through the Holy Spirit of Christ.

God sovereignly accomplishes reprobation as well as election. I talked of this earlier, and pointed out that election and reprobation are, according to the Canons of Dordt, one decree. This does not deny that God executes reprobation differently than election. Election is the

fountain and cause of faith, and therefore of salvation. Reprobation is accomplished in the way of the sin of the wicked.

And here lies mystery – not contradiction, but mystery. God is sovereign over sin; yet He executes His sovereignty in such a way that the will of sinful man is not violated and man remains responsible for His own sin. The sinner is not coerced by God's sovereignty to sin. He sins because he wants to sin. He is culpable and is punished. Where the execution of God's sovereign will, whether or not it is through the Holy Spirit, touches the will of man, we find mystery.

Maintaining these truths, we hold to Scripture.

## **WHAT DO THE CONFESSIONS TEACH ABOUT RESTRAINT OF SIN?**

Before I get into the material for this installment, I ran across an interesting quote from Augustine, the church father who served as bishop of Hippo and died in the year 430 AD. He, more than any other church father, was quoted by Calvin. I quote this in connection with the previous installment that dealt with God's sovereignty over sin. The quote is as follows: "For if it were not a good that evil should exist, its existence would not be permitted by the omnipotent God, who without doubt can as easily refuse to perish what He does not wish, as bring about what He does wish. And if we do not believe this, the very first sentence of our creed is endangered, wherein we profess to believe in God the Father Almighty. For he is not truly called Almighty if He cannot do whatsoever He pleases or if the power of His almighty will is hindered by the will of any creature whatsoever" (Enchiridion, XCVI). It is this doctrine, rejected by Augustine's own church, which was promoted by Calvin and all subsequent Calvinists.

I have really finished what I had to say on the error of an internal operation of God's Spirit in the hearts of all men, which graciously restrains sin in the natural man, with the result that he is capable of doing good in the sight of God. I pointed out that every Reformed man believes in a restraint of sin. He is compelled to do this simply because he believes in a sovereign God who rules over all, including the wicked. But this truth of God's sovereignty is a far cry from a gracious operation of the Spirit in the hearts of men, which changes their natures for good, even though this operation of the Spirit does not save.

This letter that I now send to you is a sort of bridge between the idea of common grace that teaches a restraint of sin, and an additional doctrine of common grace, which teaches that the natural man, apart from regeneration, is capable of doing good in the sight of God.

This installment deals with two quotations from our Reformed Confessions that defenders of common grace use in support of both a restraint of sin and the good that sinners do. One quotation is from Canons 3/4.4; the other is from Article 14 from the Confession of Faith (sometimes called the Belgic Confession or the Netherlands Confession).

The quotation from the Canons reads: “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 differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society and for maintaining an orderly external deportment” (Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1931 edition) 588, The article in the Confession of Faith reads: “[Man] hath lost all his excellent gifts, which he had received from God, and only retained a few remains thereof” (Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1931 edition) 398, 399.

The argument of the defenders of common grace in their appeal to these two articles in their support of common grace is an appeal to what the Canons calls, “the glimmerings of natural light,” and what the Confession of Faith calls “remains of the excellent gifts man received at his creation.” Further, the defenders of common grace point out that these glimmerings of natural light enable man to retain some knowledge of God and natural things; enable him to know the differences between good and evil; enable him to discover some regard for virtue, good order in society and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.

So, following the reasoning of those who hold to common grace, the internal gracious and restraining work of the Holy Spirit preserves in man these glimmerings or remains of natural light, and these glimmerings are the fruit of the inner restraint of sin in the heart of the sinner by the Holy Spirit. The good works the natural man is capable of performing are those listed in the Canons: some knowledge of God and natural things, some regard for virtue and good order, some ability to maintain an orderly external deportment; and because of common grace, these good works are the fruit of the Spirit’s work. Things get stranger and stranger.

At bottom, the assumption that is made is this: These glimmerings of natural light and remains of God’s excellent gifts are spiritual powers or faculties. What the Canons calls “natural light” is by the theory of common grace changed into spiritual light. Is it not true that the Holy Spirit works a change in man, which alters man’s nature for the better? Is not this a spiritual fruit of the Holy Spirit? And, are not the good works that proceed from this improvement in the nature pleasing in the sight of God? And, if they are pleasing to God, then they have spiritual value and are of spiritual worth.

The Canons themselves dismisses that idea of a spiritual good in man with some very sharp and penetrating words. It is interesting that when the Synod of the CRC adopted the three points of common grace and appealed to these articles in the creeds as proof, the Synod quoted only the first part of Canons 3/4.4, which I have quoted above. But that same article goes on to say, “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, the 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” (Idem, 588). Why did not the synod quote this part of the article? Perhaps because it completely negated their argument? I think so, but we cannot be sure, for the reasons lie in the hearts of men.

So the article itself repudiates many claims that common grace insists the article teaches. Common grace teaches that this light of which the Canons speak makes man more susceptible to being saved; the Canons say that it does not. Common grace explicitly talks about the ability of the natural man to do “civil good”; the Canons say that the natural man cannot use this light of nature “even in things natural and civil”; common grace say that the natural man is capable of some good works; the Canons say that the depraved man renders this natural light in various ways “wholly polluted.” The article to which common grace appeals is itself designed



to repudiate common grace. It is not possible that those who composed the three points were unaware of what the rest of the article said. Did the authors of the three points really think that no one was going to read the rest of the article? And thus be persuaded that Canons 3/4.4 actually taught common grace? If so, they had a very low estimate of their opponents.

But much the same can be proved from other expressions in Article 14 of The Confession of Faith. The article describes the creation and fall of man. After briefly describing man's creation, it goes on to say, "But being in honor, he understood it not (his creation in the image of God, HH) neither knew his excellency, but willingly subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death, and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil. For the commandment of life, which he had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was the true life, having corrupted his whole nature, whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death. And being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he hath lost all his excellent gifts, which he had received from God, and only retained a few remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse; for all the light which is in us is changed into darkness" (Idem, 398, 399). It is very difficult to find any common grace of any kind in this article; and only one with common grace-tinted glasses is able to see it.

It is spiritual foolishness to appeal to these articles in proof of any kind of common grace.

But, having said that, we are not relieved of the responsibility of explaining what the two articles really mean. But another installment will be the appropriate place to delve into these questions.

## **PROTESTANT REFORMED POSITION REGARDING COMMON GRACE**

I spent the last installment calling attention to two articles in the Reformed creeds, the Canons of Dordt and the Confession of Faith, which have been appealed to in support of common grace. Both articles deal with natural light: the Canons with “glimmerings of natural light” and the Confession of Faith with “a few remains” of those excellent gifts man received at man’s creation.

Setting aside for the moment the question of what is meant by glimmerings of natural light, it is interesting to note that these two articles refute Dr. Abraham Kuyper’s views in at least one respect. You will recall that when we were talking about Kuyper’s view of the fall, we noted that Kuyper’s idea was that if God had not intervened with his common grace, man would, after the fall, have become a beast or even a devil. But these articles teach emphatically that after the fall man remained man. He was just as much a man after the fall as he was before the fall. His essential character as a man did not change. He still possessed a body and soul, a mind and will. He still remained a rational and moral creature responsible for all he did.

But as both articles make clear, man’s spiritual character changed radically. Man lost the image of God, which the Confession of Faith describes as making man “good, righteous and holy.” But man, losing the image, became wicked, perverse and corrupt in all his ways, and all the light that was in him was changed into darkness” (Article 14). He became totally depraved.

What then are the few remains of which the Confession of Faith speaks? and the “glimmerings of natural light” of which the Canons speaks?

It is traditional in Reformed theology to speak of man as a rational and moral creature. That is, he was created with a mind and a will. Because he possessed a mind and a will, he could know God through God’s Word in the creation and worship and serve God as was his calling. His delight was in the Lord his God, and God’s will was his only joy.

Because he was a creature with a mind and will, he was also image bearer. But the image of God is a spiritual concept, in distinction from the natural gifts of Adam’s rational and moral

being. The image of God in man included the true knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness. Man reflected God's infinite moral perfections in his own nature, although he did so in a creaturely way.

The Confessions teach that when man fell, he lost the image of God entirely. The Confession of Faith puts it this way: "We believe that God created man out of the dust of the earth, and made and formed him after his own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will, agreeably to the will of God. But being in honor, he understood it not, neither knew his excellency, but willfully subjected himself to sin. . . . And being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he hath lost all his excellent gifts, which he had received from God. . ." (Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 588).

Those excellent gifts, which man lost are the image of God in man, namely, knowledge, righteousness and holiness, These are attributes that belong to God but which are given graciously to man at his creation. The Confession of Faith teaches that man lost the image in its entirety. Many defenders of common grace hold to the fact that man retained some remnants of the image because, so they say, the "remnants" and "glimmerings" of which the confessions speak are remnants and glimmerings of the image of God. It is also true that some have, as I said, included rationality and morality in the image of God, and thus refer to the fact that man retained some remnants and glimmerings of these attributes that make man a man. There is no objection to that view, but just as soon as one says that man, even after the fall, retained some elements of the image of God, he is bound to add that man retained some remnants of the knowledge of God, righteousness and holiness.

Scripture never says that rationality and morality belong to the image of God in man, and it is wrong to include them in the image.

So it is that Reformed theologians have sometimes distinguished between the image of God in man in the "broad" sense, and in the "narrow" sense. By the former is meant, in addition to knowledge, righteousness and holiness, also rationality, morality and sometimes, immortality. (See as an example, Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1933] 129, 130) But our Confessions do not make that mistake, and there is no ground for such a distinction in Scripture (See Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10).

This does not mean that rationality and morality are not important. Rationality means that man is a thinking creature; morality means that man possess a will, which is finally decisive in man's moral conduct; that is, in doing good or evil. Man can be an image bearer of God only because he has a rational, moral nature. A tree or an animal cannot be an image bearer. Rationality and morality, and thus the ability to be an image-bearer belong only to man.

When man fell, he lost God's image. But that does not mean that he is no longer an image bearer; he is. The terrifying reality is that man, instead of bearing the image of God, now bears the image of Satan. The true knowledge with which he was endowed was changed into the lie, for Satan is a liar from the beginning. The righteousness of God in man was changed into unrighteousness, and his holiness into corruption. Jesus speaks of this when he tells the Pharisees, those model law-keepers: "Why do ye not understand my speech? Even because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him, When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar and the father of it." (John 8:43, 44). Children bear the image of their father; children of Satan bear the image of Satan. The Pharisees were of their father the devil.

Our confessions, summing up the doctrines of Scripture on the fall of man teach that, although man lost the image of God, man remained man. Abraham Kuyper was terribly wrong when he denied that. The tragedy of the fall is that man fell and became a sinful and corrupt man. He is not a beast; he is not a devil; he is a man. There is no need for the introduction of a common grace in order to preserve his manness. As the devils, after they fell remain fallen angels, so man, after he fell, remains man.

Because he remained a man, he also remained a rational and moral creature who is capable of being an image bearer – though now of Satan; but always one in whom the image of God can be restored. He is rational and he is moral. He has a mind and a will. He can know things and he can make choices. He is responsible before God for what he does because he is rational and moral.

Now the Confessions say, about man's rationality and morality, that he retains a few glimmerings of these powers. Or, as the Canons put it, he retains glimmerings of natural light – note: not spiritual light, but natural light, light that belongs to his nature. Remnants and glimmerings are not much. One finds remnants when moths have spent a whole year in eating a fur coat and only a few drooping tatters are left. Glimmerings are like the flickering flame of a candle when compared to the sun. So, although man brags endlessly about his powers of intellect and will, he doesn't possess much any more in comparison with what Adam possessed in Paradise. Even his natural powers are severely reduced till almost nothing is left.

Such devastating erosion of man's natural powers is due to the curse on the creation and on man, and the total spiritual corruption of his nature, including mind and will. The consequences of man's sin were dreadful indeed. Even learning, thinking, figuring things out, understanding the creation, penetrating the mysteries of God's world, remembering what he learned, organizing his knowledge -- all these operations of the mind are performed with the utmost difficulty and with strenuous labor. He is prone to mistakes, easily deceived by appearances, led down wrong paths in his thinking, and only recovering after many trials. Man at his best is not much.

How true this is when men adopt the theory of evolution as an explanation of the origin of things. Evolutionism, on the surface, is ridiculous and unable to explain many obvious things in the creation. But men swear by it, promote it as absolute truth, explain all things by it and even hate those who oppose it.

The same is true of the powers of the will. Man has only "glimmerings." He can choose between going to church and staying home to sleep; he can choose between buying a Volvo or a Kia. He can choose between eating radishes or a t-bone steak; he can choose between being a physicist or a brain surgeon. But that is about all. He cannot choose between doing good or doing evil, for his will is enslaved to sin. The will has lost its greatest power, the ability to choose for God and live in joyful and willing obedience to the Most High. Now his choices are limited, minor, insignificant matters, in no way of any importance either in the history of the world or in his own 70 or 80 years in the world. Because his will is no longer able to make the one important choice that makes all the difference in his life now and forever; all he possesses are "remnants." Sin has chained his will in the service of Satan.

Even in a broader sense, his powers of will are limited. If he is a drunkard, his will is powerless to turn him to sobriety even if he knows that the path he takes is self-destructive. The drug addict is even in a worse condition. Homosexuality, though leading to sexual diseases, is preferred by him, even when he realizes the dreadful consequences of his life. These choices

for sin in opposition to decent and healthier behavior are only natural choices. His will is weak. He does not have much will-power.

Nevertheless, his glimmerings of natural light are sufficient to give him “some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil.” He “discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.” (Canons 3/3.4).

Let us look at that list of things he can know and do. According to Romans 1, he can know that there is a God and that that God alone is to be worshipped and served as the only true God – as we already noticed was taught in Romans 1:18ff. He can know some “natural things,” such as  $2 + 2 = 4$  and that a walnut tree produces a different kind of a nut than a pecan tree produces. According to Romans 2:14, 15, he can know the difference between good and evil: the difference between living all his life with one wife, never forsaking her, never marrying again if she should forsake him; the difference between putting money into the bank and robbing the bank. This knowledge of the difference between keeping the law and breaking the law is not the only difference between knowing what is good and what is evil. The unregenerated man knows what is pleasing to God and what is displeasing. He knows that he must worship God alone and that all idolatry is sin – even if he cannot and does not do what God commands. But even this knowledge he suppresses in unrighteousness.

The Confession of Faith (Art. 14) speaks of the fact that the unregenerated man by knowing these things is without excuse. He is judged righteously by God when he is consigned to everlasting darkness.

Does all this mean that man, apart from saving grace, can do good that is pleasing in the sight of God? It does not. When all that the natural man is capable of doing is evaluated by the Canons, the conclusion is: “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” (Canons 3/4.4).

So we can only conclude that common grace is wrong, seriously wrong on two counts: it errs when it describes the effects of sin on man at the time of the fall and thus creates room for the intervention of common grace. It is wrong when it interprets the natural light of which the creeds speak as being spiritual light. It thus denies the truth of total depravity.

With its wrong interpretation of key concepts in Scripture, common grace paves the way for a thorough-going Arminianism. May God save us from that pernicious error.

### WHAT OF THE UNBELIEVERS' "GOOD WORKS"?

I have finished our discussion of that part of common grace that speaks of an inner restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the ungodly that changes their natures for the better, mitigates somewhat the devastating power of total depravity, enables the man thus blessed with grace to do good in the sight of God, but nevertheless fails to save him, so that eventually he goes to hell in spite of all these gracious influences. It is a strange, but nevertheless a widely taught error.

I have now to turn to that part of the doctrine of common grace that emphasizes the good that sinners are able to do by these gracious works of the Holy Spirit. In the nature of the case, I have talked a bit about this aspect already, for it is really impossible to speak of the gracious restraint of sin without talking about the good deeds that result. But we have to deal with this aspect of common grace separately, for it is separately mentioned and it is given separate "proof".

I remind our readers of a few things we talked about earlier that also have bearing on this point. It was Dr. Abraham Kuyper who introduced this idea into the whole view of common grace, which was not held earlier in the churches of Scotland, England and the Netherlands, except insofar as Arminianism with its doctrine of freewill was held. The commonly-held view of common grace had chiefly to do with the gracious and well-meant gospel offer that was taught so widely in the post-Reformation churches. Kuyper's purpose was different; he wanted to engage the entire country in Netherlands, believers and unbelievers alike, in his efforts to plant the Reformed Faith in all parts of the world. Neo-Kuyperianism has prostrated itself at the feet of Kuyper.

In order to have clearly before us the issues of common grace that teach that the unregenerate are capable of doing good that is pleasing to God, I quote the third point of the decisions of the Christian Reformed Church. I quote this decision because it is, so far as I know, the only official decision in Presbyterian and Reformed Churches on this subject. The view is widely taught and many hold to it, but rarely has it been officially adopted as dogma in any denomination of note. The point at issue reads:

“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 Dordrecht, 3/4.4, and from the Netherlands Confession, Article 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.” (Quoted from: Hanko and Hoeksema, *Ready to Give an Answer* [Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997] 125.)

In dealing with this third kind of common grace, we shall follow the treatment of the idea as it has been explained in the decision of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924. Nowhere else is this work of grace so explicitly set forth as in this point.

The difficulty in understanding this work of God’s common grace in the unbelievers is to understand the distinction which is made between “civil good” and saving good. Herman Hoeksema discusses at some length the evasiveness and disagreement that existed over this question among the defenders of common grace. (See Hoeksema, *Ready to Give an Answer*, 126-128]. But the best we can do is quote Louis Berkhof, himself; he played a major role in the formulation of the decisions, and he took the time to explain them in a pamphlet he wrote.

He writes: “His [the unregenerate man] works may be called good, in a subjective sense, in as far as they are the fruit of inclinations and affections touching the mutual relations of men, which are themselves relatively good, are still operating in man; and in an objective sense, if they in regard to the matter as such are works prescribed by the law, and in the sphere of social life correspond to a purpose that is well-pleasing to God.” (The quotation is taken from Berkhof, *De Drie Punten . . . [The Three Points]* 50, 51. I am, however, using the translation that appears in Hoeksema, *Ready . . .*, 127.)

In his *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, Berkhof writes: “Common grace enables man to perform what is generally called civil righteousness or natural good, works that are outwardly in harmony with the law of God, though entirely destitute of any real spiritual quality.” (Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1933] 228.)

While it remains difficult to understand precisely what is meant by civil good or civil righteousness, the following seem to be implied. 1) It is to be distinguished from saving good. Emphasis on this point is thought to preserve the doctrine of total depravity. 2) Because this good involves inclinations and affections, the good which this aspect of common grace produces includes good thoughts, desires, emotions and other activities of the mind and will. Presumably, in this category of good can be found the love of a man for his wife and children, though he is not regenerated. 3) The natural man does civil good when he keeps outwardly in his external conduct, the law of God. Examples are probably such things as stopping for a red traffic light, being an honest employee who does not steal from his employer, is no child molester, etc. 4) Such civil good would also, I presume, include donations to build hospitals, establish foundations for research in various genetic diseases, giving to charitable institutions that feed, clothe and provide sleeping quarters for “street people.” 4) Such works as bringing groceries to the next-door neighbor when the husband is out of work, pulling a car out of the ditch for a family that has slid into the ditch on icy roads, and helping the man across the street build a shed for his lawn mower.

But it must be remembered that common grace teaches that such “good works” are the fruit of the operations of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the unregenerate, which operations restrain sin and produce these good deeds. That is, if the Holy Spirit is the Author in the unregenerated man of these works, they are surely pleasing in the sight of God. And, in addition, these good works are present in the unregenerate because God is gracious to the unregenerate and manifests His love for the unregenerate in giving him the power to do good works.

Various Biblical passages were also quoted in support of this position that the unregenerate man is capable of civil good. These passages are: II Kings 10:29, 30; II Kings 12:2; II Kings 14:3; II Chronicles 25:2; Luke 6:33; Romans 2:14; Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:12. The reader is asked to look up these passages and study them with a view to discovering himself whether they teach what the synod claimed they taught. I will discuss them in later installments in this forum, but it seems to me that it does not take much exegetical acumen to realize that the proof that synod appealed to is spurious.

In the meantime, there is another aspect to this question that must not be forgotten. The four aspects of the one doctrine of common grace are all parts of one whole and thus belong together. The underlying doctrine of all aspects of common grace, expressed in the first point, is that God is gracious, loving and kind to all men, elect and reprobate alike. It is this universal grace that manifests itself in various gifts: the offer of the gospel, the good gifts God gives to man, especially in rain and sunshine, the work of the Spirit in restraining sin, and the ability of man to do good.

But there is also an internal connection between the four aspects of God’s universal attitude of favor towards all men. On the one hand, it is the inner work of the Holy Spirit in man that enables him to do good (a relationship between the second and third points). On the other hand, it is this same work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men that enables them to accept or reject the gospel offer.

But there is another internal connection. In fact, God’s gifts of good things, His inner restraint of sin and the good works which the sinner is able to perform all point to the chief goal of common grace, the salvation of all men. The gracious gospel offer is the final purpose of God in giving all these many good things to man. In the end, God wants to save man. He expresses His desire to save all men, He does all He can so that on His part there is nothing more to do. He loves all men; He tells them of His love in the gospel; He gives them countless good gifts to show His love for them. He restrains sin in them by His Holy Spirit; He gives them the power to accept or reject the offer. He enables them to do good in the world. What more can God do? Wicked men are surrounded by His goodness and experience this goodness in their hearts. It only remains for them to accept God’s love or reject it.

