

THE IDEA OF “A GENERAL GRACE OF GOD” IN CALVIN AND SOME OF HIS REFORMED CONTEMPORARIES¹

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CELEBRATIONS OF A HERITAGE run the danger of shortsightedness when theological insights of the past are prized and applauded without a clear focus on what constitutes current problems or what beckons for new solutions. Of course, the past can offer itself as an avenue into new insights and fresh solutions. Perhaps within the Reformed theological heritage this applies to the idea of a common grace of God. Indeed, an inadequately explored feature of Calvin’s theology is how he treats the idea of a common or general divine grace, particularly the content and scope of such a conception in relation to those whom are reckoned among the non-elect or those not chosen for eternal life—that is, those who have not been brought under the regenerating influence of divine salvation. In view of Calvin’s potent doctrine of human depravity, which carefully expounds the base proclivities of human nature, his theology is confronted with the question, inevitably, how a *pervasive* human depravity does not succumb to an *absolute* depravity.² How can radical human corruption cohere with the formation of human society itself, with its many engineering and architectural wonders, with its artistic marvels, with the many heroic acts of self-sacrifice that non-Christian writers have recorded, not to mention the

1. A section of this article first appeared under the title “The Idea of a ‘General Grace of God’ in Some Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theologians Other Than Calvin” in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, eds. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, Robert J. Bast, series editor (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013): 97-109. This material is re-used here with permission from the publisher Brill.

2. See, for example, Calvin’s comments in his *Argument* in his Genesis commentary, where he explains that with the fall of Adam, man alienated himself from God, losing all rectitude. “Thus Moses represents man as devoid of all good, blinded in understanding, perverse in heart, vitiated in every part, and under sentence of eternal death....” Most Latin citations will be from John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. J. W. Baum, A. E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 volumes, Corpus Reformatorum (Braunschweig: Schwetschhke, 1863-1900); hereafter cited as *CO*; English translations of Calvin’s commentaries are taken from the Calvin Translation Society edition (Edinburgh, 1843-1855), cited as *CTS*, and from *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 12 volumes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963-74), cited as *CNTC* (here, *CTS*, Prefatory *Argument*, Gen. Comm. [1554], 65).

numerous other intellectual accomplishments and noble deeds of fallen human beings? In fact, the idea of a general grace of God seems to play an important role in Calvin's thinking inasmuch as it explains how the believer may interact with the world, make use of the "wisdom" or "insights" of pagan philosophers—something Calvin frequently does himself—and accounts for the status of the human condition itself, which is neither wholly under the influence of regeneration and saving grace nor wholly under the sway of degeneration and devilish depravity.

In what follows, Calvin's understanding of a general or common grace of God will be examined in relation to some of his Reformed theological contemporaries. With this aim, first we will examine briefly the most important scholarship that has treated Calvin's teaching on this topic. Next, we will examine, if only in an abbreviated manner, how some of Calvin's contemporaries, namely Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, Wolfgang Musculus, and Peter Martyr Vermigli each comment on this issue. This is followed by a summary analysis of their views, noting commonalities and distinct features of their respective conceptions. From here we will explore in a more extended way Calvin's treatment of this subject in his diverse writings. Finally, we will present conclusions that may be drawn from this study both as it pertains to the scholarship surrounding Calvin's view of a general or common grace of God and how Calvin's conception stands in relation to some of his Reformed contemporaries.

This essay will show that, in fact, Calvin displays conceptual clarity, though not always a precision of language, regarding a saving grace over against a non-saving divine grace or favor. No attempt is made to lay out the entire scope of Calvin's doctrine of grace, either in its salvific or non-salvific sense, or that of his Reformed contemporaries. Instead, this brief study will demonstrate that while a general grace of God, in distinction from a saving grace, finds more precise definition in a number of Calvin's Reformed contemporaries than in Calvin himself, nonetheless, Calvin's own formulations, accumulatively, elicit a consistent and clear-cut conception.³ The key issue addressed here is an exposition of Calvin's treatment of a general or common grace of God and how his theological formulations on this matter find continuity with the formulations of some of his Reformed contemporaries.

