

Common Grace and the Christian Institute

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This article has been written in response to Nick Needham's booklet used by the influential Christian Institute entitled, "Common Grace and the Work of the Christian Institute," one of their "Salt and Light" series of booklets.¹

The back cover states that "common grace" is God's favour to all men. This has to be refuted as unbiblical, dangerous to individuals and organizations who hold to it, and inimical to the Bible's teaching of the antithesis (that is the conflict between Christ and Satan, believers and unbelievers). Denominations and institutions which hold to this erroneous teaching are very likely to go spiritually downhill and apostatize. For example, Calvin University of the Christian Reformed Church in North America supports homosexual concerts and discussions. "Virtually all Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical churches embrace, confess and practice this doctrine."²

Any discussion of a word must entail a definition. "Grace" must be biblically defined. Is it "God's Riches At Christ's Expense" (GRACE), "God's undeserved favour" or something else? First of all, our Saviour is described as "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) and of Him it was said, "Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever" (Ps. 45:2). Since Christ was in no way undeserving, the above definitions won't do!

The first use of a word in Scripture is significant and often helpful in understanding what it means and how it is subsequently used. In Genesis we read, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (6:8), which is the first use of the word "grace."

¹ Nick Needham, "Common Grace and the Work of the Christian Institute" (Newcastle upon Tyne: The Christian Institute, 2008).

² David J. Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2003), p. 98.

Noah was one of only eight people who were saved from the worldwide flood because God in His covenant foreknowledge loved them in Christ—this is what grace meant to them! In the next ten instances, the word means the favour of men or angels rather than God (19:19; 32:5; 33:8, 10, 15; 34:11; 39:4; 47:25, 29; 50:4) but in Exodus we return to the word used exclusively as finding favour in God’s sight (33:12, 13, 16, 17; 34:9).

When we come to Proverbs further development of its use shows that it means beauty (like a ballerina being graceful; 1:9; 3:22, 34; 4:9; 22:11) and it is this meaning that applies to Christ, a quality God imparts in blessing: “Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly” (3:34).

Zechariah teaches that God’s grace is upon the place where He dwells: “Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it” (4:7). It is also on His people, particularly in the New Testament age:

And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn (Zech. 12:10).

In our New Testament usage of “grace” (used 122 times), I challenge anyone to show that, in even one case, it applies to anyone other than God’s elect! Its first use, “And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40), to my mind incorporates its two major New Testament meanings, namely beauty of character and the power of God to bless, both without measure given to Christ.

In John, we have, “And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace” and “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (1:16-17), which verses both point to grace being God’s powerful sanctifying blessing of His people (and only them!).

In Acts, the fruit of the Spirit poured out is the fruit of grace, and we would expect to see what grace actually accomplishes and we are not disappointed! It

enables powerful witness (4:33), it enables missionaries to work (14:26; 15:40), it is conveyed through preaching (14:3; 20:32), it converts Gentile as well as Jew by the gospel (11:23; 18:27; 20:24) and as the fruit of Christ's mediation (15:11), and it continues to work throughout the lives of converts (13:43).

When we come to Romans, the most clear, comprehensive, doctrinal, apostolic explanation of the gospel, it should be absolutely clear and convincing from the word's usage that it applies to God's people alone and not the world of men in general! The apostles received grace (1:5; 12:3, 6; 15:15) and grace forms part of the benedictions for believers (1:7; 16:24). Grace brings justification (3:24; 4:4, 16; 5:17), forgiveness (6:1) and God's favour (5:2); it is a gift (5:17). By grace Christ reigns in us (5:21) and grace is opposed to works righteousness (6:14, 15; 11:6). Grace is the cause of election (11:5) and will be an attribute of God causing praise throughout eternity: "That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). Who in their right theological mind believes this grace is common?

In the rest of the New Testament epistles, the scores of references to grace (remember there are 122 in total) fall into distinct categories but all apply to believers. We have three major uses and one lesser one: first, in benedictions for believers (30), second, referring to the saving power and love of God (30), third, referring to infused grace in the human heart divinely imparted (14) and, finally, in Paul's acknowledgement of his gifting for ministry (8).

Grace is praised for predestination: "Not one of God's rational creatures, either celestial or earthly, had ever been eternally and effectually saved apart from the grace of Divine election."³

Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace (Eph. 1:5-7).

³ A. W. Pink, "The Doctrine of Election: 5. Its Justice," *Studies in the Scriptures* 17, no. 7 (July, 1938), pp. 29-30.

Note it is grace for only those elect in Christ.

Arthur W. Pink, one of the most influential theologians and writers of the twentieth century, taught, “Election and preserving grace are never to be severed.”⁴ “Election being the act of God, it is forever, for whatever He does in a way of special [i.e., biblical] grace, is irreversible and unalterable.”⁵ In other words, grace and glory are intimately and unbreakably joined. He proves from Scripture that grace cannot be common because grace is manifest in time as the result of God’s eternal decree of election in Christ, which by definition is particular.