I am aware of the fact that Dr. Kuyper originally invented this idea of common grace because he was searching for a why to explain that there is a lot of seeming good in the world, which makes it possible for the church to survive. But Kuyper was also looking for some theological basis to justify cooperation between the wicked and the people of God; he found that theological basis in his theory of common grace. Because the Holy Spirit enables the unregenerate to do good, therefore the righteous may work along with the wicked in the pursuit of certain mutually desirable goals that can be realized in this world. These mutually desirable goals serve to bring about the kingdom of Christ here below.

Kuyper did not deny that the kingdom of Christ was heavenly and that it would be realized only at the time of Christ’s return, but in some more limited way the kingdom would also be



realized in this present world, so that Christ, when He comes, can take the kingdom, already established, into heaven.

Post-millennialism, especially of the Neo-Kuyperians, takes the whole concept a step further and speaks of a complete realization of Christ's kingdom here in the world. And their conclusion is a logical deduction from the teachings of Kuyper. It is not strange that Neo-Kuyperian post-millennialists appeal to him in support of their position.

I am aware of the fact that defenders of common grace do not specifically and in detail draw out all these relationships and internal connections. I am also aware of the fact that some would limit God's manifestation of common grace to less than that expressed in the three points of common grace adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924. Nevertheless, grace is grace, and the objects of grace receive grace, not only objectively in hearing the preaching of the gospel, which tells them of God's love for them, but also subjectively in their hearts by God's Spirit.

Common grace is a pernicious error and influences all theology and life.

## FURTHER EVALUATION OF THE "GOOD" OF THE REPROBATE

The problem we face in our discussion of the good works that unregenerated people are capable of performing by the common grace of God is the meaning of civil good. This term was used by the formulators of this doctrine at the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, which is the most explicit statement of this doctrine one can find. Some of the defenders of this doctrine have said that the following characteristics are implied in civil good. 1) It is worked in the hearts of men by the Holy Spirit who restrains sin in the wicked. 2) It consists of good works that are pleasing in the sight of God and meet with His approval, though not, according to Berkhof, with merit in God's records. 3) It is a good that is not the fruit of regeneration or salvation and is to be sharply distinguished from saving good; that is, from the good that is the fruit of regeneration and conversion. 4) But it is, emphatically, the result of God's grace that is given through the Holy Spirit.

I suggested various kinds of good that might be included in the scope of this term "civil good." We could add to the list given in my last installment, the efforts of wicked men to make this world a better place in which to live. By grace the wicked conquer disease; explore the mysteries of the universe; establish welfare programs to aid the poor and needy; build institutions that care for wounded veterans, people with dementia or Alzheimer's Disease; open orphanages and try by various ways to better the lot of mankind. Even some unregenerated people fight against abortion and homosexual practices and marriages. All these and such like things are said to be good and pleasing in the sight of God.

I think it important that we understand clearly that no single person of whom I have knowledge, much less myself, mean to deny that there is much good in the world, if one defines "good" by human standards. None in his right mind would say that it is an intolerable evil to do those good deeds which I have described in the previous paragraph. No one would ever claim that it is just as bad to build hospitals and train doctors to help people to regain health as it is to kill the sick and dying – although this also is being proposed in some countries. No one would ever say that to work in laboratories to find cures for cancer is as evil as letting cancer patients suffer and die without any efforts to help them. One who opposes the murder of unborn babies, though unregenerate, is not as great a sinner as the doctors in abortion

clinics who perform abortions on a regular basis. Nor is it as great a sin to help a man with a flat tire as it is to pass him by and let him struggle on his own – even if he happens to be an old man of 80+ years.

There are degrees of evil in this world and I do not deny that some sins are greater than others. The Lord Himself taught this when he told the Jews that it would be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, than for Capernaum and Bethsaida, for the sin of the latter cities in Palestine was greater than the sins in the heathen cities the Lord mentioned. In Luke 12:47, 48, Christ underscores this point: "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

In fact there is even more to be said about this in Scripture. I can best explain this by referring you to the history of Israel. There were times in Israel's history when the nation was ruled by God-fearing kings such as David; when the temple worship flourished because godly priests served in the tabernacle and temple; and when prophets brought the Word of God to Israel. The whole nation prospered at times like this, even though many in the nation were godless and unbelieving. In most cases these unregenerate people followed the practice established by good kings, priests and prophets, even though it was only outward conformity to the law of God.

There were also times when the wicked were in control. Evil kings sat on the throne – such as Ahaz; evil priests sacrificed to idols; evil prophets brought their own words instead of the Word of the Lord. God's wrath fell on the whole nation until it was destroyed. And the godly suffered also under the fury of God's wrath. Terrible judgments came upon Judah when Nebuchadnezzar led the nation into captivity, but God-fearing Daniel and his three friends also went to Babylon.

The whole house of Potiphar was blessed for Joseph's sake (Gen. 39:3). And Paul instructs Timothy to pray for all in authority in the sphere of government, not only because God saves secular rulers as well as other elect, but also "that we may live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (I Tim. 2:1-4).

The same principle holds true today. Nations in the past have attained great power and influence, only to be destroyed for dreadful sins against God's law. The Roman Empire is a case in point, for its final destruction at the hands of barbarian invaders was brought about by internal moral rot. The nation in which the law of God is outwardly observed is a prosperous nation. Many wicked countries are proof of this, and in them the church flourishes. The nation that breaks God's law with impunity also soon turns against the church, which condemns the wickedness present in the land.

We must not make the error, as common grace does, of equating material and physical prosperity with God's blessing. Asaph's Psalm (73) warns us in no uncertain terms that to think this way is grievous error that will surely rob the people of God of their assurance of God's favor. Try telling the people of God in Myanmar, who can scarcely keep body and soul together, that material prosperity is indicative of God's favor. Mere prosperity must never be construed as blessing from God. One reason why God gives prosperity to a nation that outwardly keeps God's commandment is for the sake of the people of God that they "may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (I Tim. 2:2). Generally speaking, it is easier for the church to carry out her calling in a nation peaceful and prosperous.

I hold firmly to the truth that a wicked man who lives faithfully with the wife of his youth, cares for his family and sends his children to college, is better than the man who abandons his wife because he lusts after some other woman, turns his back on his children and has no regard for their welfare. I hold firmly to the truth that the man who brings groceries to his neighbor when the neighbor is in need is better than the neighbor who shoots the husband in a drunken brawl.

By repudiating the common grace that enables the wicked to do good in the sight of God, I do not intend to deny all these obvious facts. But we must come to grips with two crucial points. Is the good that sinners do good in God's sight? And, if not, how do we explain this good of which sinners are capable? And their prosperity?

Before I enter into these questions, there is one element to the position that the defenders of common grace hold that is startlingly offensive and casts a huge cloud over the whole concept. I refer to the fact that the objects of common grace, according to the defenders of this doctrine, go to hell. The Holy Spirit dwells in them. They are, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the recipients of God's grace. They are the objects of love and benevolence. Sin is restrained in them so that the outbreak of sin is less than it would be apart from grace. The Spirit works in them to produce good works that please God and earn His approbation. Yet they go to hell. God casts an object of His love into hell. God's kindness, suddenly and at the moment of death, turns to fury and hatred.

That is not the whole story, however. God is pleased with his own work – always. God cannot be displeased with what he does. He is pleased with the work of the Spirit in the hearts of the wicked. He is pleased that his Spirit restrains sin. He is pleased with his work of producing good in the lives of the ungodly. Yet he turns His back on what he does and rejects that of which he is the Author and in which he formerly found delight. He, as it were, considering his own work in the ungodly, decides after all that he wants no part of it; that, indeed, the one whom he loves must go to hell everlastingly.

This is strange not only, but a dreadful disparagement of God's holiness. Such conduct on God's part involves God in hopeless contradiction and in a changeableness that denies his immutability. How it is possible for one who fears God to think such incredible thoughts about God is impossible for me to understand. I am deeply offended by such characterizations of God.

There is, as far as I can see, only one solution to this problem that is available to those who defend such ideas. That solution opens the door wide to every form of Arminianism and Pelagianism. It is a solution that teaches that God's common grace puts man in a spiritual position to recognize God as one who is ready to save him, but does not do so until he himself accepts God's overtures of love. Then punishment is due to God's anger over man's refusal to act favorably to God's sincere efforts to save him. Man is then the one who determines his own salvation, and God's work of saving the sinner depends upon man's reactions to God's initiatives and overtures of love. This, I say, drives us into the arms of Pelagianism, which the Canons calls a doctrine out of hell.

And so, however you may explain this strange doctrine, you wind up with a god who is a caricature of the God of the Scriptures.

## **SCRIPTURE AND THE CONFESSIONS ON THE "GOOD WORKS" OF THE REPROBATE**

I was talking in the last installment about the view of God that one must take to hold to common grace in general and the good that sinners do in particular. It is a view that disparages God and makes of him a changeable and helpless god who is unable to accomplish his purpose. No man who fears the Lord God of heaven and earth ought to speak of God as the defenders of common grace speak of him

But in this installment, before I look more closely at the confessional and Biblical proof for this position, I want to quote for you a few articles from the Confessions of the church on this very subject.

My first quote is from the Westminster Confession of Faith. There is an important article in this confession, which forms the confessional basis for Presbyterianism the world over. It is all the more powerful because the Westminster Confession of Faith was written to serve as the confessional basis of a national church. The Westminster Assembly met under the direction of the British Parliament and the Confession itself was approved by Parliament.

In chapter 16, entitled "Of Good Works," paragraph 7 the confession states: "Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and to others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word, nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and can not please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God." (Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983] 635, 636. That article is about as clear a refutation as one can find anywhere.

The Heidelberg Catechism emphatically states: "Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God" ( *The Confessions . . .* [Grandville: The Protestant Reformed Churches in America,. 2005] q. & a. 8, 86). This too is unmistakable. Everything we do is

wicked; nothing is good. Wickedness is characteristic of our whole life. The only work that can change that wickedness and produce good works is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

The Heidelberg Catechism also very carefully defines those works of man that do meet with God's approval. "But what are good works? Only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to His glory, and not such as are founded on our imagination or the institutions of men" ( *Idem*, q & a 91. 122). Good works are not defined as products of a common grace and as civil good, but are said to be only those that proceed from a true faith and are to God's glory. Common grace perverts the Catechism when it defines good works in terms of "our imagination or the institutions of men."

It is true that the Canons of Dordrecht speak of "glimmerings of natural light" in fallen man that enable him to retain "some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil"; that enable man to discover "some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment." But the same article goes on to say, "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" (*Idem*, 167). The Canons are very emphatic that the natural light, which fallen man still possesses cannot be used aright by the unregenerated sinner even "in things natural and civil." He pollutes the civil good and holds it in unrighteousness. This is strong language.

An appeal to the Confessions ends in exposing the error of common grace clearly and emphatically.

It is also noteworthy that the error of an internal restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit and the error of the ability of the unregenerate to do good stand or fall together. If indeed the Spirit is at work in the hearts of reprobate, their works are good and pleasing in the sight of God; for the good that men do is God's work in them and God never disapproves his own works. If, on the other hand, God condemns every work of the ungodly, there cannot possibly be any restraint of sin by God through the Holy Spirit.

The defenders of the good that the unrighteous are capable of doing offer us some proof from Scripture. We will look at this proof to see whether Scripture gives any indication of the ability of the wicked to do good – good, that is, worked by the Holy Spirit and pleasing in the sight of God.

The proof that is offered is first of all several texts from the history of the kings of Israel and Judah who are said to have done "good" in the eyes of the Lord. These texts are II Kings 10:29, 30; II Kings 12:2; II Kings 14:3; II Chronicles 25:2. We quote only one of these; the reader can look up the others. II Kings 12:2 reads: "And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him." The other passages make a similar statement about Jehu, and Amaziah.

While what these texts say about these kings of Israel and Judah is that they did good in the eyes of Jehovah, it is quite possible and even likely that Amaziah was a godly king who loved the Lord, although he was also very weak in many respects and did not do good "with a perfect heart." But the same cannot be said of Jehu and Jehoash. Of Jehu Scripture say: "Howbeit from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, Jehu departed not from them, to wit, the golden calves that were in Bethel, and that were in Dan" (II Kings 10:29). And

concerning Jehoash we know that when Jehoiada died, Jehoash turned to wickedness and even killed the prophet that was sent to warn him (II Kings 12:17-19, II Chronicles 25:17-25).

It is true, of course, that the texts say that Jehu and Jehoash did good. But that this is proof for good influences of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of wicked men so that they do good in the sight of God is quite another matter, and there is no mention of any such thing in the text. Jehu did good in destroying the whole house of Ahab. This was God's will that Ahab and his house be destroyed because of its great wickedness. Jehu was God's appointed means to accomplish this destruction. But Jehu was glad to do it, for he reveled in killing and was sure to secure his throne by destroying any threat from Ahab's family. Jehoash kept God's commandments and preserved the faithful worship of God in the temple, but only because of the strong influence of godly Jehoiada. But that his own heart was evil and that he did not do good to please God is evident from his dreadful sins after Jehoiada's death. They did good in an outward obedience to God's commands, the doing of which was for their own personal advantage.

No one has ever denied that wicked and unregenerate men are able to do good in a certain sense of the word. Mozart can compose very beautiful music, though he was a wicked man. An architect can design a beautiful building, but not do so in a way pleasing to God and bringing God's approval upon his good works. A carpenter can and often does build a house that has few if any defects, because he is an excellent builder; and we say, "He did a good job of this house." I recall one noted theologian who said that Tiger Woods ability to sink a 40-foot putt was surely due to common grace. And so we can go on. It happens all the time in the world that men do good from a purely earthly viewpoint. But this is still a far cry from moral good that the Spirit enables wicked men to do; and it is a far cry from good that meets with God's approval. The texts quoted are entirely beside the point and have no bearing on the matter at hand.

Luke 6:33 is also quoted as proof for the good that sinners do: "And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? For sinners also do even the same." I am puzzled by the appeal to this text as proof for the good that sinners do. It teaches quite the opposite. Sinners do good, not to please God, but to please themselves and advance their own welfare. They invite people to their feasts so that they will in turn be invited by the high and mighty. They do good to others so that they may reap the fruits of having others do good to them. Pure selfishness can hardly be the fruit of the Spirit and pleasing to God. We are warned not to do good as the wicked do it.

Another three texts are also used in support of this aspect of common grace, that unregenerated men can do good in God's sight. These texts all say the same thing. Romans 10:5 says: "For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth these things shall live by them." Galatians 3:12 reads: "And the law is not of faith: but, the man that doeth them shall live in them" Romans 2:14 says, "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified."

I think that the appeal by the Synod to these texts was a mistake on the part of the authors of the theory of common grace. Actually, the Synod that adopted officially the doctrines of common grace is the body that referred to these texts in support of the doctrine. But somewhere along the line a serious mistake was made, for these texts teach quite the opposite from what was the intention of the authors of the good that sinners do by the grace of God. For these texts teach that the fundamental principle for all time and for eternity is that fellowship with God is inescapably connected to the keeping of God's law. But as the passages

in their context go on to say, just because this principle is so true no man can possibly be saved by the keeping of the law, because it is impossible for depraved man to keep it.

The texts, however, teach a profound truth: The keeping of the law is necessary for anyone to be saved. This is a truth that dates back to the beginning of time. Adam remained in a state of rectitude only as long as he obeyed the law. It is true for all time and in every place: man only lives through the keeping of the law. This is Paul's point.

But Adam fell and all men with and in him. The keeping of the law was now forever impossible for man. For, while it is possible for sinful and totally depraved man to conform his life outwardly to the law, the law requires love within: love of God and one's neighbor. Sin is the opposite. Sin is love for one's self. And so Christ had to come to do what man of himself can never do. That is why Paul calls the law a school-teacher to lead us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). Christ kept the law. He loved his God perfectly – even when the horrors of hell drowned him in sorrow and pain and all he knew was abandonment by him whom alone he loved. By His perfect atonement Christ fulfilled the law for those for whom he died, and now, by his Spirit, he enables his people to keep the law, for the law is written on their hearts. And so still today the way to life is the keeping of the law, but it is the keeping of the law by him who works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

And so we are left without any proof whatsoever, a fact that compels us to reject the heresy of the ability of the totally depraved sinner to do good.



## **FINAL REMARKS ON THE "GOOD" THAT THE UNGODLY DO**

In the last installment I began an answer to a correspondent who inquired about the relative good that the ungodly do. He was not about to defend the position that the wicked do good by the power of God's grace worked through the Holy Spirit; nor was he of a mind to defend the proposition that the unregenerate are able to do good that meets with God's approval. But he was inquiring about the fact that, from an earthly point of view, there is a lot of good in this world.

I agree with this assertion and have been at some pains to develop that idea, including the fact that from an earthly point of view the man who keeps God's law outwardly experiences a happy and more trouble-free life than the man who tramples God's law under foot. And, what is true of individuals, is also true of families and nations. There is a direct correlation between the outward good men do and earthly success, health and prosperity. All of this comes from God. We must inquire into this problem.

Before I give a more detailed answer to this question, let it be observed that this principle holds for all of life. A man who eats only McDonald's hamburgers is not going to be as healthy as the man who eats nutritious foods. A man who obeys traffic laws is not as likely to be in an accident as one who drives recklessly. Nor would anyone, so far as I know, deny that the man or woman who lives a life free from fornication is less likely to contact a STD than one who has no moral scruples that govern his life. No one, I think, would claim that the habit of eating nutritious foods is a gift of grace and that the resulting good health of a man merits God's approval. God has established certain laws by which he rules in his creation. Sometimes these laws are called secondary means by which God exercises his sovereignty.

To defy God's law brings trouble and grief in every area of life. To practice abortion brings its own grief and trouble. To live a homosexual life is to incur the dreaded HIV virus. To fornicate in the marriage state results in its own sorrows. Such obvious rules in God's world has nothing to do with common grace, the ability of the natural man to do good, or the favor and blessing of God upon a person.

Why does consequent prosperity in some measure come to those who do keep God's law outwardly? The answer is, first of all, that God works this way for the sake of His church. That is precisely the reason why God blessed the house of Potiphar for Joseph's sake (Gen. 39:5). That is why we are commanded to pray for all those in authority over us, pray even that they may observe the law of God; for, Paul writes Timothy, that among the reasons to pray for magistrates is that the church may lead a quiet and peaceable life (I Timothy 2:1-6).

There are, however, other reasons. The unregenerate know also the difference between right and wrong. In an earlier forum article I discussed the meaning of Romans 2:14, 15, a text which teaches that God puts the works of the law on their hearts so that their consciences tell them what is right and what is wrong according to his moral law. They are also able to see in their lives and in the lives of others that an outward keeping of the law of God brings with it a certain amount of pleasure and order. And they are able to see that to break God's law brings grief and suffering. If the law against murder were abandoned all together life would become well nigh impossible. If every one committed adultery and family life would cease to exist, society would end in chaos. If laws against stealing were not enforced and everyone was given free rein to steal anything he wished, businesses could not operate and a man's possessions would never be safe. It doesn't take regeneration to see and understand that. It is clear from life itself that what a man's conscience dictates is best for society and a decent life in the world.

This great truth does not keep men from sinning anyway. The homosexual knows that the possibility of him acquiring the HIV virus is increased greatly if he continues his wicked practices, but he goes his own way in spite of it all. A drunkard can see his life disintegrate in his family, his work and his own life as he continues his drinking. But this does not always check his sin.

Yet the law of God serves as a certain rein to sin, especially when the violation of God's law brings its own judgments from God. God does not wait till the judgment day to punish sin, but executes judgment already in this life.

That such a man becomes a slave to a sin and finds it impossible to escape the slavery of the sin into which he has fallen is also a law of God. Man can, as a matter of fact, become so much a slave of sin that he finds it impossible to escape from the shackles that bind him. A drug addict cannot live without his drugs. But I have dealt with people who have even become slaves of lying, slaves of adultery, slaves of hatred. It is dreadful. Even if, because they see the consequences of their sin, they want to escape it, they find it impossible – apart from sovereign grace, which is able to deliver anyone from any sin and from the bondage of sin.

The wicked do two things about this slavery of sin. The first thing they do is try to find ways and means of avoiding the consequences of sin. They invent birth control instruments to prevent pregnancies resulting from adulteries. They build abortion clinics to kill babies when they discover that some people are too stupid or too captured by their sin to use available techniques to avoid pregnancy. They invent medicines that can curb the harmful effects of the HIV virus. They establish elaborate rehabilitation centers for those caught in the trap of drug addiction, liquor addiction or gambling addiction. And the answer of the world to these addictions is not to cease from the sin that brought them on, but to use the latest medical techniques that enable a man to continue in his sin but stave off the consequences.

The second thing they do is mount elaborate campaigns to condition people into thinking that all these violations of God's law are not sins. These weaknesses into which men plunge themselves are the results of their genes, or remnants from their animal ancestry, or

sicknesses for which cures can be found. They are treatable and science, in its performance of miracles, will conquer bad consequences of a wicked life. But if one says that homosexuality is a sin against God, he is as liable as not to be arrested and tried for a "hate crime." The poor person cannot help doing what he does; it is in his genes. His actions are predetermined. (And these same people call Calvinists "Fatalists"!)

All this is proof that man does no good out of the motive of love for God and his neighbor. He seeks himself and will sin as much as he dares. He rejoices when apparently means are invented to help him escape the consequences of his sin. He claps his hands in glee when he has succeeded in overcoming God's judgments on sin.

But God is in heaven and he is just and righteous in all he does. He punishes sin and laughs at man's silly poking around to invent means to avoid God's wrath. God does not respect persons. He does not judge on the basis of outward appearances (I Samuel 16:7). Teachers of common grace look at outward appearances, but in doing so fail to follow the Scriptures where God tells us what is pleasing in his sight.

God will tell us what works are pleasing to him. And we had better listen.

