

Question: Common grace is alive and well in the Reformed church world today. Our own churches have their origin in the controversy over common grace. The minister must be vigilant in opposing any practices that are rooted in common grace. As a minister in a Protestant Reformed church, where would the theory of common grace manifest itself in the practices of the church today?

The three points of common grace, wisely rejected by the founders of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1924, are still wreaking havoc in nominally Reformed churches of today. The Christian Reformed Church, since its open acceptance of common grace, has quickly fallen down slippery slopes. Many other Reformed churches have succumbed to the outwardly inviting doctrine of common grace and have no good fruit to show for it. With thankfulness to God, the PRCA has stood resolute in its rejection of the three points. We have maintained our biblical understanding that God's grace is sovereign and particular—not common to all men. It is our prayer that God will continue upholding the PRCA in the defense of uncommon, particular grace.

As we look to the future, our looking may not be a passive sitting and waiting. Now is not the time to relax in an easy chair, trusting that because God has cared for us in the past, certainly he will continue protecting us in time to come. Satan, the great worker of iniquity, cannot be accused of laziness in his attacks against the church. Satan will be busy about his work of attempting to destroy God's church until the very day that Christ returns. For as long as Satan is busy attacking, so long must God's people be busy fighting the battle of faith. Rather than passively sitting and waiting, God has called us to a life of diligent preparation for the future. God's church, and particularly the leaders of his church, may not be lazy in their preparation for the attacks of Satan. We must be vigilant in looking for ways that Satan attempts to sneak into the church. Satan's work is deceitful and carnally appealing, so the eyes of God's children must be carefully attuned to the tactics that Satan uses, lest we too be swept astray.

Common grace is certainly one of the tactics Satan has used in the past to deceive the church. In 1924 he used it to deceive the leaders of the CRC. At that time the PRCA was formed in response to the CRC's acceptance of common grace. However, simply because the PRC rejected the doctrine of common grace does not mean that Satan has given up on using that venue as means of attack in the present. Still today Satan attacks God's people by attempting to sneak variations of common grace into the PRC.

To understand the different ways that Satan still uses common grace, we must have at least a basic understanding of the three points. In brief summary, the first point teaches that God has a favorable attitude toward all people, not only toward his elect.¹ The second point teaches that God restrains the sinfulness of the wicked, so that they are not as perverse as they could be. Following in close connection with the second point, the third point states that reprobate man, although incapable of doing any saving good, can perform civil good.

What becomes immediately obvious about the three points is the great emphasis on *man*, not God. Regarding the first point, all of *mankind* is deemed worthy of the favor of God, not only the elect through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Regarding the second point, *man* is not as sinful as he might be. Regarding the third point, *man* is capable of doing good works. Just as Adam and Eve were led by Satan in the garden to believe that man could and should have some power for himself, so too acceptance of the three points leads man to think that he is of some value in his fallen state. The doctrine of total depravity is done away with, and men focus more and more on self, not God. False teachings arise which teach that *man* is important, that *man* has power, that *man* has knowledge; the list goes on.

¹ Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko. *Ready to Give an Answer*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997.

What specific heresies should the church be on the lookout for as a Satan continues using different angles of common grace to attack the church? There are many possible heresies, but specifically one is the teaching that we, the church institute, need to be busy “redeeming” this creation and the people therein. The argument goes as follows. God, because of his common grace, has a favorable attitude toward all people. Because God has a favorable attitude towards all, he would like to save all people and all things (immediately one notices that double predestination and God’s omnipotence are done away with). Through the mandate given in Genesis 1 and elsewhere in Scripture, God places upon us the burden of spreading his kingdom. Our responsibility, then, is to go out redeeming all parts of creation.

Initially, people from a conservative background might respond, “What? There is no way I would ever believe such ludicrous reasoning! Christ alone redeems, and my calling is to live out of love and thankfulness for his redemptive work.” Such a response is good, but caution must still be taken. What must our work of thankfulness include? What is the role of the church? Unorthodox churches would like us to think that our work of thankfulness includes working for the world. Some, in fact, would go so far as teaching that the work of the church is not self-serving at all, but rather has an entirely outward focus. Moltmann, a renowned church leader, has expressed the following: “The church does not live for itself but rather exists for the world. Therefore, the church lives for and out of mission. But even mission has to be shaped by the principle of the openness...The church is not self-serving but serving the world and the kingdom.”²

Is focusing on the external things truly what the Lord has instructed the church to be busy about? Does the primary calling of the church revolve around mission, and in particular a mission that is “open”? I believe not. The Bible teaches not. Our creeds teach not. And yet we

² Karkkainen, Veli-Mattie. *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2002, pg. 130.

so easily are tempted with this outward, “missional” mindset. It is much more rewarding to feel blessed when you see the work of your hands. Putting up a building for a poverty-stricken family feels so right. Certainly the Lord is pleased to use me as his hands and feet while I dish out portions of food to a starving African family. What could possibly be wrong about doing a fundraiser to support families affected by natural disaster?

As we contemplate such questions, let us remember the parable of our Lord regarding two houses built—the one on sand, the other on a foundation dug deep into the ground. Both builders thought they were doing good deeds. Both builders thought they were doing the will of the Lord. And from all appearances, the man who built his house on sand was doing a much better job at building the kingdom—doing mission work, helping others, etc. He immediately started nailing boards together as the house was framed in, and those watching stood mesmerized with how quickly and efficiently he served the Lord. This kingdom builder was certainly doing a good job. On the other hand, the one who built upon the strong foundation was not making as much apparent progress. Before nailing any boards together, he began his work by digging a hole. In Luke 6:48 we read that “he digged deep.” This digging was tedious, slow labor with little reward at the end of the day to show for the work. Instead of working upward above ground, he first worked down below ground.

We all know well the final result of the two men’s labors. The house built with a deep foundation stood when the test of severe weather came, whereas the house built on sand experienced a tremendous fall. As we apply this lesson to our lives and in particular the work of the church, let us remember the work of the man who dug his well deep. He was not concerned about the external show of things. Rather, his primary concern was upon doing the work of the Lord exactly as he had commanded. We are taught by the Lord that his kingdom dwells in the

hearts of the elect. The kingdom is not external. The Lord dwells within us. As we proclaim in the Belgic Confession article 22, “We believe that...the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits, appropriates him, and seeking nothing more besides him.” Let us be diligent embracing Christ in our hearts and seeking him alone. We seek not earthly sanctuaries to worship in. We seek not world peace. We seek no other fruits of common grace. Rather, we seek alone the glory of our almighty Father, who loves us with a particular grace reserved only for his children.

Bibliography

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