The principal glory which God designed to Himself in election was the manifestation of the glory of His grace. This is irrefutably established by, “Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children through (Greek) Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will: to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph. 1:5, 6). Grace is one of those illustrious perfections in the Divine character, which is glorious in itself, and had ever remained so though no creature had been formed; but God has so displayed this attribute in election that His people will praise and render glory to it throughout the endless ages yet to be ... His grace shines forth especially in predestination and what His elect are predestinated unto. So, too, when it is said of God, “that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, He had afore prepared unto glory” (Rom. 9:23), the prime reference is to His grace as Ephesians 1:7 shows.

The second Person in the Trinity was predestinated to be God-man, being first decreed, for we are “chosen in Him” (Eph. 1:4) ... It was, therefore, free grace in God which made that decree, and by how much loftier was the dignity conferred upon Christ above His fellows, so much greater was the grace.

⁴ Pink, “The Doctrine of Election: 5. Its Justice,” p. 30.

⁵ Pink, “The Doctrine of Election: 6. Its Nature,” *Studies in the Scriptures* 17, no. 9 (September, 1938), p. 25.

The predestination of the man Jesus, then, is the highest example of grace, and thus God's greatest end in predestination to manifest His grace (from whence election hath its title to be styled "the election of grace": Rom. 11:5) was accomplished in Him above His brethren, that He should be to the praise of the glory of God's grace, far above what we are.

Since in the case of Christ we have both the pattern and example of election—the Grand Original—it is quite evident that grace is not to be limited or understood only of the Divine favour toward creatures that are fallen and are delivered out of ruin and misery. Grace does not necessarily presuppose sin in the objects it is shown unto, for the highest instance of all, that of the grace bestowed upon the man Christ Jesus, was conferred upon One who had no sin and was incapable of it ...

God having thus absolutely chosen the Son of man and therewith endowed Him with such royalty as to be the sovereign end of all whom He should create or elect to Glory, it therefore follows that those who were chosen of us men were intended by the very ordination of God in our choice to be for Christ's glory as the end of our election, as well as for God's own glory. ... Here, as everywhere, Christ has the pre-eminence, for the Person of Christ, God-man, was predestinated for the dignity of Himself, but we for the glory of God and of Christ ...

It is to this original grace that 2 Timothy 1:9 refers: grace alone moving God to redeem and call us, apart from works, "according to" that mother grace whereby we were ordained to glory from the beginning.

In that original grace lay God's grand and ultimate design, for it will have its accomplishment last of all, and as the perfection of all [in glory].⁶

⁶ Pink, "The Doctrine of Election: 6. Its Nature," *Studies in the Scriptures* 17, no. 10 (October, 1938), pp. 24-26.

The above quotation and the Scriptures they are based upon show the beginning and end of the so-called chain of salvation from grace to glory. Grace and glory are forever linked in the mind and purposes of God, first in the predestination of His Son and secondarily of us. Grace has one ultimate end, the glory of God in glorifying Christ and His elect bride, the church. So how on earth can grace be called common? It is undoubtedly particular and sovereign.

These verses in Titus are conclusive and really ought to settle the issue!

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ (2:11-13).

Grace brings salvation, evidenced by godly living and an eternal hope which ungodly non-Christians do not have! "That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7). Grace justifies! Grace brings the certainty of eternal life. Non-believers have neither justification nor eternal life! So how can grace ever be called "common"? It never was, is or ever will be! How can it possibly be something God has for all men, something less than saving grace, something that confers earthly benefits alone?

"Common grace" is a human invention to blur the antithesis which God brought into existence and continues to uphold since Eden: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). There exists and always will exist an antipathy, enmity and distinct spiritual separation between Christ and Satan and between believers and unbelievers:

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? or 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 walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (II Cor. 6:14-16).

Christian believers ought not to form marriages or close business partnerships with unbelievers! “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). This is not to say we ought not to submit to all legitimate authority, use society’s many useful institutions, work or play alongside and be friendly towards all other people!

Dr. Richard Mouw correctly represented Hoeksema’s legitimate concern:

The commonality emphasis in common grace theology, Hoeksema insists, will inevitably result in the “obliteration of the distinction between the Church and the world, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, righteousness and unrighteousness.”⁷

Furthermore David Engelsma declares the faulty purposes behind the theology of “common” grace:

Common grace delivers the ungodly from total depravity. Common grace achieves one of the two great purposes of God in history: the production of good, God-pleasing culture. Common grace binds Christians and non-Christians together in their mutual calling to build a better, God-glorifying, Christianized world.⁸

Returning to Needham’s booklet, he states that “common grace” is “God’s loving and favourable attitude to human beings per se,” which flows forth in “blessings” but stops short of salvation, quoting Matthew 5:44-45 where God is said to make His sun rise on the evil and the good. Has he not read Romans 9 where God clearly states He loved Jacob but hated Esau (v. 13)? Does he really believe it is a “blessing” to provide the wicked with so much and then cast them into hell? Has he not read Psalm 73 where Asaph begins by envying the wicked (v. 3) but then sees their latter end (vv. 17-20, 27)? Does he not see

⁷ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 24.