The Canons and the Westminster Confession describe, these good works that are approved by God as they ought to be described (See Canons 3/4.4 and WC 16.7, which we have already quoted). If one is talking about good that is approved by God himself, then the criteria of the Heidelberg Catechism must be used as a measuring rod: "They must proceed from a true faith". This assertion is also Biblical: "For whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). They must be performed according to the law of God. Surely, if outward conformity to that law is approved by God, the Pharisees did more that met with God's approval than anyone else. But the law of God is all summed up in the words of Jesus in Matt. 22:37-40. The only true keeping of the law is love: love for God and love for one's neighbor for God's sake. True good works are done to God's glory. Man's "good" is done for the glory and praise of man; good works are done only for God's glory. Then, and then only is a work something that meets with God's approval.

Works that are "good" in this world are actually sins. A man who is faithful to his wife and family goes to hell, not in spite of his faithfulness to his family, but because he did not remain faithful out of a true faith in Christ; nor because he loved God and his neighbor; nor because he was seeking God's glory. Does this seem to you to be impossible? We must measure man's works, not by our standards, but by the standards of a holy God. Nor must we forget that God created man good, and his inability to do good is his own fault, for he chose the way of sin in the place of the way of obedience.

One more matter must be addressed. It takes us back to the basic idea of common grace. Is the prosperity of the wicked, even when it is the result of a life in conformity with the outwards demands of the law, indicative of God's favor and blessings?

To answer this question, perhaps we ought to read once again Psalm 73, Psalm 37, Proverbs 3:33, and such like passages. The answer in Scripture is obvious. The prosperity of the wicked, even when it is the consequence of a walk in keeping with God's law outwardly, sets the wicked on slippery places that end in everlasting destruction. The Psalm is quite clear on the matter: God sets them on slippery places. His purpose never is to bless the wicked, but to destroy them. Even their riches, their health, their pleasures are God's wrath. God's curse is in the house of the wicked.

But this is not the case with God's people. They may and do wash their hands in innocency, but know only the chastening of the Lord: poverty, sickness, trouble, grief, suffering; but, says the Psalmist, in spite of all his troubles, "I am continually before thee: thou hast held me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with they counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever. For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works."

## **THE GRACIOUS WELL-MEANT OFFER**

I begin with this installment a discussion of the fourth aspect of common grace, probably the most widely accepted aspect, and about which much has been written. I refer to that point of common grace that is called the gracious well-meant gospel offer. It is the doctrine that defines the gospel as a declaration from God that it is his desire to save all that hears the gospel proclaimed.

Many books have been written on the subject, and it surely is not my intention to write yet another book. We shall therefore, limit these articles to an examination of what is meant by this gracious and well-meant gospel offer, what proof is given from Scripture and the confessions in support of it, what aberrations in doctrine have resulted from it, and what is the Biblical teaching over against it.

Actually, the doctrine itself is of rather recent origin. In the form in which it is taught by many churches today, it did not appear in the preaching until the so-called Marrow Controversy that took place in Scotland in the early part of the 18th century.

This does not mean, however, that various other doctrines that are a necessary part of the doctrine of the well-meant offer have not been taught in the church for a very long time. A brief survey of the history will demonstrate this.

Until the time of the great church father, Augustine, the church with few exceptions held to the doctrine of the free will of man. The church was, of course, preoccupied with the development of the truths of the trinity and the person and natures of our Lord Jesus Christ. It had little time to give the doctrines of salvation by grace any attention. This doctrine of the free will of man was thought necessary because of the heresies of Gnosticism and Manichaeism that had troubled the church. Both these heresies had taught that matter itself, of which the creation was composed, was inherently evil. There was, therefore a certain necessity in evil. To escape this necessity of evil, the church clung to the doctrine of man's free will.

It was not until the time of Augustine that the church took a long and hard look at the widely accepted doctrine of free will. This was occasioned by the heresy of Pelagianism. (For a detailed history of Pelagianism and its teachings see my recently published book, *Contending for the Faith*, available from the RFPF.) Because Pelagianism was blatantly and openly a heresy that based salvation firmly in the hands of man, Augustine developed the doctrines of grace – the so-called “Five Points of Calvinism,” although, of course, they were not called that till over 1000 years later. Augustine’s teachings were exactly like we believe today. He even explained such texts as II Timothy 2:4, II Peter 3:9, and other such texts as are used by the defenders of the gracious offer of the gospel to prove that Scripture teaches this heresy, as referring only to the elect.

When the Roman Catholic Church faced the question of sovereign grace, it waffled badly. Many in the Romish Church insisted the atoning sacrifice of Christ was for all men and that this general atonement made salvation for all men possible. The Romish Church officially adopted a Semi-Pelagian view of salvation by faith and works.

While the Arminian controversy, which arose in the Netherlands in less than 100 years after the Reformation, did not address itself specifically to the question of the gracious offer of the gospel, it did condemn two doctrines inevitably attached to and an integral part of the offer. Although all adherents of the gracious offer of the gospel will not admit it, the broadening of the extent of the atonement is necessary to maintain the error. Because man is a sinner, only Christ can earn for the sinner God’s grace. He can do this only in his suffering and death of the cross of Calvary. The relation between the gracious offer and the atonement is so compelling that most who hold to the offer also hold to the doctrine that, at least in some sense, Christ died for every one. Even John Murray, the noted Presbyterian theologian, had no hesitation in writing: “The unbelieving and reprobate in this world enjoy numerous benefits that flow from the fact that Christ died and rose again.” (John Murray, *Redemption – Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955] 71.) But Dort would have no such increasing the extent of the atonement beyond the elect. (Canons 2.8).

In France, the Amyraldian heresy arose, a heresy that developed another aspect of the doctrine of the gracious offer. This heresy taught that God has two wills, one of which determines salvation only for the elect, and another will according to which God desires the salvation of all men. This heresy, rejected by the Genevan theologians, nevertheless took root in Scotland and was held by the so-called Marrow Men. They taught, not only that the gospel had to be presented in such a way that God’s desire to save all men was proclaimed, but that it was right and proper to speak of Christ as dead for all men.

Although the Marrow position was officially condemned by the Presbyterian church of Scotland, it entered the Netherlands by way of the close ecclesiastical contact between those who were concerned for the orthodoxy of the church in the Netherlands and the Marrow men. And so, this idea entered into the thinking of Dutch theologians.

When the Separation of 1834 took place under the leadership of Henry De Cock and others, the movement was divided between an orthodox wing of the Separation represented by De Cock and Van Velzen, and a weaker wing represented by Brummelkamp and Henry De Cock’s son, Helenius De Cock.

The separation from the State Church that took place 52 years later under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper was, on this point of a gracious gospel offer, sound and orthodox. In fact Kuyper himself repudiated the idea of a gospel offer in his book, *Dat De Genade Particulier Is* (That Grace is Particular. This book has been translated by Marvin Kamps and is available from

the Reformed Free Publishing Association, under the title, *Particular Grace*.) This book was written by the earlier Kuyper, several years before he published his three-volume work on common or general grace. But even in this latter work he did not and would not teach a gracious offer of the gospel.

Because many of the immigrants to this country in the latter half of the 19th century were from the Separation of 1834, the idea of a gracious offer of the gospel entered into the thinking of the Christian Reformed Church. Hence, when the common grace controversy erupted in the late nineteen-teens and came to a head at the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, in 1924, the gracious gospel offer was a point at issue. The Synod included it in its decisions on common grace, although strangely enough, it was mentioned only in passing. The first point reads: “Regarding the first point, touching the favorable attitude of God toward mankind in general and not only toward the elect, synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confessions it is established, that besides the saving grace of God shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is also a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general. This is evident from the Scripture passages that were quoted and from the Canons of Dordt, II, 5 and III, IV, 8, 9, where the general offer of the gospel is set forth . . .” (emphasis is mine, HH).

Yet, in spite of the fact that the “general offer of the gospel is only mentioned in passing, it became the most important part of the entire theory of common grace.

The issue was also faced by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the Forties when controversy arose between Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark over the incomprehensibility of God. In the report that was submitted to the General Assembly a section was devoted to the question of the gracious gospel offer. While this part of the report was never adopted by the OPC, it nevertheless was distributed in the churches by the General Assembly in pamphlet form. Authored by John Murray and Ned Stonehouse, it is a detailed defense of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer.

Today the doctrine has spread far and wide and its supporters from Northern Ireland to Australia. And so it has entered the thinking and theology of many churches and has driven the church into open Arminianism.

## **THE TEACHING OF "THE WELL-MEANT OFFER" OF SALVATION**

In the last installment I gave a brief history of the doctrine of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. I shall in this installment, describe what the teaching of this error is. I have used for references chiefly the following works, so that the reader can, if he wishes, look them up himself.

Louis Berkhof, *De Drie Punten in Alle Deelen Gereformeerd* (The Three Points, Reformed in all its Parts (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1925).

K. W. Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered* (Covenanter Press, 1958).

John Murray, *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (A copy downloaded from the internet with a foreword by R. Scott Clark. Found on R. Scott Clark blog.)

R. Scott Clark, *Janus, the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel and Westminster Theology*. The chapter referred to is Chapter 7 of *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine*, David Van Druenen, ed.

H. J. Kuiper, *The Three Points of Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., no date).

I recognize the fact that dozens of books have been written on the question, but these books and papers mentioned above contain, in one way or another, all the basic teachings of the gracious and well-meant offer. I might add that Hugh Lindsay Williams has written (and is still writing) a thorough critique of the well-meant offer in *The British Reformed Journal*. These articles are a critique of David Silversides, *The Free Offer: Biblical and Reformed* (Marpet Press, 2005). The articles are thoroughly researched and carefully written. Copies can be obtained from Rev. Angus Stewart in Ballymena, Northern Ireland.

The following points are the chief points of the well-meant gospel offer as defined by the proponents of common grace.



First this gospel offer is part of common grace; that is, it is part of God's attitude of favor towards all men. The first point adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 explicitly stated this: ". . . synod declares it to be established . . . 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 general offer of the gospel . . ." In fact, almost all the Scriptural and confessional proof that was offered in support of the first point refers to this general offer of the gospel; it would seem that in the mind of synod the offer was the chief way in which God showed his favor to all men.

I remind our readers that subsequent discussions of common grace made clear that God's attitude of favor towards the wicked includes God's love, mercy, lovingkindness and all communicable attributes.

Second, the grace and love that God has for all men is expressed in the preaching of the gospel. The gospel must not hesitate to say to all who hear, "God loves you and is favorably inclined towards you. He is gracious and merciful towards you."

Third, that love and favor God has towards all men and expressed in the gospel is explicitly expressed by telling people that it is God's desire that all who hear the gospel be saved. God wants all men to be with him in heaven. His desire and will are that all men be a part of the church, which some day is destined to go to heaven.

Fourth, God expresses his desire to save all that hear the gospel by doing all that is possible for him to do to persuade man that salvation is preferable to damnation and that accepting Christ is preferable to rejecting him; that they should, therefore, hear God's overtures of love. There is, so to speak, nothing more that God can do. If man persists in rejecting Christ proclaimed in the gospel, it is due to man's own refusal to do what alone is good for him.

Questions arise in connection with this presentation to which various answers have been given.

One crucially important question involves the extent of the atonement. The question can be stated in this way: "What is the judicial ground of God's favor towards the wicked? And, specifically, God's desire to save them?" The point here is that if God loves the wicked, even though it be with a non-saving love, it must be rooted in what Christ does for men, for it cannot be grounded on man's meriting that love. Besides, the justice of God must be satisfied: for sin is against God's most high majesty and the debt sin incurs must be paid. Christ has paid that debt, for no man can possibly pay it. The answer to the question has been ambiguous with some saying, Yes, Christ died for all men; and others saying, No, the atonement is limited. But the very force of the relation between God's love and favor towards all men has compelled many to say that, although Christ did not necessarily die efficaciously or effectively for all men, his atonement is sufficient for all men and its effectiveness depends on man's response to the gospel.

Another important question that has come up, especially among Calvinists, is the harmony between God's will to save some (the elect) and to reprobate others on the one hand, and his will that all men be saved on the other. There is evident and incontrovertible conflict between the two wills of God. In answer to this problem, some have felt free to speak of two wills in God, one will to save all, and another will to save some. Others have appealed to paradox and apparent contradiction, by which God's "logic" is placed on a much higher level than our logic, so that what seems to us as contradictory is not contradictory in God's thoughts.

This, e.g., is the whole argument of R. Scott Clark in an article entitled “Janus, the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel and Westminster Theology.” He writes, “This essay contends that the reason the well-meant offer has not been more persuasive is that its critics have not understood or sympathized with the fundamental assumption on which the doctrine of the well-meant offer was premised: the distinction between theology as God knows it (*theologia archetypa*) and theology as it is revealed to and done by us (*theologia ectypa*). In making the biblical case for the claim that God reveals himself as desiring what he has not secretly willed to do, Murray and Strimple assumed this distinction which they did not articulate explicitly.”

This proposed solution is a rather fancy and Latinized way of saying that the conflict in God’s will to save the elect only and God’s will to save all men is only in our theology and not in God’s theology. God’s theology is fundamentally different from revelation and from our theology.

Yet another problem with the well-meant offer is the rather obvious conclusion that, because God desires the salvation of all men, yet not all are saved, the final decision for or against salvation rests with man. Arminians, of course, see no problem here. They insisted all along that man’s choice by his own free will is the decisive factor in salvation. But Calvinists struggle with this question, for they profess to believe that God actually works faith in the hearts of men. So, one stands perplexed over the problem of why God only works faith in the hearts of a few when his desire is to save all who hear the gospel. This too is a problem without solution, although some, once again, almost in desperation, appeal to paradox and apparent contradiction to support such a strange position. Apparent contradiction is found to be a safe haven in which to find refuge when confronted with a problem to which no answer can be found.

A charge that is consistently brought against those who repudiate such an idea as a well-meant offer is that a denial of a well-meant offer makes all evangelism impossible. The argument seems to be that one cannot go out to preach to the unchurched unless one can assure them that God loves them and on his part is longing to save them. But why? Why is evangelism dependent upon a gospel that announces God’s love for all? I have never been able to come up with any answer to this question other than to conclude that wrong ideas of evangelism have brought about some notions that God must be shown to have done all he possibly can to save sinners, but that the salvation of sinners rests on their willingness to accept God’s overtures. But this is Arminian to the core and not at all what evangelism is all about.

Much the same is true of those who label all who deny the well-meant offer as “Hyper-Calvinists.” One point that needs to be made is that it is easiest when caught up in a theological debate to escape responsible defenses of one’s position by labeling one’s opponents with an opprobrious name. When one raises objections to the whole concept of a well-meant offer, his arguments are dismissed, not by careful and Biblical counter-arguments, but by the remark, “Those people are Hyper-Calvinists.” And it is assumed that Hyper-Calvinists are dangerous people to have around and whose theological arguments are not worth weighing and considering carefully. But it works with the unwary. I have met the charge myself – repeatedly. “Oh, you deny the well-meant offer? You must be a Hyper Calvinist. I need not listen to what you have to say. Your theology is dangerous.” Such responses save a lot of time and hard work – the hard work of searching the Scriptures.

What I have said in this installment pretty much sums up the position of those who hold to a well-meant offer. I shall examine the arguments in later installments and present in a positive way the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed Confessions on the matter.

## **THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS GIVEN FOR THE "FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL"**

Before we get into the Biblical and confessional proof that was offered for the well-meant offer of the gospel, I want to say some things about the arguments that have been used to substantiate the well-meant offer as answers to theological objections which have been brought against it. These objections of a theological nature have been mentioned and described in the previous installment. They are important for our discussion, because they are the crutches used to make it possible to walk the path of a well-meant offer.

The first point that needs addressing is the claim that the well-meant offer is the testimony of God's grace to all men. The claim itself I have addressed more than once in previous installments, but as that claim is made in connection with what has been called "the chief point of the first point" – with an obvious reference to the first point of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, I have not said anything about it.

Our readers will recall that when we were discussing the teaching that there is a grace of God shown to all men and not only to the elect, I claimed that this common grace was not intended to be limited to an outward attitude of God towards all men (although it surely includes that), but was also intended to include a subjective infusion of grace into the hearts of the unregenerate, which did not result in conversion and salvation, but which was there to enable the unregenerate to do good works pleasing in the sight of God. In the preaching of the gospel the same is true: a certain grace is conveyed to those who hear the gospel.

It is quite possible that this idea too, came from the Marrow Men of Scotland. The Marrow Men taught a certain "preparationism;" by which they meant that all who heard the gospel, were by a grace that came to all the hearers, prepared for the gospel itself and its reception. Usually it was maintained that the preaching of the law conveyed to the hearer the grace that put the sinner under the conviction of sin, so that he saw sin in himself as it really was, saw the hopelessness of his own sad condition, and saw the need for help outside himself in order to escape the just punishment of sin. But this conviction of sin did not necessarily guarantee that such a one would be saved.

One defender of the well-meant offer told me that this grace conveyed to the unregenerate enabled the person who received it to pray for regeneration. That is a powerful grace, but a prayer which, apparently, God does not always hear.

Some of the distinguishing features of preparationism can be found in Norman Petit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (Wesleyan University Press, 1969.) The later Puritans were not so concerned with “the disparity between the regenerate and the unregenerate and with the requirement of grace as an instantaneous illumination,” the author writes; “Rather, the baptized were expected to look for the beginnings, or first ‘signs,’ of regeneration.” Petit goes on to say, “If God’s will was always omnipotent, still He looked to the inner man for the ‘new heart’ required in the new covenant. If God alone sought out those to be taken, man had always to ‘choose’ God by entering the covenant voluntarily. And as the more English Puritans turned toward voluntarism, the higher became their conception of baptism, with greater possibilities for man’s doing something of his own” (13)

Thus the Puritans made room for man’s own work in salvation. “The preparationists maintain that contrition and humiliation were not in themselves saving graces but preliminary steps, and that while God takes away all resistance, this cannot be done without man’s consent” (18). “God’s mercy could be denied in the end. The prepared heart, while a necessary prerequisite to the conversion experience, was no guarantee of salvation. The lost soul could be left in utter confusion, between preparation and conversion, in ‘horror of heart, anguish and perplexity of spirit,’ even in the ‘very flames of hell’” (19).

More and more the emphasis in Puritan thought fell on man’s work. Petit writes, “With Hildersam (a Puritan theologian of great influence who lived 1536 – 1632, HH), in fact, the steps leading up to effectual conversion were given full elaboration for the first time. Beginning with the work of the Law in the external call, he alluded to the covenant promises themselves and emphasized throughout what man must ‘do’ before conversion. Ever careful to insist that regeneration ‘to speak properly be the mighty work of God,’ he nevertheless proclaimed that ‘we may ourselves do much in this work, yea . . . we must be doers in it ourselves or else it will never be well done’” (57, 58).

Still describing Hilversam’s position, the author goes on to say, “Hilversam does not commit himself on the efficacy of the preparatory states themselves. This point is also unclear in Rogers, where man in preparation is considered neither to have faith nor to be entirely ‘without it.’ In effect, Puritan divines had yet to take a clear stand on man’s spiritual status in the preparatory phase. If a reprobate, could man desire grace as well as fear the Law? Or are all desires God-given, indicating some kind of regenerative condition? Few Puritans, if any, could offer a satisfactory solution; but of those who tried, William Perkins was perhaps the most articulate of his age.” (61).

This notion became the ground for the emphasis that was placed in the preaching to urge the hearer to close with Christ, a plea that was filled with tenderness, pathos, and with the assurances that God truly desired the salvation of the sinner. And this subjective grace, worked in the hearts of the hearers by the preaching, put the hearer in a position to accept or reject the gospel offer. Especially the Marrow Men in the early 18th century emphasized this aspect of the preaching.

It is of passing interest that this same idea is present in the theology of those who hold to a conditional covenant. Their claim is that all who are baptized receive the promise of God that

they will be saved, on condition of faith. But all at baptism also receive covenantal grace, by which they are enabled to make their decision.

So also the well-meant gospel offer is gracious, that is, it actually bestows grace on the sinner; not saving grace but grace sufficient for a man to choose between accepting or rejecting the gospel.

There is no evidence in Scripture or the confessions that God gives such a grace to all who hear the gospel. In fact, our Canons sharply repudiated the notion of a conviction of sin brought about by the gospel: "The synod rejects the errors of those who teach that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God" (Canons, 3/4.B.4).

The whole concept of a subjective grace is Arminian. I know full well that those who want to maintain their Calvinistic credentials appeal to the fact that the final decision to accept Christ is due to the special grace of God; but this is like tipping one's hat in God's direction to acknowledge his presence, while ignoring him in fact as one goes his way down Arminian paths. God, in doing all he can do to persuade man to accept Christ, even goes so far as to give him grace by which he can accept Christ, but which grace does not guarantee salvation. When one adds to this the essential idea of the well-meant offer, namely that God earnestly desires the salvation of the sinner, then one has been caught in the quicksand of Arminian free-willism.

The question of the extent of Christ's atonement is crucial to any discussion of the well-meant offer. Theologians have proposed different solutions to the problem of the relationship between a well-meant gospel offer and the question: For whom did Christ die? Calvinists who held to limited atonement frequently refused to face the question and simply tried to maintain both a limited atonement and a general or universal desire on God's part to save all men. But this proved impossible. Grace, whether common or particular, is unmerited favor. Somewhere, somehow that grace shown to reprobate people had to have some judicial basis in God's own being if God's justice was to be maintained. Grace cannot be justly given to unworthy sinners unless God's justice is satisfied. And so gradually the idea of a universalizing of the atonement crept into the churches, which held to a well-meant offer.