1. Recent Scholarship on the Place of Common Grace in Calvin's Theology⁴

Within contemporary scholarship on Calvin's theology, the subject of common grace has seen only periodic analysis, without achieving a consensus on what a general grace of God involves and implies for the whole of his theological enterprise. Much of the scholarship has concerned itself with comparing Calvin's position to

3. For an analysis of how Calvin relates his conception of a common grace of God with the free offer of the gospel to the non-elect, see J. Mark Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 55-76.

4. For a more extended survey of the scholarship pertaining to Calvin's use of the idea of "common grace," see J. Mark Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace," 56-63.

subsequent figures in theology or to some other topic or issue. What is more, so far as I have been able to discover, Calvin’s treatment of a general grace, or even his idea of divine grace as such, has not been examined in relation to his Reformed contemporaries—which is to say, scholars have not asked how mid sixteenth-century Reformed theologians, besides Calvin, may have addressed this issue. Modern Calvin scholarship simply has not examined Calvin’s use of the idea of a general grace of God, or what Calvin refers to as a divine favor or kindness or beneficence, within his own historical context.

The groundbreaking work of Herman Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” remains in many respects the starting-point for discussion. Bavinck argued that throughout church history there have been a variety of responses to the question regarding how to affirm “the absoluteness of the Christian religion” on the one hand while recognizing that Christianity “is by no means the sole content of history” on the other. For example, Greek and Roman civilization express a rich culture of laws, social organization, juridical and moral virtue, and religious plurality. The question Bavinck poses, then, more formally stated, is what is Christianity’s relation is “to this wealth of natural life, which, originating in creation, has, under the law there imposed upon it, developed from age to age?”⁵ Bavinck presents Calvin’s deliverances on “common grace”⁶ as representative of the Reformation’s response to this question. In Bavinck’s analysis of Calvin’s understanding of common grace, the focus is upon the interplay and union between a salvific grace that brings forth the salvation of human beings and a common grace that entails the preservation of the world. This preserving work includes safeguarding remnants of humanity’s original and natural gifts from God. In enabling human life to proceed and develop, God thus manifests a certain favor upon all people, for all human achievement must be considered gifts of the Holy Spirit. God bestows such gifts not only to meet human need and satisfy human necessity, but also to bring forth enjoyment and pleasure to human life as evidence of his fatherly kindness for the elect and non-elect alike.⁷ The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of sanctification and of life, working in believers and in unbelievers.⁸ In fact, for Calvin, says Bavinck, “reprobation does not mean the withholding of all grace.”⁹ Although the blindness of human depravity necessitates God’s redemptive initiative and provision, including the gift of special revelation

5. Herman Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” *Presbyterian Theological Review* 7 (July 1909): 437-465; printed in *Calvin and the Reformation*, edited by William Park Armstrong (New York, Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1909; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 99-130, 225. All quotations, including the one cited above, are from the Baker reprint edition, pp. 99, 100.

6. For clarity in the ensuing discussion, it should be noted that the use of the language of “common grace” is not a formal category that belongs to Calvin’s theology as such. In the subsequent history of Reformed churches, the words “common grace” came to be used by synergistic or Arminian theologians to refer to a particular species of prevenient grace. In this conception sinners could either effectively resist or effectively cooperate with that grace. The idea of common grace as discussed here has no synergistic elements.

7. Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” 119; also “Common Grace,” 51 [16-17].

8. Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” 119.

9. Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” 117.

and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit for redemption, God also works in and upon all humans through a “*generalis gratia*.”¹⁰ This “grace” has at least a fourfold effect, namely (1) the restraint of sin; (2) the retention of certain “natural gifts”—bringing forth positive benefits both morally, socially, and epistemically; (3) the use of earthly possessions as divine gifts for human enjoyment; and (4) the preservation of the created order itself, which means therefore that human vocation, which is rooted in creation, cannot be divorced from divine redemption and faithful service to God.¹¹