⁸ Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited*, p. 93.

that God provides for all men promiscuously and that any gift short of salvation is part of His providence not grace! Pink quotes Matthew Henry to explain:

A man in the condemned cell is fed and clothed, but what is the daintiest diet and the costliest apparel worth, while he remains under sentence of death! “Our daily bread doth but fatten us as lambs for the slaughter if our sins be not pardoned.”⁹

Needham quotes from Psalm 145, “The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works” (v. 9), but he neglects to quote the next verse which explain what his works are: “All thy works shall praise thee, O Lord; and thy *saints* shall bless thee” (v. 10; cf. vv. 17-18). Since when do the wicked praise God? Hence they are not part of His “works” here.

One of the most obvious blessings God bestows is repentance: “Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities” (Acts 3:26). Is this blessing universal? Absolutely not! It is kept from the unrepentant wicked. Furthermore, Needham shows his shallow theology by quoting, as so many do, II Peter 3:9 in defence of God’s desire to save all men which in context manifestly is applicable to the elect saints only, the “usward” in the verse to whom God is longsuffering! Engelsma warns, “Far worse is the use of the theory of a common grace of God to introduce the doctrine of universal saving grace. History shows that this is unavoidable.”¹⁰

Turning to civil society, more nonsense follows: “yet it is still an act of grace, because of course incalculable and undeserved blessings ensue to human beings from the reign of law embodied by the state.” What state is Needham talking about? Communist China or North Korea? Does he mean the UK with its legal murder of millions of the unborn since 1967 and today’s increasing pressure on Christian free speech? He totally neglects biblical teaching on the “world,” by which I mean the world of the ungodly, the world we are not to love (I John 2:15-16), the world under the thralldom of Satan (John 12:31; I John 5:19).

⁹ Pink, “The Lord’s Prayer—Part 7,” *Studies in the Scriptures* 17, no. 9 (September, 1938), p. 1.

¹⁰ Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited*, p. 96.

Needham recovers somewhat by stating, “When it functions rightly, the state is a blessing to the church, and is intended to be so in the providence of God!” At last, some truth! He uses the correct word to encompass God’s rule in society and government. But then he lapses, “Civil society never entirely loses its character as an expression of God’s common grace.” No? What about the now fallen antichristian kingdoms, e.g., Babylon, Rome and the USSR, all of which oppressed God’s people and prefigure the final antichristian kingdom that will seek to wipe out the confessing church? Are they manifestations of God’s grace or are they not expressions of God’s sovereign providence and used to sift His church, and so fulfil a gracious purpose in them?¹¹

In his final chapter, Needham turns to the conscience in man and God’s restraint of sin to try and prove that these are gifts of “common grace.” He fallaciously thinks man’s spiritual and moral condition can be distinguished, “Spiritual death in the soul does not necessarily carry with it moral death in the conscience, the feelings, or the conduct.” This is flatly denied by Scripture that teaches that spiritually dead people bring forth nothing but works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21), their thoughts are continually wicked (Gen. 6:5) and, even if they appear morally upright, God discerns their selfish, sinful motives for their aim is not to glorify Him (Rom. 3:23). Thus their best deportment is only ever respectable or “splendid vices” (Augustine). Needham classes some of the work of unregenerate men as “good” again plainly contradicting Scripture which states, “there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” (Rom. 3:12; Ps. 14:1, 3; 53:1, 3).

Needham’s basic underlying error is his ignorance of Scripture and lack of submission to it. He has not grasped that men harden their hearts and have seared consciences (I Tim. 4:2). The Reformed tenet of total depravity, which apparently is not held by Needham or the Christian Institute, correctly teaches that every faculty of man’s mind, will and conscience is corrupted, whereas Needham says, “there is still much that is good in the conscience, feelings, and conduct of unregenerate people.” Needham does not see as God sees (Gen. 6:5; I Sam. 16:7) that basically sin is pride, self-reliance and self-centredness, falling short of giving God the glory, and failing to love God and the neighbour

¹¹ Needham’s “common grace” is in reality a facet of providence.

from the heart. All men are guilty of continually breaking God's law because they lack the life of the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:2; Gal. 5:22-23).

Key to understanding the right relationship between the kingdom of God (the church) and the kingdom of man (society) is Christ's command in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men," and Paul's exhortation, "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Eph. 5:11). Light and darkness are opposites and one dispels the other. Though we coexist and live and in many ways cooperate with others in secular society, our words and lives ought always to expose immorality and sin.

We agree with Needham that the state is to govern society so as to preserve good order and morality (Rom. 13:3-5; I Tim. 2:2), but we deny that, as an institution, civil government is an expression of God's grace, only His providence (*Belgic Confession* 13, 36).

Needham's "secret ally" conscience in the minds of non-Christians, part of his theoretical "common grace," really is not another basis for any alliance between the opposing kingdoms but again just an attempt to blur the real existence of the God-ordained antithesis and fails to distinguish between the Christian's true inner light (Christ's Spirit) and the native darkness in all men.

To sum up, grace is the beauty and free sovereign mercy and love of God granted to His elect in Jesus Christ. Such a wonder ought never be called "common" (Acts 10:15)!