The Calvinistic Church in Wales finally drifted into a universal atonement because of the pressure of those who held to a well-meant gospel offer and charged all who denied it with the charge: Hyper-Calvinism. The Christian Reformed Church, because of its adoption of a well-meant offer, was forced in the 60's to face the question of the extent of the atonement. I was present at the synod when the discussion was being carried on and there were those who opposed widening the effects of the atonement. But a stop was put to the debate by one speaker who said, in a fairly lengthy speech, Brethren, we believe in a well-meant offer, do we not? How is it then that we can deny that in some important ways Christ died for all men? As I recall, the three key words that were used to define a universal atonement were: intention, availability and sufficiency. Efficacy was denied and limited to the people of God.

The pressure put on the importance of the question of the extent of the atonement arose out of the simple question: "Can God, without hypocrisy, offer men what is not available?" It would surely be hypocrisy on my part to offer everyone who came to my front door \$100.00, if I only had about \$100.00 available to me.

But it is the question of the sufficiency of the gospel that attracted the most support, and most defenders were willing to base the well-meant gospel offer on the sufficiency of the atonement for all. This probably was due to the fact that the Canons of Dordt speak of the universal sufficiency of the atonement. The Canons say: "The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world' (Canons 2.3).

That the Canons do not intend to teach a universal atonement is evident from what the confession says a bit later in the same chapter: "For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect . . . that is, that it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross . . . should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language all those, and those only (emphasis is mine HH) who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given Him by the Father. . ." (Canons 2.8).

We shall have to examine this question of sufficiency further, but at a later time.

## THE "FREE OFFER" AND CHRIST'S ATONEMENT

In the previous installment I mentioned that a particularly persuasive ground for the well-meant gospel offer is the universal sufficiency of the atonement of Christ. A telling objection to the well-meant gospel offer has been the need for universalizing the extent of the atonement so that it may serve as the judicial basis for God's desire to save all men: What God offers has to be available. If salvation in Christ is offered to all, salvation in Christ has to be available. If one likes to retain his Calvinistic credentials, then he speaks of a universal sufficiency to the atonement but an efficacy limited only to the elect.

I found an interesting quote concerning this matter. It is found in Eugene Heideman, *The Theology of the Midwestern Reformed Church in America, 1866-1966* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009) 141, 142 footnote. The comment came in the context of a discussion of the influence of Kuyperian common grace on the RCA. One RCA, a professor in Western Theological Seminary, wrote: "There is a sense in which it is true that the whole world shares in the sacrifice of Christ. It is the basis of common grace as it is of saving grace. God is longsuffering with the wicked, causes rain to fall on the unjust, holds in check the destructive forces in nature and humanity, brings to fullest development the hidden possibilities in both man and beast, through his Spirit and for the sake of the mediatorial work of Christ." Although this was written in connection with Kuyperian common grace, the same applies to the well-meant gospel offer, for, as the author of the quote says, ". . . the whole world shares in the sacrifice of Christ. It is the basis of common grace as it is of saving grace."

Those who appreciated the force of the argument that somehow the grace offered in the gospel had to be earned by Christ, but were hesitant to widen the scope of the atonement fell back on the doctrine of the sufficiency of the atonement, while holding to the doctrine of the limited efficacy of the atonement (that is, that the atonement is efficacious only for the elect, though sufficient for all.) Thus the defenders of a well-meant gospel offer fell back on what is basically an Amyraldian position. (Amyraldianism is the heresy of a hypothetical universalism with respect to the atonement of Christ, and is used to support a well-meant gospel offer. It

was developed shortly after Dordt in France and spread to the United Kingdom where it was widely accepted.)

The strength of an appeal to the universal sufficiency of the atonement lies in its confessional basis. I quoted from the Canons of Dordt in this connection, where the sufficiency of the atonement is explicitly stated. The trouble is that those who appeal to the universal sufficiency of the atonement as taught in the Canons of Dordrecht do so without understanding the Canons, and, in fact, twisting their meaning and purpose. They cling to this one article in the Canons (2.A.3), as a drowning man clings to what appears to him to be a life raft.

Let us look closely at the article a moment.

Historically, the reason for inserting this article in the Canons was the wicked charge of the Arminians that the Reformed with their doctrine of particular redemption did serious injustice to the atonement by limiting its power or efficacy to only a relatively small number of people. The Reformed denied that and insisted rather that the suffering and death of Christ is “of infinite worth and value.”

The meaning of the fathers is clear. First of all, one must not measure the value and worth of Christ’s suffering and death in terms of kilograms, meters or liters. Christ’s suffering is not something of quantitative importance. If, and I speak as a fool speaks, there had been one more elect than there actually is, Christ would not have had to suffer a bit more than he did. Christ’s suffering is not a matter of “so much” for this sin, so much for that sin, so much for this sinner, so much for that sinner. To speak of the atonement in such a fashion is to mock it.

Secondly, the value and worth of the atonement is to be found in the person who submitted to it. The article emphatically states that “the death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin,” and it is therefore, “of infinite worth and value.”

The next article develops that idea further: “This death derives its infinite value and dignity from these considerations, because the person who submitted to it was not only really man and perfectly holy, but also the only begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit, which qualifications were necessary to constitute Him a Savior for us; and because it was attended with a sense of the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin” (2.A.4).

The Canons do not say that the atonement of Christ was sufficient to cover the sins of the whole world because God wanted to offer salvation to all; or because salvation is then available to all; or even because the great Synod of Dordt wanted to open the door a crack for the Amyraldian position that God is gracious to all. Nothing could have been farther from the minds of the fathers at Dordt. Their sole purpose is to extol the dignity and greatness of Christ who as both truly God and man paid the price for our sins.

There is something sinister about such careless re-writing of history and such blatant attempt to make the great theologians of Dordt say something that was so far from their minds. The Canons themselves compel us to abandon all efforts to find the judicial basis for common grace in the cross. It isn’t there. It cannot be found there. To appeal to the cross as providing blessings for others than the elect is pulling ideas out of the mind of man. Apart from the cross, common grace hangs there in the air, a mockery of God’s justice. In his work of showing grace to all God is content to set his justice aside and let his grace push his justice out of the way. In common grace God acts as one devoid of justice.



## **THE "APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS" IN GOD**

Many of those who hold to the doctrine of a well-meant and gracious gospel offer to all men have so far departed from the truth of Scripture and from what is widely known as The Five Points of Calvinism, that they have no time for such doctrines as unconditional election, particular redemption irresistible grace, total depravity and the perseverance of the saints. They have adopted a wholesale Arminianism to which these truths are anathema. Some have even gone beyond an Arminianism into a social gospel and have defined Calvinism as that spiritual force that can bring about the kingdom of heaven here in the world. This later Modernistic heresy is the inevitable outcome of a commitment to Arminianism, for Arminianism is incipient Modernism.

However, we are not concerned in this forum to do battle with Modernism, or even, for that matter with Arminianism as such. Our concern is another question. Those who profess to be Calvinists and who hold to the Westminster Confessions and the Three Forms of Unity are committed to the truth of the sovereignty of God in the work of salvation. That sovereignty is expressed also in the decree of election and reprobation, according to which God determines and wills that some whom he has chosen in Christ be saved and others damned in the way of their sin.

This insistence of Calvinism on election and reprobation stands diametrically opposed to the idea of a gracious gospel offer to all men. The gracious gospel offer means exactly that God wills the salvation of all men, earnestly desires it and announces his desire in the preaching of the gospel. The question then is: How can God both will the salvation of the elect alone on the one hand, and the salvation of all men on the other hand? This would seem to be an insurmountable problem.

Efforts to overcome the problem have been made by the adoption of a new and novel theory of the knowledge of God. I briefly outlined the idea two articles ago and quoted R. Scott Clark as a proponent and defendant of this position. He was not, however, the author of it. The first one, so far as I know, to develop this idea was Cornelius Van Till, who introduced the idea in connection with his defense of the well-meant gospel offer when he was professor in

Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His position was a part of the so-called Van Till – Clark controversy over the question of the incomprehensibility of God.

Briefly, the position of those who defend apparent contradiction is this. God’s knowledge of himself and of all things is infinite and divine. But because of his greatness, mere man, with his limited capacity for knowledge, is unable to know as God knows. Hence, what knowledge of God man has is limited, analogical and not identical with God’s knowledge. There are, so to speak, areas in which God’s knowledge of all things is so much greater than our knowledge, that what we know, while it may seem to be contradictory, is nevertheless perfect in God. Hence, in us God’s will to save all and God’s will to save some appear to be contradictory, in God the two are perfectly compatible with each other.

Various terms have been used to describe the discrepancy between God’s knowledge of all things and our knowledge of what God reveals. Sometimes our knowledge is described as containing “apparent contradictions,” that is, ideas which, while they seem contradictory to us, are not contradictory to God. Our knowledge is analogical knowledge, that is, our knowledge is only an analogy of God’s knowledge of the same proposition.

In this installment of our discussion of the subject of the well-meant gospel offer, I want to make some remarks about this strange argument behind which defenders hide themselves, for the argument, for some inexplicable reason, has become a keystone in the defense of what is obviously an unbiblical position.

I am aware of the fact that to repudiate such a position is to invite the charge of rationalism. But, once again, as I said in a previous installment concerning the charge of Hyper-Calvinism, it is easy to call names, but it is more difficult to come with sound Biblical exegesis and hard study to learn what the Scriptures say. I am not a rationalist, and in fact hate rationalism with great intensity. Rationalism is the proud insistence that we with our minds can know things better than God, for our minds are the canon of all truth. I had my fill of the siren call of rationalism in my years of the study of philosophy in college. It is the sin of intellectual pride. If I remember correctly, Dorothy Sayers in her book “Born to be King,” makes intellectual pride the chief sin of Judas Iscariot, and the deepest reason why he betrayed his Lord.

To bow in humility before the final authority of the Word of God is not rationalism; it is the calling of everyone who insists on being faithful to the truth of God. But, and here is the point that needs emphasis more than anything else, when it comes to this question of “apparent contradiction”: If God can both will the salvation of all men and will the salvation only of the elect, then Scripture is no more the canon of truth and the source and fountain of all our knowledge of God. If Scripture presents us with propositions that are logically contradictory, it is impossible to trust Scripture to reveal anything true about God.

This, it seems to me, is easy to demonstrate. If I pick up a book that is intended to teach me the basics of arithmetic, and I learn in chapter 1 that  $2 + 2 = 7$ , I would not want to rely on that book to tell me anything about arithmetic. Or, even worse, if the first chapter of the book teaches me that  $2 + 2$  sometimes  $= 4$ , but sometimes  $= 9$ , I would probably put the book down as being totally unable to teach me anything I need to know about arithmetic.

This is equally true of Scripture. If Scripture tells me in one place that God loves all men and wants all men to be saved, and somewhere else that God loves only His people whom he wills to save, then I cannot trust Scripture to tell me anything about God that is true. My knowledge of God may, as the defenders of a well-meant gospel say, be analogical; but my knowledge of arithmetic has got to be more than analogical. My teacher may say,  $2 + 2 = 4$ , and my

arithmetic book may say,  $2 + 2 = 9$  (or worse, my arithmetic book may say both are true); but my teacher will not earn my trust if she says, "Well, both can be true, because our knowledge of this equation is analogical. Both are arithmetic propositions; both have to do with addition of numbers; and so the analogy between them is sufficient to accept both as true. The arithmetic book was written by a man far superior to us in the field of mathematics, and so we, of lesser minds, can only understand that in the mind of the author of the book, the two thoughts are harmonious. We lesser minds will have to put up with the contradiction."

If Scripture reveals contradictory propositions, it is impossible for us to know anything about God, for Scripture may be telling us something that lies beyond our comprehension. Scripture, after all, is written by God. We are mere men.

I wonder sometimes and really suspect that the idea so frequently promoted even in conservative church circles that what Scripture says is relative, but not absolute truth, is not the fruit of this nonsense about apparent contradiction. I read a report submitted to the highest assembly of a "conservative" denomination on the question of creationism vs. evolutionism; the report opted for evolutionism (of the theistic brand – if there is such a thing) and justified its rejection of the clear teaching of Scripture on the grounds that Scripture spoke differently to different people in different areas of the world and at different times in the world's history. Scripture may very well have meant to ancient people that God created the world in six days of 24 hours; but we, in our scientific age are obligated to interpret Scripture differently in order to make it relevant to our times. This is a flat-out denial of the divine inspiration of Scripture.

But does not the position that we can understand Scripture because there are no logical errors in it make us rationalists? Does it not lead to the position that God is not incomprehensible, but can be understood by mere mortals? Is not our position the epitome of pride when it claims that man is able to understand God?

The charge must be answered.

Reformed people, including Calvin, have always insisted that God is indeed infinite and beyond all human comprehension. He is far, far above all his creation, which he made and which he upholds by his providence. He is, in his knowledge of himself infinitely greater than Scripture, which reveals him. Our knowledge of God is roughly comparable to the water in a small thimble compared with the vast expanse of oceans, seas, lakes and rivers. Calvin speaks of the miracle of Scripture in which the infinite God stoops down to whisper in our ear concerning himself and must, because of our humanity and sin, speak baby-talk. I believe that. But baby-talk is still the truth.

There is one more important point. Scripture is not a book that gives us some information about God, but Scripture has the power to bring us to God through Jesus Christ who is revealed in Scripture. This knowledge that Scripture gives us is the knowledge of the one with whom we can live in covenant fellowship. The knowledge we have is personal, experiential, saving knowledge of God revealed in Christ. It is the knowledge of God as our Friend, our Bridegroom, the one with whom we live in most intimate fellowship. When we are finally in heaven and see Christ, not through a mirror darkly, but face to face, we will say: "He is the same as I knew him while I was on earth. He is exactly the one in whom I believed as he described himself on the pages of Scripture. He is far greater, far more beautiful, far more wonderful; but he is the same. I may exclaim with the Queen of Sheba, "The half has not been told me," but the half that was told me was correct in every respect. He does not now – he

never did -- love every man. His blood was not spilled on Calvary for all men, but for me – and this innumerable host of redeemed of which I am a part.

Sometimes a man and a woman who have never seen each other carry on a courtship by mail. It would be a dreadful thing if all the letters they exchanged were only “analogies” of what these two actually were. Both are human; one is a male and the other a female. But if they did not describe themselves as they truly were, then when they finally met, both would say, Your letters lied; your personality is entirely different; further, my impression was that you love just me and now I learn you love all kinds of others. You are different from what I was told in your mail.” The one would not I am sure, satisfy the one to whom he was engaged by saying, “Well, the knowledge of myself that I gave you was analogical. It my thinking the two are not contradictory.” So it must be with those who speak of apparent contradictions in our knowledge of God.

The only surprise we will have in heaven will be the surprise of the overwhelming greatness of the glory of God, which glory we now see only by way of passing glimpses. But it forever shall be the same glory.

Does this mean that we can comprehend God? Of course it means no such thing. There is a profound difference between comprehending something, that is, having exhaustive knowledge of something, and knowing something. They are two different aspects of knowledge. I can have the latter without having the former. Knowledge is organic.

The wonder of knowledge, even in this world is like that. I know a rose bush very well. I have some in my flower gardens. I know a rose bush sufficiently well that I can recognize a rose bush wherever I go in the world and whatever variety of rose I see. I know how to prevent diseases in the bush. I know what kind of fertilizer it must have. No one can deceive me by coming with an orchid and telling me that it is a rose. Nevertheless, there are hundreds and perhaps thousands of botanists who know rose bushes far better than I. They can write books about roses that are learned treatises and scientific explanations of the life of a rose bush and its intricate parts. Whether they have exhaustive knowledge of roses is another thing. No man has exhaustive knowledge of anything in God’s creation. Nevertheless, if you ask me, “Do you know a rose bush?” My answer would be, “Yes, of course.” If he would ask, “Do you enjoy roses?” my response would be, “Indeed I do!” In other words, a true knowledge of anything is not an exhaustive knowledge. A true knowledge of God is not, need not be, cannot be, never into all eternity will be an exhaustive knowledge. But if someone would ask me, “Do you know God?” my answer would be, without hesitation, “Yes, of course, I know God. We spoke together this morning.” And if the questioner would persist, “Is your knowledge of him as he truly is?” My answer would be emphatically in the affirmative, because if I did not know him as he truly is, I do not know him at all. But if, again, the questioner would persist and ask whether I know all that there is to know of God, I would only look at him in amazement that he should ask such a question. “Why, of course not. He is the infinite One, beyond all human comprehension.”

We know him from the sacred Scriptures as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. We have such true knowledge of him that we know what is true about him and what is a lie. We know him intimately and personally as our Friend and Redeemer. That is the joy of our knowledge of him.

To claim that he both loves every man and at the same time loves only some men gives me no knowledge of God, but is convincing proof that they who claim this do not know him – not as he is revealed in the holy Scriptures. That is the truth concerning this cruel description of a God filled with contradictions.

### **FURTHER REFLECTION ON THE "KNOWLEDGE OF GOD."**

Before we go on in our discussion of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer, I want to go back briefly to Clark's distinction between knowledge as it is in God and knowledge as we receive it. R. Scott Clark calls this the difference between *theologia archetypha* and *theologia ectypa*, a distinction that, in Scott's opinion, solves the apparent contradiction between knowledge as it is in God (God's decree to save only his people) and knowledge of God that we possess (God's desire to save all men).

The Latin terms may give a sense of learning to the argument and persuade others by some superior language found only in the Latin, but the fact is that the English words mean something quite different. According to my trusty Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, confirmed by Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, the English word *archetype* means "original" and the English word *ectype* means "copy."

Now, I do not think that it would be proper to call our knowledge of God a "copy" of God's knowledge of Himself. Our knowledge of God is the knowledge of fellowship and friendship. It is like the knowledge to learn about my knowledge I have of my wife; and Scripture confirms that I have God's full consent to use the analogy of marriage. Nor must we forget this when we talk of the knowledge of God. Scripture makes it very clear that our knowledge of God is of such a kind that the same word can be used for it as is used for Adam and Eve, when Adam "Knew" his wife Eve and she conceived and bore a son (Gen. 4:1).

The wicked have a certain knowledge of God as well, acquired through God's speech in creation (Rom. 1:18ff.) But this knowledge is very limited, although accurate. They know, Paul says, that God is God and that he alone must be served. This is not a knowledge different from what God has in himself and of himself; if it were, the wicked would have an excellent excuse for not serving him (Rom. 1:20). They will not be able to say in the judgment: "We had only ectypal knowledge of thee and did not know that thou art the only God."

But the knowledge that the believer has is saving knowledge, knowledge of covenant fellowship. With God, knowledge that sets free, knowledge that saves. But it is impossible to imagine that such knowledge could be intimate and covenantal if it involved contradictions. If I

may carry the analogy of the knowledge of my wife into the context of the well-meant gospel offer, the intimate knowledge of our marriage would be impossible. She told me that she loved me and wanted to be married to me and to live with me in the intimacy of marriage. But she told me also that, in some sort of different way, which I could not comprehend, she loved other men as well and desired to be married to them. This sort of thing would make the knowledge of the intimacy of marriage impossible – even if she said to me, (as some defenders of the well-meant gospel offer say): “My love for other men is different from my love for you. It is not contradictory, as you seem to think, but you are not capable of understanding why it is not contradictory.” I assure you, that would do little to relieve my concern – if “concern” is a strong enough word.

But, supposing that we use the ideas of “original” and “copy” for a moment. If God’s knowledge of Himself is original (as it is) and our knowledge of God is a copy, the copy is like the original in many respects or it is not a copy. If the copy says that God loves his people as elect, but God loves all men in his desire to save them, then the original has to say that too, or the copy is no more a copy. In other words, if the copy says things not found in the original, it is not a copy.

To say that the copy has problems and contradictions in it that the original does not have is to say that we do not have a copy at all, and that we cannot tell what the original says. We are incapable of saying anything about the original. We cannot say anything about God from the knowledge we have in Scripture. We are theological agnostics; and the knowledge of God as our God is forever impossible – even in heaven. Even in heaven, I say, for our knowledge of God that we shall have in heaven is the same as it is now in all respects. We know God always and only through Christ. The difference is only that now we know Christ through a mirror darkly (I Cor. 12:13), but presently we shall know him face to face.

But again our knowledge that we have through a mirror darkly is not and cannot be contradictory and therefore inaccurate. If I am shaving in front of the mirror and see my wife behind me, I do not expect that by turning around and seeing who is behind me, it will be another person than my wife. When we turn around in heaven, throw away the mirror, and see Christ face to face, and God in Christ, we will not say (thank God) I had an entirely wrong knowledge of you while I was in the world. I thought you said in the mirror, “I love not only you, but all men.” And the answer would come to us in heaven, “Your knowledge of me while you were on earth was only *theologia ectypa* and not *theologia archetypa*. We ought to be very thankful that that is not the case. Can you imagine a martyr willing to die for his knowledge of Christ when it is only *theologia ectypa*? I would not be prepared to do that. I will gladly and willingly die for one who is my Friend, who has cared for me, saved me from the wreck I made of my own life, and will take me into his own covenant life. I cannot imagine myself dying for a god of whom I know nothing, much less whether he truly loves me, when he loves everybody, even those who kill me and who go to hell.

No, the distinction will do nothing to solve the problem, but it will only rob us of the knowledge of our God through Jesus Christ, a knowledge that is more than life to us.

\* \* \* \*

I called attention to the fact in an earlier installment that the well-meant gospel offer was inevitably Arminian. We must give some attention to this, although the charge is so obvious that it does not require much discussion.

We must bear in mind that the well-meant gospel offer insists that it is God's desire to save all men and that he provides the grace necessary for man to make a decision for or against the gospel. This is Arminian on the very surface of it. Nothing can alter that conclusion and no arguments can gainsay this inevitable charge.

God either desires the salvation of all men or he does not. One of the two has to be true. If he does not, the well-meant gospel offer is false; if he does, one is forced to explain why not all are saved. A god that is unable to accomplish what he desires is a god who leaves the final decision of salvation to the sinner. If that is not true, then all knowledge of God is impossible, and we are left bereft of our assurance of salvation.

I am aware of the attempts that have been made to escape this difficulty, but we have examined these attempts, chiefly the one I discussed in the first part of this installment and in the installment previous to this one, and have found it, after being weighed in the balances, to be wanting.

That the well-meant offer of the gospel leads to Arminianism is a fact of Scripture. There are pretended Calvinists who in their defense of the well-meant offer, have denied reprobation. It is interesting to ask a defender of the offer whether he believes in reprobation, and his answer will be either, "Yes, but we have nothing to do with it, for it belongs to the hidden things of God," or, "No, I do not believe in sovereign reprobation, but only such reprobation as God's rejection and punishment of those who reject the gospel.

More and more, defenders of the well-meant offer argue for a universal atonement, at least in some sense of the word. But the fact is simply this: Christ died for the elect, or Christ died for everyone. If God makes salvation available to everyone, Christ died for everyone. No theological squirming can avoid this choice.

The well-meant offer is accompanied by preparatory grace. As I pointed out in an earlier installment, such preparationism, already among the Puritans, put emphasis on man's contribution to salvation and thrust into man's hands some of the responsibility for his ultimate salvation. But as one farmer said to Henry De Cock, minister of the Reformed Church in Ulrum, the Netherlands, and leader of the Separation of 1834, "Reverend, if I had to contribute one sigh to my salvation, I would be forever lost." "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" Eph. 2:8, 9).

A striking example of the Arminianism of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer is a decision of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church last summer. An appeal was brought to Synod, which appealed a decision of a classis. This classical decision exonerated a prominent minister in the CRC who taught a universal atonement of Christ, a universal love of God, and a free-will in man, upon the choice of which depended a man's salvation. The synod also exonerated him without any discussion. (You can find an analysis of the decision in the October 1 issue of the Standard Bearer. The Standard Bearer can be found on the Protestant Reformed website.)

All five points of Calvinism are lost. Man is no longer totally depraved; he is the object of God's grace. Grace is resistible because the grace of preparationism can be used to reject the gospel; salvation is never certain, because final salvation depends on the faithfulness of the one who has, by his power, accepted the offer of the gospel.

There is no amount of semantic or theological legerdemain that can extricate someone from this morass.



## **TWO CHARGES AGAINST DENIERS OF A "FREE OFFER"**

There are two more charges that are brought against those who deny that a gracious offer of the gospel is taught in either the Scriptures or the confessions.

The first charge is that those who deny the gospel offer cannot perform evangelism. This is a strange charge, but it is frequently made. The assumption is that a church cannot do evangelistic work unless the church believes that God gives all who hear the gospel grace in their hearts to accept or reject Christ, that he loves all men and that this universal love is possible because Christ died for all men. Basically, the charge is that a Calvinist cannot do evangelistic work, but one must be Arminian in his theology to do true evangelism.

We should put it the other way around: The fact is that no Arminian is able to do evangelistic work; only a Calvinist is able to keep the command of Christ to go into all the world and preach the gospel.

It has never been clear to me why this charge is made against those who deny a gracious and well-meant offer. Why does one have to tell all men that God loves them if evangelism is to be effective? The only answer I can think of is that the preacher must preach a gospel that tries to persuade a man to accept Christ, something which man has the power to do. And that is Arminianism.

That is not the description of the preaching of the gospel that Scripture gives us. Paul writes in Romans 1: 16 that the gospel is "the power of God" unto salvation. The idea is surely that God works through the gospel and is pleased to use the gospel to save those who were ordained unto eternal life. But God saves, not man. The power of the gospel is in God's work, not the work of man. This is Paul's contention in I Corinthians 2:5, II Corinthians 10:3, 4. No wooing is necessary; no persuasion is required. God saves irresistibly by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the elect. All that the preacher is called to do is proclaim the whole counsel of God by preaching Christ crucified.

The Canons of Dordrecht also oppose such nonsense. Instead of the word “persuading,” which I used above, the Canons uses the word “advising” to describe the Arminian error. The article is found in the Rejection of Errors 3/4, 7, where the Canons rejects the error of those who teach “that the grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising, or (as others explain it) that this is the noblest manner of working in the conversion of man, and that this manner of working, which consists in advising, is most in harmony with man’s nature and that there is no reason why this advising grace alone should not be sufficient to make the natural man spiritual, indeed, that God does not produce the consent of the will except through this manner of advising; and that the power of the divine working, whereby it surpasses the working of Satan, consists in this, that God promises eternal, while Satan promises only temporal goods. But this is altogether Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture which, besides this, teaches yet another and far more powerful and divine manner of the Holy Spirit’s working in the conversion of man, as in Ezekiel: a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). ” (\_\_\_\_\_, *The Confessions and the Church Order to the Protestant Reformed Churches* [Protestant Reformed Churches, 2005] 172)

But there is more. The Scriptures also teach that the preaching of the gospel has a two-fold power: the power to save, but also the power to harden. Already in the Old Testament, the prophet was called to utter these words: For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Is. 55:10,11). This figure is picked up in the New Testament in Hebrews 6, in which passage the author is explaining the reason for the unforgivable sin. He writes: “For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.” (Heb. 6:7-8,).

Paul makes this two-fold effect of the gospel explicit when he writes: “Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ” (II Cor. 2:14-17).

It is impossible to fit into that verse anything that even resembles the gracious and well-meant gospel offer.

One more charge must be considered: I speak of the charge that all who deny the gracious and well-meant offer are called “Hyper-Calvinists.” This is rather silly, because never so far as I know has a reason been given why those who deny the heresy of the well-meant gospel offer are Hyper-Calvinists. But the charge sticks and many in America and overseas, especially in the British Isles, have picked up the term.

In a way, it is a lazy man’s method of argumentation. To find an opprobrious name and to label someone with it is a far easier way to refute someone’s position than to show carefully and fully why one is wrong in what he does or teaches. To label one a Hyper-Calvinist who shows carefully that the gracious and well-meant gospel offer is contrary to Scripture seems to relieve

one of the more difficult task of showing from Scripture that Scripture indeed teaches a grace of God towards all men in the preaching of the gospel.

But as is true of all labels and opprobrious names, this one too is spurious. The church is plagued by Hyper-Calvinists. I myself have debated in correspondence with and lost the friendship of those who are adamant in their Hyper-Calvinistic position. Hyper-Calvinists teach that the gospel, especially the command of the gospel to repent from sin and believe in Christ, is for the elect only. They deny, therefore, the words of Jesus, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14). They do not deal honestly with such passages as Proverbs 8:1-6: "Doth not wisdom cry? And understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors. Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of man. O ye simple, understand wisdom: and ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart. Hear; for I will speak of excellent things . . ."

There are many other passages of a similar kind. One can find a detailed discussion of this subject in David Engelsma's book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*.

It is Biblical and Reformed to teach that the gospel is and must be promiscuously proclaimed. Christ's command is to go into all the world and teach all nations (Matt. 28:19). That preaching of the gospel must include the promise of God to save all those who believe, and the command to all who hear the gospel to repent of their sins and believe in Christ.

There is a world of difference between an offer and a command. God does not offer salvation, give grace to a depraved sinner that he may make a choice, and then await the man's decision. He commands to man to repent of sin and believe in Christ. It is an obligation laid on everyone to turn from one's evil way and serve God. It is so much an obligation that to disobey warrants punishment in hell. Disobedience to God's command is deadly.

The obligation to repent of sin rests upon man in spite of his total depravity. The proponents of common grace are sufficiently intelligent to see that a totally depraved man cannot obey the command, nor can he accept the offer of salvation. A general grace has to be introduced; a grace that makes it possible for a totally depraved man to accept or reject what is proclaimed in the gospel and offered to him.

Underneath lies the problem: How can God demand of a man that which he is incapable of doing? How can God require man to repent of sin when he is totally depraved and incapable of obeying God's command? How can he believe in Christ when faith is a gift of God and God gives faith only to those whom he has elected?

The Hyper-Calvinist says: "God doesn't do this. He does not demand of man that which he cannot do" The gracious-offer man says: "God would be unjust in demanding of man that which he is incapable of doing. Therefore, God really wants him to be saved, but permits the choice to be man's choice, and he gives grace so that his total depravity is mitigated and he can make the choice." The Reformed man says, without hesitation, "Yes, God demands of man that which He cannot do. That is Biblical and Confessional teaching. "Doth not God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in His law that which he cannot perform? Not at all, for God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own willful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts" (\_\_\_\_\_, *Confessions*, 86 Heidelberg Catechism q & a 9).

Two points are made here. The first is that the fall of Adam is our responsibility, for Adam sinned as our federal head. We turned our backs on God and his command – in Adam. The second is that God does not simply forget his just demands of man. He cannot do that and remain just – any more than a bank may excuse a mortgage holder from making his payments on the mortgage. The house-owner's own profligacy does not excuse him from his monthly payments.

And so the command continues to come to man to repent of his sin, forsake his evil way and live in obedience to God.

To believe in Christ is for sinful man the way to escape his depravity and be saved from his sin. Of course, man cannot believe any more than he can repent. Repentance brings him necessarily to Christ and faith in Christ. Hence the command is to repent and to believe in Christ. Both are part of one command.

But Hyper-Calvinists we are not.

## **IS THE "FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL" TAUGHT IN THE CANONS OF DORDT?**

In the one installment before the last I put to rest the false notion that our knowledge of God, which is apparently contradictory, is in God's mind perfectly harmonious. Such an idea as this does two serious and destructive things to our knowledge of God. First, it results in theological agnosticism; that is, we cannot really know who and what God is and what is the nature of his mighty works. Second, we cannot know him with that saving knowledge of which Jesus speaks in his high-priestly prayer: "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

In this installment, we turn to a consideration of the proof for a gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel that comes to all men to express God's universal love and divine intention to save all who hear the gospel. It is my intention to treat first the confessional proof offered.

The Christian Reformed Church (CRC), which officially adopted the three points of common grace and made it binding on all members of the church, appealed especially to two articles in the Reformed confessions. Only two quotes from the confessions were given. The first is Canons 2.5, which reads: "Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel"

It is not clear how the CRC found even the suggestion of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer in this article. There is no mention of any kind of a grace that comes to all who hear the gospel; even though such a "common grace" is a part of the offer. It is possible that the CRC meant by appeal to this article that the word "promise" actually means "offer," but it is hard to imagine that intelligent men would confuse "promise" with "offer." The two are very different. It is more likely that the CRC found in the word "command" the idea of an offer. The article reads: "This promise (that God will save believers, HH) together with the command to repent and believe. . . ," means that "This promise, together with the offer of salvation that man

repent and believe . . . ,” was in the minds of those who established the offer as confessional doctrine. This interpretation would be supported by the fact that the article says: [The promise and command of the gospel] “ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons . . . .” In other words, that the command and promise of the gospel ought to be proclaimed to all the world means that the gospel is an offer to all men stating most emphatically that God loves them all and desires their salvation.

But the teaching of this article is clear and unambiguous. The preceding article speaks of the perfect sacrifice for sin by the eternal Son of God who came into our flesh to atone for sin. This article presupposes therefore, that Christ’s atonement is the content of the gospel. And Christ’s atonement is not made for everyone, but as Article 8 states emphatically: “This was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect. . . , that is, it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross . . . should effectually redeem . . . all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father. . . .”

That gospel of Christ crucified contains this promise: “That whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life” . The gospel proclaims that believers, and only believers in Christ crucified will be saved.

It has been argued that the wording of the promise makes believing or faith a condition to salvation. That is, it has been argued that the gospel is proclaimed requiring faith as a condition of its fulfillment. Thus, man by his own power believes. When he believes he is saved. Thus faith is the condition man must fulfill in order to be saved.

But this is not the intent of the Canons. Article 8, part of which we quoted above, also includes the following statement: “. . . It was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross . . . should effectually redeem . . . all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith . . . .” (Ibid). This is in harmony with what the Canons state in 1.6: “That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God’s eternal decree . . . .”

The promise of the gospel is that God saves those who believe in Christ; and faith, the power by which men believe and are saved, is given through the power of the cross of Christ.

One may wonder why the article phrases the promise in the way that it does. The reason is that the article, as Scripture does, looks at the whole salvation of Christ as the conscious experience of the elect believer. Faith is brought to consciousness by the gospel. That faith lays hold on Christ set forth by the gospel, and lay hold on him only. Clinging to Christ alone the believer has salvation consciously as his own possession.

At the same time, the gospel also contains “the command to repent and believe” I hope to discuss this more in detail a bit later. Now, I only call attention to the fact that the command of God to man to repent and believe is a part of the gospel, accompanies the promise of the gospel, and is crucial for the preaching of the gospel. The command, as far as its contents are concerned, is serious. God means what he says. When he commands men to repent, he means that it is his will that men repent. Further, to repent of sin means also to believe. The act of believing that God commands is faith in Christ. That is, not simply a historical faith, which confesses that Christ is indeed the one who accomplished salvation, but faith that personally lays hold on Christ for one’s self as being God’s only way of salvation

It is at this point that the defenders of a gracious offer of the gospel find their justification for teaching that God wants all men to be saved. And it is here that these same defenders of common grace find ground for two wills in God: one will to save only the elect, and another will that seriously desires of all men that they forsake sin and believe in Christ.

Some will say, If God's will and purpose is to save only the elect (Art. 8) and it is also God's will that all men repent of sin and believe in Christ, is it not true that God has two wills that contradict each other?

I do not want to enter into this question in detail at this point. It is not a new question, for Calvin already discussed it in his *Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*. There will be ample opportunity to discuss the question when we come to deal with various passages of Scripture that are appealed to as proof of the gracious, well-meant gospel offer. It is sufficient here to point out that God's command to repent and believe is not rooted in, nor does it imply, God's desire to save all men. The command to repent and believe rests in man's original creation, in which man was created able to keep God's law perfectly. That he fell from this lofty position into sin is not God's fault, but man's own sin. God, however, maintains his just demands on man. God cannot and will not simply overlook sin and excuse man for his failure to obey God. The gospel confronts man with the horror of his sin and insists that man forsake it

The figure has been correctly used of a man who contracts with a builder to build him a house. At the builder's request, the cost of the house is given before building begins. But the builder takes that money and goes with his wife on a round-the-world cruise. Upon his return, the man who advanced the builder the money insists that now the builder build his house. The builder cannot successfully hide behind his inability to buy the materials needed. He was given the means to build the house; he failed, but he remains responsible for building that house. His inability does not free him from his responsibility.

Finally, the article (2.5) teaches that the promise of the gospel along with the command to repent of sin and believe in Christ must be preached throughout the world. Even here a limitation is included: ". . . ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel."

This promiscuous proclamation of the gospel is necessary, first, because God gathers a church from all the nations of the earth; and, second, because in the judgment day the crucial question, addressed to all nations, will be: "What did you do with Christ?" On the basis of the answer to this question they will be judged.

## **GOD'S COMMAND TO REPENT AND BELIEVE**

We were considering the confessional proof offered by the defenders of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer; more particularly, we were considering the proof offered in Canons 2.5, which we quoted last time.

The article establishes the truth that the gospel proclaims that all who believe in Christ will be saved: “. . . whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” I pointed out earlier that this language does not give the opportunity to claim that faith is a condition to salvation. The language used is, first of all, Biblical (John 3:16); second, the language emphasizes that faith is that gift of God by which the elect lays hold on Christ crucified and appropriates him for his own; and third, is part and parcel of the other part of the gospel: “the command to repent and believe.”

It is that command to repent and believe that is often interpreted as a gracious offer. But anyone can see the difference between the two. One who is offered something has it within his power to accept it or reject it. One who is commanded to do something, on the other hand, must do what he is commanded to do, or suffer the consequences of disobedience. That is indeed a very great difference.

To repent and believe in Christ is commanded of all in the gospel. Man is placed by the gospel under solemn obligation to repent of his sin and believe in Christ.

As I pointed out in an earlier article, man is commanded to repent of his sin because God maintains his righteous demands that were placed upon man in Paradise. God must do this to remain a holy God. The fact that man no longer obeys God and, indeed, is unable to do it, makes no difference at all. Man's inability is brought upon him by his own refusal to obey God. God is not to be blamed for man's total depravity; man despised God's command and chose rather the evil promises of Satan.



To believe in Christ is also man's obligation. God has provided the way of escape from sin and death; God has sent Christ into the world as the only one under heaven by whom man can be saved. Surely, God did not need to provide salvation, but he did. And now God commands men to believe in Christ as the only way he can be saved. But man will not, for he hates God and Christ and would rather go to hell than obey God and believe in Christ. His hatred of God's command is manifested in his crucifixion of Christ. It is a terrible depravity, which man brought upon himself. And it is a terrible sin to refuse to obey God's command to believe in the one through whom salvation is possible.

But the objector will say: Man can do nothing else but repudiate Christ. True. But man's inability is a terrible state that man brought upon himself; and he alone is to be blamed for it.

But the objector will say: But God does injustice to man for demanding of him that which he cannot do. Lord's Day 4, 9 answers that question: "God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own willful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts."

It is interesting to note, rather parenthetically, that both Arminians and Antinomians agree that God does not demand of man that which he cannot perform. The Arminian says, "Man can perform obedience to God's command, because man has a free will. The Antinomian agrees that man cannot obey God, but dodges the issue by claiming that God does not demand good works; the imputed righteousness of Christ is sufficient. This same antinomian position is often the position of the Hyper-Calvinist as well.

Again, the objector will say that man has to have some sort of ability to choose to do good or evil before he can be punished for his failure to the good can be held against him. This is the Arminians' argument for free will. The Arminian claims that only a man with free will can really be punished for doing wrong. The confessional answer is the same: Yes, but God made him capable of doing the good; capable of choosing between good and evil; and it is his own fault that he lost the ability to pay the debt that he owes to God.

God's insistence that man repent of sin and believe in Christ is rooted in his own holiness. God would deny himself if he was to listen to the Arminians. The Arminians try to tell God that he would show an abundance of mercy and love if he would simply overlook man's terrible sin, forget man did such dastardly things, excuse man for a moment's recklessness, and so act as if sin had never been committed.

God's insistence that men obey him is not another will in God that is contradictory to his decretive will to save only some. I am aware of the language that is often used in this respect: the will of God's decree and the will of God's command, or something similar. But if such terminology leads to the conclusion that there are two wills in God, the terminology ought not to be used. Even more so, if the terminology leads to the notion that the will of God's command is a gracious and loving offer, the terminology is yet more deceptive.

It seems to me to be better to speak of the holy demands of God's law that he maintains throughout all history, regardless of the moral state of man. God's will, on the other hand, is His ultimate determination to save from the sin into which they plunged themselves and for

which they are responsible, those whom he has chosen eternally in Christ and to punish those whom he has determined to damn for their sins as manifestations of his holiness and justice.

The gospel accomplishes that purpose. God, through Christ and by means of the church, proclaims that all those who believe in Christ, set forth in the gospel, will be saved, and those who reject the gospel and remain in their sins will be damned. That gospel is heard wherever the gospel is preached, by elect and reprobate alike. It is heard by all to whom the gospel is sent according to God's good pleasure.

Accompanying that gospel is the work of the Holy Spirit of Christ who works faith in the hearts of the elect so that, when they hear the gospel of Christ crucified and salvation in him, along with the command to repent of their sins and believe in Christ, they turn from their wicked ways and flee with their sins to the cross. But when the wicked hear Christ crucified, they do just as the wicked Jews of Jesus' day and crucify him again in mockery and scorn.

God reveals in the righteous who come to Christ the riches of his grace, mercy and love; God reveals in the wicked his just judgment and holy hatred of sin. The wicked have not only walked in the ways of evil; they have shown how truly evil they are in their crucifying of Christ. Just as in Jesus' day, the gospel of the cross rips away any mask of piety and religion the wicked might have to cover their terrible sin, and their wickedness is revealed for what it truly is: a hatred of God and of his Christ.

God's purpose is sovereignly accomplished and God's perfections are revealed and shown to be the only perfection there is.

### **WHAT OF THE CANONS OF DORDT, ARTICLES 8 AND 9?**

One other quotation from the Reformed Confessions was given as proof for the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. It is found in Articles 8 and 9 of the third head of doctrine in the Canons of Dordt. I quote it here in full.

“As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly shown in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him and believe on Him.

“It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves, some of whom when called, regardless of their danger, reject the Word of life, others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their heart; therefore their joy, arising only from a temporary faith, soon vanishes and they fall away; while others choke the seed of the Word by perplexing cares and the pleasures of this world, and produce no fruit. This our Savior teaches in the parable of the sower ( Matt. 13) ”.

Although the Synod of the CRC in 1924 gave no explanation of this article and made no effort to show how this article actually proved the gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel, their line of reasoning was most probably this: Because the call of God that comes in the gospel to all men to repent of sin and believe in Christ is “unfeigned,” that is, is sincere and expresses what is pleasing to God, therefore God expresses in the gospel his desire to save all men. This interpretation is an astounding jump in logic, but I cannot explain in any other way why this article was quoted in support of the offer.

Let us consider the article for a few moments.

It would be a dreadful slander of God to consider the opposite of what the article teaches. What would the Synod of Dordt have been saying about God if this article were not true. It would be saying that God does not really mean what he says when he commands men to repent of their sin and believe in Christ. Really, behind this command lies God's secret hope that man will not take the command seriously, but realizes that it is only a joke. It would mean that God is deceiving man when he commands them to repent and believe.

Further, if the command of the gospel to repent were not very seriously meant by God, God's punishment of the wicked who reject the gospel would be grievously unjust. If I would order my son to cut the lawn, but would secretly hope he did not do it, and then, upon his failure to obey, give him a hard spanking, I would become a hypocrite.

God is in dead earnest when he comes to men with the command to repent. He is God; he has the right to command men to do as they were created to do. He has the right to punish them when they refuse. In fact, he would be less than God if he did not punish them for their opposition to him. This is clearly what the article is saying.

Secondly, the article also implies a distinction between what God has eternally determined in his counsel and what he commands men to do. God's eternal counsel, including the decree of eternal predestination, is his sovereign will and unchangeable purpose. The article is not speaking of that counsel of God, but of what is "pleasing to him, namely that those who are called should come to him." I have repeatedly demonstrated that repentance from sin is pleasing to God because God created man capable of doing good and serving God with the whole of his being; and God refuses to alter his demands upon man because of what man himself did when he sinned. The distinction is clear and one does wrong when one confuses the issue.

Thirdly, God's counsel in reprobation is indeed to manifest his righteous justice in damning sinners to hell, but let it never be forgotten that God executes his counsel in such a way that man remains responsible for his sin. God does not make man sin; man sins willingly and willfully. This is clearly the teaching of Article 9, which I quoted above.

If one should inquire into how it is possible for God to be sovereign also over the sin of man and still hold man accountable for his sin, let it be clearly understood that one is shifting the discussion to an entirely different question; indeed a question over which much ink has been spilled and with which theologians have struggled for many centuries. Already the old church father, Augustine, who taught double predestination, but never denied man's accountability, dealt with the problem.

Scripture teaches both and finds no conflict between them: God is sovereign; man is accountable. This is the firm and unwavering conviction of the church. And the teaching of Scripture.

Finally, it is true that Canons 3/4.9 uses the word "offer." But as I and others have repeatedly pointed out, there is no problem with the word "offer" as long as it is taken in the sense in which the fathers of Dordt took it, along with all theologians in the 17th century, who used Latin in their theological works. The Latin *offere* means simply "to present" Christ as publicly

proclaimed and presented as the one in whom alone can be found salvation. When men are called to repent of their sin in obedience to the command of God, they are also called to believe in Christ presented in the gospel. When men refuse to do this, their refusal is rooted in their sin. For such disobedience they are justly punished.

We now turn to the passages in Scripture used to support the error of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. I consider this to be the most important part of our investigation of this doctrine. After all, Scripture is the only and final authority for all our faith and all our life. If the offer is taught in Scripture, we must teach it regardless of any other consideration. But if it is not taught in Scripture, we not only err when we teach it, but we deceive the people of God.

In our considerations of various texts in Scripture that are appealed to in support of the offer we find passages quoted, which are purported to teach that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is universal; that is, that he died on the cross for all men. Such pages as John 3:16 and I John 2:2 are referred to. It is not my intention to enter into the question of the extent of the atonement. It is true that to support a well-meant and gracious gospel offer, it is necessary to expand the extent of the atonement to include all men, for salvation must be available if it is offered to all, and it can be available for all only if Christ died for all. But to enter into a defense of the extent of the atonement would involve repetition of what I have said in early installments.

Two passages especially are favorites in defense of the gospel offer. I refer to I Timothy 2:4, which reads: "Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth;" and I Timothy 4:10: "For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe."

It is also true that there are those who in the interests of maintaining a particular atonement and still teaching the offer, speak of gifts merited on the cross for all men that are not a part of salvation: a sort of an overflow of blessings from the cross that engulfs all men.

Or, with a slightly different emphasis, some maintain that Christ died for all men, but only in a way sufficient to save all, intended to save all, but not efficacious to save all. I have dealt with this in an earlier installment, and need not repeat here what I said there.

The fact is that no Scriptural evidence can be adduced for either position. The argument defending a broader atonement than an atonement of our Savior that is only for the elect is not a deduction from Scripture, but a bold and unwarranted attempt to support the theory of an offer by supplying it with a judicial ground in the cross of Jesus Christ. One looks for a text to support a heresy, and as Luther himself said, Any heresy in the world can be supported by some sort of text, if one wants to do so. The Dutch expression is, Elk ketter heft z'n letter. The translation is: "Every heretic has his text."

### **WHAT OF I TIM. 2:4 & I TIM. 4:10? (51)**

In the last installment I referred to two passages of Scripture that are quoted in support of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer, which comes to all men as an expression of God's love for all men and his desire to save all men. The first is I Timothy 2:4: Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." The second is I Timothy 4:10: "For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe."

What do these texts teach?

I Timothy 2:4. Almost all serious commentators, including Calvin, take this passage in the light of the context in which Paul admonishes Timothy to pray for all men. This "all men" is defined in verse 2 as "kings, and all that are in authority." The reason to pray especially for all in authority over us is "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty;" that is, we must pray for those in authority for the sake of the well-being of the church.

To do this is pleasing to God, because it is his will that all be saved. God saves all kinds of people, including those in authority. Timothy needs to know this, for those in authority were persecuting the church, and he would have wondered why he had to pray for obvious enemies of the gospel. But this was surely in keeping with our Lord's own instructions to citizens of the kingdom in Matthew 5:44.

It all seems clear enough and one cannot help but wonder how this text can be quoted to support the idea of a universal love of God and a desire of God to save all men.

I Timothy 4:10. If one takes this passage in the context in which it is written, the meaning is not all that hard to ascertain. Paul says that it is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Timothy exercise himself unto godliness, for physical exercise is of little profit, while godliness

“has the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come” (verse 8). That is a great incentive to practice godliness! Such a great incentive is this for the apostle (and he wants his own life to be an example to Timothy) that he is willing both “to labour and suffer reproach” at the hands of the enemies of the gospel for the sake of the exercise of godliness. The reproach of the wicked does not mean very much and has little significance for him because he trusts in God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially the elect.

To set aside for a moment the true meaning of the passage, it is worth our while to note that should this be used in support of a universal desire of God to save all men, the text proves more than supporters of a well-meant gospel would themselves want.

After all, the text does not say that God desires to save all men, but that Christ is actually the Saviour of all men. That is more than the most dedicated Arminian wants to say.

There is another meaning to the Greek word *soter* (Savior) that is the meaning here. That meaning is “Preserver.” Christ preserves all men, especially the elect. Paul calls attention to this fact as the reason why he is not troubled by reproach for the godliness in which he exercises himself. The reason, apparently, is that God has his own purpose in preserving every man.

Whether he be elect or reprobate, he is created by God to serve God’s sovereign purpose in history. By his providence, God preserves righteous and wicked alike. The wicked too exist by the word of God, the same word that sustains the entire creation. (See for this use, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 612. Thayer, in fact, claims that “preserver” is its original meaning. Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1895) 534).

Part of that purpose God has in preserving wicked men is that they persecute the righteous. Persecution also comes through wicked men by the will of God. And persecution is the means God uses to sanctify his people. Peter reminds us that persecution is a fiery trial in which the faith of God’s people is tried as gold is tried in the fire, that it might be to the praise and glory of God (I Peter 1:7).

It may very well be that Paul, in this general statement, has a broader purpose in mind that God has for the reprobate; but he particularly calls attention to the preservation of the reprobate, for it stands in direct relation to God’s purpose in preserving the elect. God’s purpose is “especially” revealed in them in their salvation; but the reprobate are also preserved “especially” for the elect.

Surely, there is no universal love and grace of God in the text.

The text I consider next is found in Romans 2:4: “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” The argument that is made from this text is that God’s goodness, forbearance and longsuffering are shown to all men and express God’s desire to save them; yet they despise these manifestations of God’s love and grace towards them. The point of the defenders of a well-meant gospel offer is that the text speaks of God’s attributes, particularly his goodness, forbearance and longsuffering, as indicative of God’s love for all men, his grace

towards them and his desire to save them. Louis Berkhof argues this very point in his book written in defense of common grace.

There are two things wrong with this interpretation. The first is that it clearly places the final decision for man's salvation in man's hands. I have objected to this implication of the defense of common grace repeatedly, but the use of this text as proof that God desires to save all and thus to throw the final decision in man's hands is blatantly argued here. There is absolutely no way one can hold to such a position without becoming Arminian in the fullest sense of the word.

The second thing wrong with this interpretation is that it changes the reading of the text. No man has a right to do this. The interpretation offered by the defenders of a well-meant offer deliberately change the text to read something which it does not say. These defenders say the text reads: ". . . not knowing the goodness of God desires to lead thee to repentance" – but does not succeed in its desire. While the text says, ". . . not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" – and actually does so.

This alteration in the words of the text is inexcusable to a sincere student of Scripture, and shows a willingness to twist Scripture's clear words in the interests of making a case for one's own notions.

I am assuming, of course, that no one who uses this text as proof that God wants all men to be saved, actually believes that all men are saved, and that no one goes to hell. A universalist who believes that no one ever goes to hell is some other creature whose arguments are not relevant to the subject of the well-meant offer. A defender of the well-meant offer believes that many go to hell, even though God loves them and wants desperately their salvation.

One can, therefore, appeal to this text in support of a well-meant gospel and give it the meaning which the defenders of the well-meant offer give it only if one is a universalist, believing that all men will eventually be saved.

But no argument over a wrong interpretation of a text in Scripture is successfully refuted without a statement as to its true meaning.

The apostle is paving the way for his great teaching of justification by faith alone, without the works of the law. He is demonstrating that justification on the basis of the works of the law is an absolute impossibility. The keeping of the law cannot justify a man; it cannot justify any man. It cannot justify the Gentile; it cannot justify the Jew. The reason is that all are sinners under the just condemnation of God. Thus the whole human race is referred to in chapters 1 and 2, and in chapter 2, Paul directly addresses all men with this condemnation by using the general term "man" (verses 1, 3).

All men despise God's goodness, forbearance and longsuffering. They even despise God's goodness, forbearance and longsuffering when they know that these attributes lead to repentance, and thus salvation.

This fact that God's goodness leads to repentance does not mean that God wants all men to be saved; nor does it mean that in fact God's goodness always does lead every man to repentance



and salvation. But it does mean that in fact, in the case of some, it is God's goodness that leads to repentance, a truth that is evident on every page of Holy Writ. When the gospel is preached, the elect are brought to repentance. The wicked are witnesses of this great goodness of God that does save. But even though they see this, they still despise this goodness of God.

And, of course, we also despise God's goodness, for we are included under the dire things Paul says about men. Thus behind the text stands the truth that God's attributes, goodness, forbearance and longsuffering, are revealed in all his works, but men despise them. They are particularly revealed in his salvation of some. When some are led to repentance, it is the goodness of God that leads them to repentance, and not their works. Hence, the direct address is used here: ". . . the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." But they are nevertheless universally despised.

The text becomes very important, therefore, for the doctrine of total depravity; and this truth in turn prepares the way for the great truth of sovereign grace, namely that God justifies the elect through faith in Christ, apart from any works which man performs.

### **WHAT OF EZEKIEL 18:31-32 AND EZEKIEL 33:11?**

We come now to the two passages which, more perhaps than any others are quoted in support of a gracious and well-meaning gospel offer. I refer to Ezekiel 18:31, 32: “Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.” (See also verse 23.)

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

From a certain viewpoint, these passages from Ezekiel are the strongest proof for the well-meant and gracious gospel offer. Both mention the fact that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Ezekiel 33:11 says also that God does have pleasure in the wicked repenting from their sins and living. And the rhetorical question is a powerful one: “Why will ye die, O house of Israel?”

Nevertheless, it is a perversion of the text to force it to prove an intention of God, or a desire on God’s part, to save all who hear the gospel. As a preliminary observation, we must point out that the text makes no mention of “grace.” After all, the well-meant offer is part and parcel of a common grace, which is an attitude of favor on God’s part and which he shows to all men in the preaching of the gospel.

I think this is crucially important. The grace of God can, in this connection also, be understood in two ways. It can refer to the fact that God looks with favor on all who hear the gospel and gives evidence of his favor towards them by expressing in the gospel his desire that they be saved. In other words (and it is not clear to me how this conclusion can be avoided) in the gospel God graciously gives all who hear a chance to be saved. God’s love, mercy, and grace

are so great that God through the gospel makes salvation available to all that hear the gospel and earnestly desires that they seize on the opportunity and satisfy God's desire.

But in the context of common grace, the grace that comes in the preaching of the gospel to all that hear is also a subjective grace given to each man so that he is put into a spiritual state in which he can make a choice either for or against the offer of the gospel. He has the grace to say, when he hears to the gospel, "No, I do not want to be saved;" or, "Yes I will accept the offer of Christ and so be saved.

In this respect, common grace as taught in the well-meant gospel offer is patterned after the Puritan conception of Preparationism. I have referred to this in earlier installments, and need not enter into this notion again.

But such a grace as is taught by the well-meant offer defendants leads directly into Arminianism. And Arminianism is contrary to Scripture, Calvinism and the Reformed faith.

But more important for our present purposes, no such idea can be gleaned from the texts in Ezekiel.

The second point we need to remember is that these passages must not be taken out of their context. In both passages in Ezekiel the Lord is answering an objection that Israel made against the Lord's dealings with the nation.

In chapter 18 the context explains to us that the words of God in verses 23 and 32 were spoken because Israel charged God with double dealing. Especially, they said, this was true because they were being punished for the sins of their fathers.

God answers this by informing Israel when a righteous man turns from his righteousness, he will surely be punished; and when a wicked man turns from his wickedness, he will surely save his soul. For this reason God says that he will judge each man according to his own ways (30).

But God does not take pleasure in a righteous man turning away from his righteousness; but he does take pleasure in a wicked man turning away from his wickedness. And therefore he comes to Israel with the command, "Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions" (30).

This is the command of the gospel of which I already spoke at some length and which must be preached to all men. This is bound on all Reformed ministers by the Reformed confessions, specifically in Canons 2/5.

Chapter 33 is somewhat different, and may very well been spoken at a different time. The context here is a charge to the elders in Israel to be watchmen on the walls of the city, whose responsibility it is to warn the inhabitants of the city of the approach of an enemy. If they fail to do this, and people perish as a result, the blood of these people will be required of the watchmen.

It is worth our while to note that the principle God lays down in Ezekiel 33 is still in force today. How dreadful it is when the elders of a church fail to warn the people of enemies who constitute a spiritual danger to the church. And how much more dreadful it is when these

watchmen actually conspired with the enemies to assist them in entering the city, something they do when they approve of false doctrine.

Ezekiel is therefore told that he must warn the people of the enemy. If he does this, and the people do not listen, then Ezekiel will be free from their blood (verse 9).

Apparently, the people of the captivity, to whom Ezekiel prophesied, complained that they were so punished by God in being brought into captivity that they saw no possibility of living once again (verse 10). The implied criticism of God was that God had no interest in them any more and that he did not really care if they died in Babylon.

To this Ezekiel, speaking God's word, tells them that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He does have pleasure in repentance and a turning away from the wicked ways that characterized Israel's life.

One more remark needs to be made. That is that Ezekiel is addressing the nation in captivity in their organic unity. That is, he is addressing the nation as a whole. But the nation, we must remember, consisted of many wicked who had gained control over the life of the nation and had led the nation into terrible idolatry so that the nation became ripe for judgment.

But there was also in that nation a remnant according to the election of grace. This remnant was small and seemingly insignificant. But it was represented by Daniel and his three friends, by Ezekiel himself, and by those who sang Psalm 137.

This word was spoken to the whole nation in its organic unity; that is, in such a way that the wicked and the faithful both heard it.

This truth remains always the same. The word of the gospel is proclaimed in the church in its organic unity. In that church are hypocrites and unfaithful members. But in that church are also believers, saved by the power of the gospel. To them all comes the word of God: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways, for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"

That is, as Canons 2.5 expresses it: God promises eternal life to all who receive the gospel and repent of their sins; but God condemns those who refuse to obey the command of the gospel.

Looking at the preaching from God's point of view and from the viewpoint of his eternal purpose, God uses that gospel with its promise and its command to save his people through the work of the Spirit in their hearts. And he uses the same gospel to harden the wicked in their way that it may be shown that God is righteous in all his ways.

## **EZEKIEL 18 AND EZEKIEL 33 FURTHER EXAMINED**

In the last installment I sent I was discussing the meaning of Ezekiel 18:31, 32 and Ezekiel 33:11. In both texts Jehovah expresses through the prophet Ezekiel that it is his pleasure that the wicked turn from their evil way and live, for he has no pleasure in the death of any in the house of Israel.

I made some general remarks about the two passages in the last installment, but have waited till this installment for the correct meaning of these two passages from Ezekiel.

It seems to me to be perfectly clear that these passages simply state what is expressed in Canons 3/4.8, 9. You will recall that these articles speak of the fact that God is sincere when he commands men to repent of their sin and believe in Christ. He means exactly what he says. He is not deceiving man by demanding that which he does not want to happen. As I pointed out in my last article, this notion makes God what he can never be – a hypocrite.

Further, Article 9 of the Canons emphatically states that it is not God's fault that men do not obey. It is man's own fault. He refuses to repent of his sin and believe in Christ – even when Christ is presented in the gospel as God's way of salvation.

It is true, of course, that God eternally determines in his counsel that the reprobate are justly punished for their sins, and that God eternally determines their unbelief and everlasting punishment in hell. But, as I have said frequently, God eternally determines reprobation in such a way that his eternal purpose is accomplished by means of man's sins. Reprobation is sovereignly accomplished in such a way that man is responsible for his sin – not God! And so man is justly punished.

So the preaching of the gospel is not an expression on God's part that he loves all men, gives them grace, and desires earnestly their salvation. It is the sovereign means God uses to

accomplish his eternal purpose of election and reprobation; although the latter is accomplished in the way of man's sin and refusal to believe in Christ.

The truth of Canons 3/4.8,9 is repeatedly emphasized in Scripture. This emphasis indicates that it is extremely important to maintain the truth of these two articles. Men commit a serious error when they claim that God does not command all men to repent of sin and believe in Christ. And men commit a grievous error when they deny the seriousness of God's command to all men to repent of their sin.

In Isaiah 5 God speaks, through Isaiah, a parable of his vineyard. The parable speaks of all the care that God gave to his vineyard so that there was no reason why the vines did not produce grapes. God himself says, in a striking rhetorical question: "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" (5:4) The vineyard in the parable is "the house of Israel and the men of Judah" (5:7); and the failure of the vineyard to produce grapes refers to the terrible sins committed by Israel and Judah when they surpassed the heathen nations in their idolatrous practices.

God indeed did all that was necessary so that the vineyard would bear fruit. Paul sums it up in Romans 9:4, 5: "Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen."

Along with the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5, this is a powerful Scriptural support for Canons 3/4.8, 9. Nothing more could have been done to show wicked Israel and Judah the blessedness of repenting from sin and believing in Christ.

Paul expresses the same truth in 10:21, quoting Isaiah 65:2: "But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people." To stretch out one's hands is to underscore the earnestness in which one issues a command.

Yet, let it be understood as well that the command of the gospel is exactly that – a command. It is not an offer that expresses God's deepest desire. It is not an invitation, although those who speak of the preaching as an offer really mean that the command is nothing else but an invitation, the acceptance or rejection of which is left to man's free will.

Even in Matthew 22:1-14, where Jesus speaks of a wedding feast to which many were called, although they refused to come, the call was not an invitation. It was the king's wedding feast for his son, and the king called (22:3) the guests. Now the call of a king is not an invitation. It is a command. So much so is it a command that when those called did not come, the king "was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city" (22:7).

Not even a king destroys those who decline an invitation. But a king has every right to destroy those who refuse to obey a command.

Jesus, the supreme teacher, also immediately adds that God accomplishes his purpose: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (22:14).

The two passages in Ezekiel underscore, therefore, an extremely important truth concerning God’s purpose in the gospel.

That God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked is not at all difficult to understand. God has no pleasure in sin. It is contrary to his own holy being. He detests sin and is filled with fury against it and the sinner. The punishment of the sinner is necessary because it is the manifestation of his hatred of sin. He must destroy the wicked to preserve his own holiness.

How out of keeping this is with the thinking of much of the church in our day. If one would listen to theologians one would get the impression that God does not mind sin all that much. He overlooks it rather easily and winks at the sinner as if the sinner is only a little naughty boy who does not know any better.

Common grace, with its doctrine of God’s universal love takes sides with modern theology. But it is all unspeakably degrading of the holy God. Let us preserve at all costs the great holiness of Jehovah God before whom the angels cover their faces and cry all the day, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty.”

One final remark. Some will conclude from that what I have outlined here implies two wills in God. There is the will of his decree, and there is the will of God’s command. After all, the counsel of God is called God’s good pleasure in Scripture (Is. 44:28). And Scripture (and the Canons in 3/4.8,9) speaks of God’s serious command that all men repent of sin and believe in Christ and call this serious command, God’s good pleasure. On the one hand, therefore, God’s good pleasure is to reveal his justice in reprobation; while it is also God’s good pleasure to demand that all men repent of sin.

Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have always recognized that a distinction must be made between the eternal will of God’s counsel and the will of God’s command. But it would be a wrong conclusion to interpret this distinction as referring to two wills in God. The fact is that the will of God’s command is the means by which God carries out the will of his decree. God made man holy and able to keep all the commandments God laid down. Obedience to those commandments was required because those commandments expressed God’s purpose in creating man.

Man transgressed and lost completely his ability to obey God. God, rightly and with perfect justice still requires of man obedience. Man cannot and will not obey God. But in the hearts of the elect God works through Christ’s perfect obedience to the law the salvation of his elect. So, both the eternal decree of election and reprobation are accomplished through the on-going demand of the law. In the elect God accomplishes his purpose in Christ by enabling the elect to keep the law. In the reprobate God accomplishes his eternal purpose in the way of man’s refusal to repent of sin.

Perfect harmony, perfect justice, perfect mercy, a perfect will of God to bring all praise and glory to himself.

### **CONCERNING II PETER 3:9**

We are busy with the Scriptural proof that has been offered in support of a gracious and general well-meant gospel offer. I already treated a few of these texts; in this letter I continue an examination of such passages, for Scripture itself is our final canon of truth.

I consider in this letter II Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

Although John Murray and Ned Stonehouse make a great deal of this passage in their pamphlet on the well-meant gospel offer (Stonehouse, Ned & Murray, John, *The Free Offer of the Gospel: Report to the 15th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1948*. 27 pages), it is something of a puzzle to me how an appeal to this word of God can be made credible. A well-meant offer is so far from the thought of either the Holy Spirit or Peter in penning these words that one is forced to scratch his head in puzzlement at all efforts to make it proof for what is after all, an erroneous doctrine.

I suppose that the defenders of a well-meant gospel offer appeal to the very last clause in the verse, “Not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” The text then must be read: “Not willing that any single person on the face of the earth should perish, but that every one of them should come to repentance.”

But the question is, of course, What right does anyone have to make the text read in this way? The answer to this question could conceivably be: “Well, Calvin explained the verse this way.” It might be well to quote Calvin.

“And as to the duration of the whole world, we must think exactly the same as of the life of every individual; for God by prolonging time to each, sustains him that he may repent. In the like manner he does not hasten the end of the world, in order to give to all time to repent.



“So wonderful is his love towards mankind, that he would have them all to be saved, and is of his own self prepared to bestow salvation on the lost. But this order is to be noticed, that God is ready to receive all to repentance, so that none may perish; for in these words the way and manner of obtaining salvation is pointed out. Every one of us, therefore, who is desirous of salvation, must learn to enter in by this way” (John Calvin, Commentaries on The Catholic Epistles, translated and edited by John Owen (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948) 419.

Even in this explanation of II Peter 3:9, Calvin is aware of God’s sovereign decree of election and reprobation. He writes,

“But it may be asked, If God wishes none to perish, why is it that so many do perish? To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel. For God there stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundations of the world” (Idem, 419, 420).

There is, however, some justification in the appeal that the defenders of common grace make to Calvin in this passage in II Peter. Calvin’s expressions are not as clear and decisive here as one would like to have them. But I am convinced that those who do appeal to this passage do so wrongly. Whatever Calvin may have meant in writing these words, his thoughts were never along the lines of the defenders of the common grace of the well-meant gospel offer. I submit the following considerations in proof of this assertion.

In the first place those who appeal to Calvin in support of any aspect of common grace are guilty of the sin of anachronism. The sin of anachronism is to ascribe to men of bygone years views that one is defending hundreds of years later. It is the sin of interpreting what a man says long ago in the light of the times in which we live, to make a man of the 16th century a thinker in the 20th century; to describe the circumstances in which he wrote as if they were identical to our present circumstances. No one may do that. A man has to be interpreted and understood in the light of his own times and the circumstances under which he did his work. Only the Bible transcends all time and circumstances.

What I mean is that the common grace that is taught today throughout much of the church world was not anyone’s teaching in the days in which Calvin wrote. The common grace controversy of the 19th and 20th centuries was a foreign subject to the Reformers; it was not even taught in the form in which it is taught today by the Roman Catholic Church. Calvin was a man of his times, and he did not react to the heresy of common grace in the same way we are called to do it today.

In the second place, the quotation is taken from Calvin’s commentaries; and his commentaries were, for the most part, delivered in class when Calvin lectured in the Academy on almost all the books of the Bible. The students took down these lectures and they were printed as commentaries. (Calvin himself did, however, edit them and approve them before they went to the printer.) Calvin was a busy man who literally worked himself to death. His notes from which he lectured were not always as thorough as they could have been if he had devoted every day of the week to exegesis. That we find, not only here, but in other commentaries less than satisfactory exegesis is not hard to imagine or understand.

Yet, I do not want to minimize the importance of Calvin’s commentaries. I have a whole section of my bookshelves filled with commentaries. I must admit that, while I still make a lot of sermons, there is only one commentary among them all to which I now turn: Calvin’s

commentaries. They are, far and away, the most helpful. Regularly I recommend them to those who ask about the best commentaries available. But this does not mean that they are without error.

In the third place, it does not surprise me that Calvin's commentaries are not perfect. Who has ever written a perfect commentary? Who is so bold and foolish to claim infallibility in his exegesis of the infallible Word of God? Our best efforts are feeble and without much merit when compared with the depth of the knowledge and wisdom of God contained in sacred Scripture. I insist that we ought not to be surprised by Calvin's "unreformed" statement that he makes from time to time; what ought to surprise us is that Calvin, brought up in Roman Catholicism, steeped in Roman Catholic thought, influenced throughout his formative years, could be so "Reformed" – if I can make use of an anachronism. Perhaps it is better to say, ". . . so profoundly Biblical." What never ceases to amaze me is that all the great truths of sovereign grace were as clearly seen by this great servant of Christ in such a few short years of a short lifetime.

And that brings me to my final point. Many passages can be found in Calvin in which he teaches doctrines directly contrary to the ideas defenders of common grace pull out of a few isolated passages here and there. I hope to demonstrate this in a subsequent letter. But for the present I merely state it without demonstrating the validity of it.

It happens times without number that the great men whom God raises up in the church had such gifts of God that they see the wide horizons of that truth as we lesser theologians cannot. They see the breadth and length of God's truth. They see its scope as it brings together under one roof all the doctrines of Scripture from one side of its broad perspective to the other.

Lesser theologians have not this ability, and so they misrepresent the men who can grasp these glorious truths and see them in their united oneness. The Antinomians did such misinterpretation of Luther. Luther taught justification by faith alone without the works of the law. Luther had no problem with Scripture's insistence on the necessity of good works when he railed against the law and condemned it in fierce fashion. But Agricola and his followers did. And they repeatedly appealed to Luther himself in support of the position that the justified child of God might not have anything to do with the law of God. They took one aspect of Luther's theology and without holding it in the balance of all Luther's thought, they ran only with the one idea that the law was an enemy. They did not understand and could not see that Luther's sharp condemnation of the law was a condemnation of the law as the road to salvation.

I well recall that in the controversy of 1953 in the Protestant Reformed Churches that arose from a defense of an unconditional covenant, some took the position that any use of the word "if" in any theological statement was heresy, for "if" implies a condition. I was reprimanded for choosing in a worship service, Psalter No 65, a versification of Psalm 25, which goes:

Grace and truth shall mark the way  
Where the Lord His own will lead,  
If His Word they still obey  
And His testimonies heed.

If one wants to quote Calvin in support of the well-meant gospel offer, one must explain many, many passages where what Calvin says is an almost furious assault against that very doctrine. Let me quote just one passage from Calvin, interestingly taken from his commentary on I John

2:2: "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." Calvin writes:

"Here a question may be raised, how have the sins of the whole world been expiated? I pass by the dotage of the fanatics, who under this pretence extend salvation to all the reprobate, and therefore to Satan himself. Such a monstrous thing deserves no refutation. They who seek to avoid this absurdity, have said that Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect. This solution has commonly prevailed in the schools. Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage; for the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word all or whole, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world. For then is really made evident, as it is meet, the grace of Christ, when it is declared to be the only true salvation of the world."

Calvin would have been a muddled-headed theologian to write such contradictory words without his even being aware of it.

That is enough for now. I would like to return to Calvin in my next letter.

## WHAT II PETER 3:9 TEACHES

I was considering the proof texts that have been used to support the doctrine of a gracious and well-meant offer of God that comes through the preaching of the gospel, in which God expresses his desire to save all men. In particular, I was discussing II Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

I had made some general remarks about this verse and various interpretations that have been given of it. We must now turn to the meaning of this passage.

Peter himself gives his reason for writing this second epistle in verses 1-4a of chapter 3: “This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour: Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming . . . ?”

It seems to have been the case that the churches to which Peter addresses his epistle were being persecuted at the time the apostle wrote both I Peter and II Peter. In the pressures of persecution, the saints were looking for an imminent return of Christ to rescue them from their enemies. Further, according to chapter 2, they were beset by false teachers who were causing grief in the church.

Apparently these false teachers were mocking the people of God when, in spite of the eager expectation of the saints, Christ did not return to deliver them. Their mocking words were: “Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.”

They meant that it was foolish to expect Christ to return because the saints spoke of this return of their Lord as being a cataclysmic event that would bring an end to this present

creation. The grounds for their mockery were that the creation has existed unchanged since its beginning.

Peter denies that this ground for their mockery is true: All things have not continued unchanged from the beginning of the creation.

Although what I have now to say is a sort of parenthesis in the discussion of the meaning of II Peter 3:9, I cannot resist a few remarks about this important chapter that have to do with obvious refutations of evolutionism. It is striking that the mockers who taunted the saints in Peter's day based their denial of Christ's coming on what evolutionists call "the principle of uniformitarianism." Evolutionists claim they can know the nature of the creation in the distant past by studying the creation as it now is, because it has always been the same. They do that on the grounds that "all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation," the precise argument that serves as a foundation of the godless theory of evolutionism.

It is not surprising therefore, that those who hold to the theory of evolution, are, sooner or later, forced to deny the coming of Christ. Such a denial of a fundamental truth of Scripture is by no means limited to the worldly scientists; it is found, sadly, in the church as well.

Peter refutes that principle of uniformitarianism and insists that all things do not continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. To prove his point, Peter makes reference to the major change that took place at the time of the flood. The flood itself was a picture and type of the end of the world. In it the wicked world, which had filled the cup of iniquity was destroyed by water, and the church was saved by that same water (I Peter 3:20).

The pre-deluvian world was preserved by God's word "standing out of the water and in the water" (II Peter 3:5). The world that existed after the flood is "reserved unto fire" (II Peter 3:7). Noah entered a different world when he left the ark. For the first time in the history of creation things in God's world were governed by seasons (Gen. 8:21-22). It is therefore, impossible to determine the nature of the pre-deluvian creation from the character and nature of the creation today. The Holy Spirit destroys the foundation of the entire theory of evolution with a few pen strokes.

But Peter is not arguing against evolutionists in the first place. He is arguing against those who deny Christ's return from heaven on the clouds. He is doing this for the sake of beleaguered saints, hard-pressed by enemies who were disappointed that Christ did not return to rescue them. He assures them that even though Christ does not return when they expected him to come, he will certainly come again

And if it seems as though the Lord tarries for a very long time, the saints must remember that a day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.

But then Peter goes on to explain the purpose of God is in not sending Christ when the saints thought he should. Let the saints understand, first of all, that "the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness." The saints must not charge God with a certain indifference to Christ's coming. They must not think that God is so busy and preoccupied with running the world that he has no time to think about Christ's return. Christ himself said, "Behold, I come quickly." God cannot come until all things that God has determined in his counsel have taken place. God is in a hurry to send Christ, and Christ is also eagerly anxious to come as quickly as possible. But God's counsel must be carried out.

Further, God is also longsuffering. He is longsuffering to "us-ward."

God's longsuffering is an important attribute. It means literally, to suffer long. It can best be described in terms of an incident that I take from my own experience. When my sons were small, one of them ran a very large sliver of wood into the calf of his leg. That sliver was very painful and had to come out. And so I took a strong needle to dig into the flesh and pry that splinter out of my son's leg. It hurt very much, and at one point my son, with tears streaming down his cheeks, said, "Dad, don't you love me? You hurt me so badly." My answer had to be, "It is because I love you that I have to hurt you."

So is the longsuffering of God. God suffers when we suffer. I do not know how the suffering of God can be explained in terms of his infinite perfections; but God loves us; that I know. And our suffering causes him anguish.

Nevertheless, our suffering is sent by a sovereign God and is necessary for our salvation, for we cannot be purified from our terrible sins in any other way than through suffering. All suffering sanctifies. Suffering is the only way to glory.

That longsuffering of God, such a wonderful attribute, is said by the defenders of common grace, to be towards all men. By this they mean that God is deeply moved by the suffering which all men endure and longs to save them from it. He gives them the opportunity to be saved by the offer of the gospel. But they do not take this offer and God's longsuffering is without purpose.

There are three things wrong with that interpretation. The first is that the text does not say this. God's longsuffering is towards "us-ward;" that is, it is towards Peter and all the saints to whom Peter writes these words of encouragement. In the second place, we do a terrible wrong to God when we speak of his purposes as being frustrated. God says through Isaiah: "I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:9-10). And, third, to take the position that longsuffering is an attribute of God towards all men is to claim also that God saves all men. This is not a rash statement, for Peter himself says, a bit further in the chapter: "And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation" (verse 15). It is salvation. In fact, in the Greek, the word "is" does not even appear. The text reads: "Accounting that the longsuffering of our Lord, salvation."

But Peter gives another reason why the saints must not be discouraged or tempted by mockers when Christ does not come when they expected. That reason is wrapped up in the words: "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

The defenders of an offer want to interpret the "any" as meaning "all men." God is not willing that "all men" should perish. So God is longsuffering, not simply to "us-ward", but to all men. That exegesis is faulty in the extreme. Picture yourself sitting in church on the Lord's Day and listening to your minister. "Beloved, we have a letter from our dearly beloved apostle Peter. He writes: 'The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.'" Would there be one member in the congregation who would hear this and say, "Oh, God's wants all men to come to repentance? Only a dyed-in-the-wool defender of common grace would support such a notion.

But there is in those words a profound truth. God's people are not a disorganized mass of people. They are the body of Christ. They are chosen by God in Christ from before the

foundations of the world. They are redeemed in the blood of Christ who suffered for them on Calvary. They constitute an organism, a whole, a unity which is saved as a unity. The church can be compared with a human body.

Supposing a person is terminally ill. And the doctor claims to be able to save that person. But when the person recovers, one arm is missing, one foot, one leg, the eyes, the ears, and perhaps the mouth. I suppose that one can say, "The doctor saved that person," but such a salvation would be highly questionable.

Because the church is the organism of the body of Christ, perfected in Christ, every member of that elect and redeemed body goes to heaven – or no one goes to heaven. It is all or nothing. It cannot be nothing, and so it is all – all the elect and redeemed.

But these redeemed elect are gathered from the beginning to the end of time. Christ will return only when the last redeemed elect is born and brought to repentance. He cannot and will not come earlier. He will not take to heaven an incomplete church, a mutilated body. He loves all his people and will not save even one until everyone is saved.

Peter is saying to the saints – and it is a glorious thought: "Our Lord has died for an innumerable multitude of God's elect. You are not the only elect. There are thousands yet unborn. They have to be saved as well as you. Do you want them to be damned to hell because you want Christ to come before all the elect are born? And so the church must be in the world for some time yet, until every one of your brothers and sisters is born and saved. In the meantime, you will have to suffer. And suffering is not pleasant. But it too is necessary for your salvation. But God is longsuffering. He suffers with you in your suffering. But wonder of wonders: he makes suffering serve your salvation. So do not listen to the mockers. All is well. You are God's beloved."

That is a glorious gospel!

### **TURRETIN'S QUOTE: WHAT OF MATT. 23:37-39?**

In the February 16 bulletin of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church of Ballymena, Northern Ireland, Rev. Angus Stewart included an interesting quote from Francis Turretin on Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11. Francis Turretin was born in 1623 and became professor of theology in Geneva in 1568. He was one the authors of the Helvetic Confession, composed to expose the errors of Amyraldism. Amyraldism was a heresy that arose in France and was promoted extensively by Moise Amyraut. It had wide influence in the British Isles and was represented at the Westminster Assembly by a few men. The Assembly, however, rejected it. The chief error of Amyraldism was its hypothetical universalism. Because Amyraldism also taught a gracious and well-meaning offer of the gospel to all who hear, based on a universal atonement, the Helvetic Confession has important articles condemning both Amyraldism and its doctrine of a gracious gospel offer.

The quote from Francis Turretin is as follows:

When God testifies that “he has no pleasure at all in the death of the sinner, but that he should return from his ways, and live (Eze. 18:23), this does not favour the inefficacious will or the feeble velleity (‘The lowest degree of desire: imperfect and incomplete’ – Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary) of God because the [Hebrew] word *chpts* which occurs there does not denote desire so much as delight and complacency. Thus God may be said not to delight in the punishment of the wicked inasmuch as it is the destruction of the creature, although he wills it as an exercise of his justice. So he is said to will the repentance of sinners approvingly and perceptively as a thing most pleasing to himself and expressed in his commands, although with respect to all of them he nills it decretively and effectively ... Although God protests that “he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but in his conversion and life” (Eze. 33:11), it does not follow that from eternity he willed and intended under any condition the conversion and life of each and every man. For besides the fact that conversion cannot be intended under any condition (because it is itself a condition), it is certain that here is treated the will of *euaestias* (the Greek word for “well-pleasing, HH) and of complacency, not the will of good pleasure (*eudokias* – the Greek word for God’s good pleasure. Turretin makes a distinction between what is pleasing to God and God’s good pleasure, the latter being his eternal decree of election



and reprobation, HH.), which the verb *Ichpts*) proves, meaning everywhere to be pleased and to hold as grateful, to imply that God is pleased with the conversion and life of the sinner as a thing grateful to him and agreeing with his perfectly merciful nature, rather than with his destruction, and therefore exacts it from man as a bounden duty to be converted if he desires to live. But although he wills not (i.e., is not pleased with the death of the sinner, as it denotes the destruction of a creature), yet he does not cease to will and intend it as an exercise of his justice and as the occasion of manifesting his glory (Prov. 1:26; I Sam. 2:34). Take, for example, a pious magistrate who is not pleased with the death of the guilty, yet does not cease justly to decree their punishment in accordance with the laws. Nor is it the case that if God does not properly intend their repentance and salvation, does he to no purpose say to the reprobate who are invited to repentance, “Why will ye die?” For he rightly shows them by these words what they must do to avoid death and that by their voluntary impenitence, they alone are the cause of their own destruction, not God. For although by the decree of reprobation, he had passed them by and determined not to give them faith, yet no less voluntarily do they sin and so obstinately bring down their own destruction upon themselves (Institutes of Elentic theology, vol. 1, pp 229-230, 408).

The claim is made by the authors of “The Three Points of Common Grace” that “writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed theology . . . favored this view.” Turretin lived in this “most flourishing period of Reformed theology.” He was undoubtedly the period’s most influential theologian. He repudiated the whole doctrine of a well-meant gospel offer. He did so in his battle with the deadly error of Amyraldism.

It would seem to me that anyone who would make a boast that a well-meant gospel offer was taught by “Reformed theologians” “from the most flourishing period of Reformed theology” would take account of what Turretin writes. It would seem to me that honesty and theological integrity would compel defenders of the well-meant offer of the gospel to take account of these historical facts. It seems to me that they would clearly show how their view of the gospel differs from the Amyraldian heresy. And it seems to me they would take note of at least one theologian (and there were many more) of great influence in the “most flourishing period of Reformed theology” that opposed their position. But where we would expect to find these things, there is instead total silence.

Turretin’s figure of an earthly judge is powerful. An earthly judge may surely wish that a murderer who stands before him had not committed the crime of which he is found guilty. The judge may think of the grief of the family of the one murdered; of the murderer himself who committed the crime, and of his pending execution. But the judge may still will that the murderer be executed in the interests of justice.

But we must move on.

Another passage frequently quoted by the defenders of a well-meant gospel offer is Matthew 23:37-39: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

A similar passage is found in Luke 1:34-35: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not. Behold, your

house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

I have recently treated these passages at some length in the Newsletter of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church of Ballymena, Northern Ireland. It is possible to obtain these Newsletters, published monthly by the church in Ballymena. They have a readership all over the world and discuss many important theological and practical issues of the day. It can be obtained free from the e-mail address [anmstewart@lineone.net](mailto:anmstewart@lineone.net)

Because I have dealt with these verses in considerable detail in several issues of the Newsletter, I intend to limit my remarks in this forum.

The argument that is made from these texts in defense of the gracious gospel offer consists of two points. The first point is that it clearly expresses our Lord’s desire to save Jerusalem. And that “desire” is exactly what the preaching of the gospel is: an expression of God’s desire to save all who hear the gospel.

The second argument is that the very form of the text indicates that Jesus spoke these words with great sadness. This sadness arose out of a desire to save Jerusalem, but the desire came to nothing because of Jerusalem’s great sin.

The first argument is not difficult to prove wrong. Jesus does not say, and may not be made to say that he desired to save Jerusalem itself. The text clearly tells us that Jesus is expressing his desire to save Jerusalem’s children: “How often would I have gathered thy children together. . . , but ye would not.”

Jesus does not mean to say that he desired to save Jerusalem’s children but never did succeed in saving them; his only point is that the rulers of Jerusalem prevented him from gathering Jerusalem’s children. This astonishing charge that the Lord lays at the feet of the rulers of Jerusalem is a charge that can also be made of the false church today.

Jerusalem not only killed the prophets and stoned them whom God sent to them to warn them to repent of their sins, but they rejected the great One whom God sent, Jesus Christ himself. They fought long and bitterly against him all the time he ministered on earth. They tried to prove him an imposter and charlatan. They excommunicated from the church those who believed on him (John 9:34). They threatened with dire punishments anyone who confessed his name (John 11:47-53). And finally they nailed him to a cross and murdered him to silence his tongue and prevent him from teaching Jerusalem’s children.

So it is today. The church is more than ready to take into its fellowship the greatest of heretics. I am not speaking of the church in general, of which this is also true, but of churches that profess to be Reformed. If anyone raises his voice in protest or expresses his disgust with the presence of wolves in the heritage of God, he is silenced and even, if necessary, ousted and stripped of his membership. It is a dreadful sin to reject Christ; but it is yet more dreadful to do all in one’s power to prevent faithful ones from believing in Christ and confessing his name.

Jesus is therefore simply adding to the list of Jerusalem’s children another great sin.

Two questions remain: Who are Jerusalem’s children? And: Why is Jesus sad because of Jerusalem’s sin and perhaps, we might add, because of Jerusalem’s impending destruction? But we have said enough in this installment, and postpone the answers to the next installment.

### FURTHER COMMENTS ON MATT. 23:37-39

In the last installment I began a discussion of Matthew 23:37, with a similar passage in Luke 13:34: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.” I closed the last forum article with the comment that two questions remained unanswered: One was, who are Jerusalem’s children? And the second was, why was Jesus sad at the impending destruction of the city?

Scripture uses the expression “Jerusalem’s children” in two different ways. One way is to speak of Jerusalem’s children as including all the natural seed of Abraham. These children are said to be in bondage; that is, the bondage of the law, which no man can keep, and which leaves those who are under the law in sin. This is the meaning of Galatians 4:25 where the “Jerusalem that now is” is said to be in bondage with her children.

But Scripture also speaks of the true people of God who were Jerusalem’s children. In Zechariah 9:9 the daughters of Jerusalem are admonished to rejoice at the arrival of Jerusalem’s King. When Scripture speaks of the children of Jerusalem as being the elect only it also speaks of the “Jerusalem above” which is the mother “of us all,” whether Jew or Gentile (Gal. 4:31; see also Heb. 12:22-24). These are the children of Jerusalem that Christ desired to gather.

Christ does not desire to gather all Jerusalem’s children, but is frustrated in his desire; he does in fact gather them. He gathered them on the day of Pentecost and throughout the years following Pentecost when the gospel was proclaimed to Jew and Gentile alike. The text does not convey a frustrated desire of the Lord; it emphasizes Jerusalem’s sin in doing all in its power to prevent Christ from gathering Jerusalem’s children (John 9:34-38, John 11:47-53). The sin of trying to do all they were capable of doing to prevent Christ from gathering Jerusalem’s children is the sin that determined their destruction. This was the tradition of apostate Israel from earliest times, when they killed the prophets and stoned those whom God had sent. It was for this reason that their house is left unto them desolate.

How it is possible to get a well-meant offer out of this text requires extraordinary exegetical legerdemain. One ought to read the whole chapter. It is filled with woes upon the scribes and Pharisees who are branded as hypocrites. It is a sharp condemnation of their sins, which will ultimately bring them to hell (14). These hypocrites are said to be blind guides (16), leaders in Israel who make proselytes greater children of hell than themselves (15), who “shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in” (13). It is impossible to find a well-meant and gracious offer in this chapter.

We must now answer the question: Why was Jesus sad at the thought of Jerusalem’s destruction?

While neither the passage in Matthew nor Luke speaks of Jesus sorrow at the impending doom of Jerusalem, the very wording of the text suggests this: O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ...” There is one instance where Jesus is said to have wept over Jerusalem. That instance was at the time of his triumphal entrance into the city while riding on a donkey. Luke 19:41-42 informs us that “when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes.”

There were at least two reasons why Jesus was saddened by the impending doom of the Holy City. The first reason, though by no means the most important, was a sadness that the important place Jerusalem occupied in Israel’s history was going to be destroyed. It is the kind of sadness that one feels when the ancestral home, or village, or city is destroyed. Jerusalem represented the Jewish nation of which Paul speaks in Romans 9:4-5: “Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came.” Those thoughts moved Paul to speak of a “great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart” (Rom. 9:2).

I personally have that same heaviness and sorrow when reports come of the wide-spread apostasy of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. From that country came my ancestors, and God gave that country the privilege of being the cradle of the Reformed faith, the same faith that we confess and love today. The sorrow that this has happened is real. And those who came from other countries in which once the truth of Scripture was held high, but have now departed from the faith know what that sorrow is like.

Our Lord was like us in all things, except for our sin. He too knew sorrow. One might say that the Lord should not have been sorrowful, because he, as God, had foreordained such apostasy; but that is not the point. As a man who possessed with us all human emotions, Jesus experienced sorrow. A forceful illustration of this is found in the gospel according to John, chapter 11. Jesus came to Bethany to raise Lazarus who had died. He knew that he had come to perform the miracle of raising Lazarus, but that knowledge did not prevent the Lord from weeping at the grave (John 11:35). Jesus knew the sorrow that comes to us all when God takes from us one we love.

It is not, therefore, strange that our Lord, remembering the past glory of Jerusalem wept over the city, even though he knew that Jerusalem’s apostasy and coming destruction were according to the purpose and plan of God.

But more is implied in Jesus’ sorrow. Jerusalem was dreadfully wicked. It had been wicked almost all the days of its existence. It had forsaken God’s law, worshipped idols, committed

sins worse than the heathen, and repeatedly persecuted those who came to warn Jerusalem of its sins. The sins of Jerusalem saddened Christ. They did not sadden him, because he was disappointed. He was not so sad because he had wanted Jerusalem to be saved, and had even given them grace to do what was right and pleasing in God's sight. Sin saddened our Lord. Jerusalem's sin saddened him; our sins sadden him as well.

The opposite is unthinkable! Is God delighted when men sin against him? blaspheme his name? make idols to worship instead of worshipping him? The very thought is blasphemous. Even the Psalmist expressed such grief at the sin of those whom he knew. "I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved; because they kept not thy word" (Ps. 119:158). David sang this Psalm in which he expressed his grief at the wickedness of those around him; but he also, in this same Psalm, speaks of God's sure judgments upon the wicked, and other of his Psalms express his fervent desire that God will bring judgment on all the workers of iniquity. His sorrow for sin was not incompatible with his desire that sin be punished.

As I have emphasized before, God is not, by his unchangeable counsel, the author of sin. Sin does not come because he ordained that it should. He is not responsible for the sins of men. Man sins willfully and willingly. He chooses sin and delights in sin. This remains true even though God sovereignly determines all sin. Though it was according to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God that Christ be crucified, and although the Lord determined crucifixion as the absolutely necessary way for the elect church to be saved, the Jews, Pilate and Herod committed this one crime of the ages because of their wickedness (Acts 2:23, Acts 4:26-28).

God created man good and able in all things to do the will of God. The sin of Adam and Eve (and our sin in Adam) was, though according to God's eternal purpose, man's dastardly act of rebellion. God's sadness is evident in his will that men fulfill the purpose for which he has been created.

Men protest against this truth that God is sovereign while man remains responsible for his sins. They even claim that this is logically inconsistent and cannot both be true. The sad part of it all is that in the interests of maintaining man's accountability for his sins, the truth of God's sovereignty lies like a wounded and bleeding reality on the pages of human theology. Man would prefer to sacrifice the truth of God in the interests of maintaining a twisted view of man's accountability.

That we cannot understand fully the ways of God is not surprising: we do not understand any of God's works, not even the simplest works of which we are witnesses a hundred times a day. God is infinite in knowledge and his ways are past finding out. We are bound to Scripture, for there God tells us of what he does. Scripture speaks of both God's sovereignty and man's accountability on every page without finding any problem. Rather than desecrate the holy name of God, let us bow in wonder and adoration, confessing our sins and our inability to know God's marvelous works as he performs them in time.

## WHAT IS THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL?

I have completed our discussion of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer. There are other texts that are sometimes quoted in support of this erroneous doctrine, but they are very similar to the key texts that I discussed in previous articles.

I would not be satisfied, however, with a criticism of the doctrine, and neglect to offer to the readers the positive teaching of Scripture on what the gospel in fact is. If it is not grace to the hearers – if it is not an offer in the sense of God’s desire to save all who hear and his willingness to save those who do hear – what in fact is it? The Scriptures speak repeatedly of the gospel. What do the Scriptures themselves say?

The word for “gospel” in the New Testament is a word from which we get the English “evangelism,” or, “evangelical.” In the noun form it means literally “glad tidings,” or, “good news” and refers to the contents of the gospel. The contents of the gospel are God’s eternal determination to save his elect people in Christ. Or, if I may put it in the words of one of our Confessions, the Canons of Dordt, it is the promise of God to save all those who believe in Christ, and it is a command to all who hear to forsake their sin and put their trust only in Christ for their salvation (2.5).

I take my starting point in Paul’s definition of the gospel in Romans 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

There were in Paul’s day and there are many in our own time who are ashamed of the gospel. They are ashamed of the sharpness of the gospel when it puts all men into a condition of sin from which they cannot possibly deliver themselves. It is embarrassing to them to come to men with the Biblical truth that the saved are eternally chosen as God’s elect. They are fearful that a gospel which speaks of God’s love for his people only will drive people away. And they are especially afraid of speaking of the gospel as the good news of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross for his people only and not for the whole world. That makes them ashamed of a gospel of particular grace, by which power God saves those whom he has eternally chosen.

But Paul is not ashamed of the gospel in all its sharpness and distinctiveness. He is not ashamed to preach it because the power to save does not lie in himself or his oratorical abilities. He tells the Corinthians, "And I, brethren when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:1-6).

Paul's only concern was to be faithful to Scripture in his preaching. God would accomplish his own sovereign purpose through the preaching, apart from the gifts of the preacher, and apart from any human power at all.

Today, preachers who want to be popular and attract large crowds, are afraid or embarrassed by the gospel as Paul preached it. They are concerned about making the gospel more palatable, more attractive, more appealing to men. So it is with the gracious offer of the gospel. It holds to the fact that God has an attitude of favor to all men, that it is Biblical to teach that God loves all men and that Christ died for all men. They claim that if a preacher keeps talking about sin all the time and condemning sin, then people will turn away from him. People have to be told that they have some remarkably good qualities about them and that sin is not always so bad as it is said to be: surely man is not totally depraved. And so God loves them all, makes salvation available to them all, and desires their salvation. All that remains is for man to accept the loving overtures of the gospel and all is well.

Paul will have none of that. The gospel is God's power to save. God himself saves through the gospel and God saves whom he wills to save. He accomplishes salvation in the atoning suffering and death of his own Son. The gospel is the proclamation of that truth. And through it God does what he has eternally determined to do, that is, save his people.

Paul puts it clearly in 1 Corinthians 1. He says that the gospel may very well be a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but it is nonetheless "unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24).

Because the power of the gospel does not lie in human ability or skill, in the persuasiveness of the preacher, in his charisma, where does the power of the gospel lie? The answer is, in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Both Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, when they still taught the truth of Scripture, spoke of the external call and the internal call of the gospel. The external call of the gospel was the preaching of a minister who set forth the promise of salvation to all who believe and who brought the command to repent and flee for a refuge to Christ. All present when the gospel was preached heard this external call that proclaimed salvation to believers, the command to repent of sin and the sure punishment of hell for unbelievers.

But both Presbyterian and Reformed theologians also spoke of the internal call of the gospel. This internal call was the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the elect people whereby they are efficaciously called out of darkness into light, out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. It is sovereign, irresistible and particular and is used by God to bring salvation to those who are chosen in Christ and redeemed in Christ's blood. Without that work of the Spirit, all who hear the command of the gospel will never repent and believe in Christ. They are totally depraved, without the grace of God, hell-bent for destruction.

Two things therefore, must be said about the Spirit's work. The first is that the Spirit never works salvation in the hearts of men without and apart from the Scriptures and the preaching of the Scriptures. This is Paul's clear teaching in Romans 10:11-18. This passage ends with these words: "But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom 10:16-18).

The second is that the Spirit who always works only in connection with the preaching of the gospel, also always accomplishes God's purpose in having the gospel preached. And it is this that I want to say a few things about.

First of all, let it be said emphatically that as far as I personally am concerned, I could never be a preacher if that were not true. If the success or failure of the preaching depended on me in any way whatsoever, I would be so frightened that I would never want to enter a pulpit again. The only truth that keeps me going is that God will do his work regardless of what I am or how I preach.

But there is more. Isaiah, in an important passage, says: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing wherein I sent it" (Is. 55:8-11).

This passage is a clear statement that God accomplishes his purpose through the gospel. The emphasis falls on God's purpose; his purpose of eternal election in Christ and his purpose revealed in the cross.

The same figure of the preaching of the gospel as rain falling on the earth is found in Hebrews 6, although with a different emphasis. In verses 4-6, the author of this epistle speaks of those who have once tasted the good word of God but have fallen away. It is impossible, the apostle says, that they be renewed unto repentance. In verses 7-8 the apostle gives the reason for this: the reason being that the word of God always accomplishes its purpose, but not only now in the salvation of the elect, but also in the damnation of the reprobate. "For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God. But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned."

The gospel that is widely preached is like the rain that falls upon the earth. In some instances, because of the blessing of God, it brings forth fruit. In other instances, the same rain brings forth briars that are destined to be burned. The latter as much as the former is the realization of the purpose of God accomplished through the gospel.

The outward call of the gospel that demands repentance and faith in Christ from all who hear it has its purpose. Its purpose is, first of all, that through the work of the Spirit, the elect bring forth fruit. But it is also that the wicked who reject the gospel and in whom the Spirit does not work, are left without excuse when they bring forth only briars.



But behind the rejection of the gospel lies the purpose of God in the decree of reprobation. It is no wonder that men hate the doctrine of reprobation, for it more than any other reveals the sovereignty of God. But that the gospel also is used by God to accomplish his decree of reprobation is clear from Scripture.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, the apostle Paul writes: “Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish. To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.”

Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. He rather considers preaching the gospel to be a triumph in Christ because God’s purpose is accomplished. And God’s purpose is accomplished whether the gospel saves or hardens. In both cases the preaching of the gospel is a pleasant smell to God. No wonder the apostle says, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (16).

That the decree of reprobation stands behind the rejection of the gospel is taught elsewhere in Scripture. This firm teaching of Scripture does not detract from man’s responsibility, because, as I said in an earlier installment, God accomplishes his decree by means of the sinful rejection of the gospel by man. But that does not alter the fact that God remains sovereign.

There are many passages in Scripture that teach this. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and told Moses he was going to do this before Moses ever confronted Pharaoh with the command, “Let my people go” (Exodus 4:21, and at least eight other places in Exodus). Paul confirms that this was the work of God’s sovereign decree of reprobation in Romans 9:17.

Jesus explains the unbelief of the Jews as God’s sovereign work when he explains his purpose in teaching in parables (Mark 4:11-12). Jesus, in speaking of himself as the good Shepherd, explains the unbelief of the Jews as being rooted in God’s decree: “But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you” (John 10:26). It is a mistake to turn this around, as some do: “Ye are not of my sheep, because ye believe not.” In very strong language Jesus explains the unbelief of the Jews in this way: “Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, “He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them” (John 12:39-40). It is impossible to harmonize these strong words with a God-loves-you, God-wants-to-save-you, God-pleads-with-you-to-accept-Christ gospel. The exegetical daring of those who try leaves one breathless.

The gospel is God’s great power unto salvation to all who believe. Any minister who takes his calling seriously stands in awe before the great power of the gospel. He mounts to platform, explains a text – and unleashes powers that make a destructive earthquake of less power than the pop of a small firecracker. The gospel makes saints out of sinners and the bride of Christ out of spiritual prostitutes. It carries on its power the elect from the spiritual dirt and filth of sin into the purity and glory of heaven.

And the gospel also accomplishes God’s purpose in hardening the reprobate that they might, in the way of their sin, manifest the judgment of God.

Let us humbly give thanks that God has used the gospel to transform us. And let the gospel be our light and guide in life. For who is sufficient unto these things?

## **FINAL REMARKS AND FINAL ARTICLE**

With the last article on the gracious and well-meant offer of the gospel, I have finished by discussion of this aspect of common grace. There is, I suppose, more that can be written. Some books have come out in the last few years defending the doctrine of a gracious offer of the gospel, but there has not been anything new in these books, or elements that I have not discussed.

Just today (the day this installment was written) I received an article with the title, “The Free Offer of the Gospel: Is It Biblical and Reformed?” The author makes assertions in the article that are simply not true. I will use an answer to the article as my concluding installment for this forum.

All the passages quoted by the author in support of the gracious gospel offer are passages we have explained in various installments and will not repeat here.

Referring to the Protestant Reformed Churches as a denomination that denies the free offer, the author describes their position as somewhere between hyper-Calvinism and orthodox Calvinism. This is stated as a fact without any proof, and the assumption is, of course, that those who hold to a gracious gospel offer are the true Calvinists.

What is worse, the author in claiming that a gracious gospel offer is Calvinistic implies that Calvin himself taught this doctrine. We have examined this question before and will not repeat what was said; but the fact remains that such as make this claim ought, for the sake of honesty, to explain Calvin’s position as outlined in his “Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God,” published in the book, *Calvin’s Calvinism*. In this book, Calvin specifically repudiates everything those who hold to a gracious gospel offer teach.

The author also appeals to Christ’s fulfillment of the moral law. The argument here is this: Christ, to fulfill the law, had to obey the commandment “Love thy neighbor.” Because that command as it comes to us, means that we are to love all men, so Christ loved all men when he kept the law perfectly. The author insists, however, that Christ’s love for all men is a love of

the divine person as well as the human person. This is an important consideration, because there have been those who have held to the position that Christ loved all men in his human nature, but not in his divine. The author will have none of this and declares that Christ as divine and human loved all men. We find that to be at least consistent.

However, the argument is fallacious. It is wrong, in the first place, because even our neighbor is not everybody in the whole world, but is only one whom God puts upon our pathway and who demands our attention and help. But, in the second place, one cannot argue from who our neighbor is to whom Christ's neighbor is. That is fallacious argumentation that cannot be supported by Scripture. It must necessarily follow from the author's position that Christ then also died for all men, for he died to fulfill the law. The author's position (as is the case with all who teach a gracious offer) leads to a universal atonement, something sharply repudiated by Scripture and both the Reformed confessions and the Westminster Confession. It can very well be said that Christ's neighbors are those whom God put on Christ's pathway and who require Christ's attention and help. But these are, obviously, the elect.

The author also claims that the Westminster Confession uses the word offer in a far broader way than in the way Protestant Reformed Churches interpret it; that is, as meaning "present, set forth, proclaim" – as is the meaning of the Latin. He appeals especially to the "Sum of Saving Knowledge", which is often printed in the same book as the Westminster Confession. We acknowledge his claim as true. But the Westminster Confession itself does not teach a gracious offer of the gospel. This is clear from the following considerations: 1) The question came up repeatedly on the floor of the Assembly, brought there by the Amyraldians. Repeatedly the Assembly's great leaders repudiated the Amyraldian position. Anyone interested in this question can find material on it in: An article I wrote that appears of the Protestant Reformed website under the title "A Comparison Between the Westminster Confession and the Reformed Confessions." In this article I refer to such material as Mitchell's "Minutes of the Assembly" and J. I Packer's Introduction to Owen's book, "The Death of Death," an Introduction published separately in pamphlet form. 2) The Westminster Confession is the official confession of all Presbyterianism; not "A Brief Sum of Christian Doctrine." It would seem to me that the author owes it to his readers to make this clear.

The author finally accuses those who deny the gracious offer of God of humanistic rationalism. He writes:

Do you have difficulty reconciling the genuine overtures of the Gospel with the truth of God's sovereign election and predestination? To all any such difficulty to cause you to reject the plain Biblical testimony to the reality of these gracious overtures is to bow down to the false humanistic god of the finality of human reason and is the very antithesis of true Biblical Calvinism. Whilst all of God's Word is reasonable, our powers of reason are those of a finite and fallen creature. We must lean upon the words that have proceeded out of the mouth of God. It is fallen man's pride in his own reason causing him to heed again the words of the serpent, "Hath God said?" (Gen. 3:1)

These are serious charges, sufficiently serious to consign all who hold to them to the eternal wrath of God in hell. Does the author really mean that? Earlier in the paper he speaks of "the late Herman Hoeksema" as "an able theologian." How can one be an able theologian when he is a rationalist, an idolater, one who listens to Satan as Eve did, and a proud man?"

I have also answered the objection itself in a couple of forum articles. It is evident that the author of this article takes the position of apparent contradictions in Scripture. We discussed this at length, and need not repeat what was said. But the author claims that only those who

hold to a gracious offer “Lean upon the words that have proceeded out of the mouth of God.” Would that the defenders of this gracious offer of the gospel would really do what they claim to be doing. It is my experience, and I have debated the whole question in speaking and writing times without number, that the defenders of this view are quick to quote texts here and there. But rarely, if ever, do they engage in serious and thorough exegesis. They do not make an effort to explain the texts they quote; they make no effort to examine the exegesis we present; they ignore our arguments and will not even try to answer them. It would be most helpful in the debate if just once we would receive some serious and thorough exegesis along with a solid Biblical refutation of our position. To fall back on the lame charge that we the Protestant Reformed Churches are guilty of rationalism will not suffice. Name calling does not solve theological problems.

Such an approach to a fundamental truth of Scripture is a denial of sound Hermeneutics, insisted upon early in the Reformation by both Luther and Calvin, namely the principle of the *regula fidei* (See, for example, A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969). This rule means that when one formulates a doctrine, one must take into account the teaching of the whole of Scripture and not just a text or two. Luther insisted that one could prove any heresy under heaven by simply quoting texts. And yet this is what is so often done by defenders of the gracious offer of the gospel.

Let us adhere to a tried and tested method of Biblical Hermeneutics, based solidly on the principle of Scripture Interprets Scripture, and not fall back on wild charges of rationalism and appeal as our last line of defense to “apparent contradictions.”

And so I conclude our discussions of common grace. I bid you all a fond farewell along with the prayer that our gracious God will keep you all faithful to his truth.