Herman Kuiper follows in the trajectory of Bavinck. He argues that Calvin is “the acknowledged discoverer of the doctrine of common grace.”¹² His study, though rather dated, remains the most comprehensive analysis of Calvin’s treatment of a “common grace.” Confining his study to Calvin’s *Institutes* and commentaries, Kuiper detects a number of key terms which, he says, Calvin uses as near synonyms of grace, such as: goodness, kindness, liberality, benignity, beneficence, love, mercy, clemency, good will, and favor. Thus Bavinck and Kuiper, along with other writers, like A. Kuyper, Hepp, Choisy, Krusche, and Breen, argue that Calvin’s thought elicits a fairly detailed doctrine of common grace, forming either an essential or at least a clear component of his theology.¹³

Other studies by Anderson, Couch, Douma, Partee, and Campbell-Jack follow in a different direction, being more cautious in speaking about a “doctrine” of common grace in Calvin’s theology. They form a consensus in detecting only the seeds or the “embryonic” construct of such a doctrine. Some of these writers argue a bit anachronistically in saying that since Calvin does not give a formal treatment to common grace, making it a topic of his theology, he has no “doctrine” of common grace.¹⁴ For example, J. Douma maintains that “a *dogma* of common grace” cannot

10. These words come from Calvin’s *Institutes* II.ii.17.

11. Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” 117-129.

12. Herman Kuiper, “Calvin on Common Grace” (Ph.D. dissertation, Free University of Amsterdam; Goes, The Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre; Grand Rapids: Smitter Book Co., 1928.), 1-2.

13. Kuiper, “Calvin on Common Grace,” 3. Other writers that, broadly speaking, form something of a consensus along this path of interpretation are Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1902-1904); Quirinus Breen, “Calvin and Common Grace,” in *Religion and Culture* 5 (1923-24): 119-120; 131; 151-152; 171-172; *Religion and Culture* 6 (1924-25): 3; idem, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism*, 2nd edition (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968), 165ff.; V. Hepp, *Het Misverstand in Zake de Leer der Algemeene Genade* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma, 1923), 14-17; Fred Bronkema, “The Doctrine of Common Grace in Reformed Theology or New Calvinism and the Doctrine of Common Grace” (Th.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1928); Eugène Choisy, “Calvin’s Conception of Grace,” in *The Doctrine of Grace*, edited W. T. Withley (New York: MacMillan, 1932), 228-234; Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), 95f. For an extended survey of these materials, see my unpublished paper, “Calvin’s Treatment of Divine Grace and the Offer of the Gospel,” Calvin Theological Seminary, Nov. 15, 2000, 3-8.

14. James William Anderson, “The Grace of God and the Non-elect in Calvin’s Commentaries and Sermons” (Th.D. dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976); Richard Arden Couch, “An Evaluation and Reformulation of the Doctrine of Common

be detected in Calvin’s thought. Indeed, it is not even a “theme” he addresses formally. Rather, Calvin treats grace as a single entity that can be distinguished with regard to its *extent* and *effect*.¹⁵ While Douma’s remarks might, strictly speaking, be true, they are also a tad anachronistic and certainly not particularly to the point, since it is precisely the *extent* and *effect* of common grace that distinguishes it from saving grace in Calvin’s thought. This is only to say that Calvin’s failure to give systematic formulation to this doctrine in his writings does not preclude him from having a clear conceptual idea of how God’s saving grace, bestowed only on the elect, can be properly differentiated from a non-saving graciousness or divine favor that is directed toward the created order itself and especially toward those persons who are reckoned as the non-elect. Campbell-Jack, himself denying that Calvin gives us a “doctrine of common grace,” nonetheless asserts that “there is ample evidence that Calvin taught that there was a response of unmerited favour on the part of God towards unregenerate humanity.”¹⁶

A final group of writers, mostly coming from the Protestant Reformed Churches, assert that Calvin’s remarks on a universal divine favor constitutes a serious aberration within his theology, even more, it bespeaks outright contradiction, for any such teaching, given Calvin’s deliverances on election and reprobation, fails the test of consistency. Divine grace means saving grace—and God has nothing but love for the elect and hatred for the reprobate.¹⁷ We mention this line of thought—in spite of its failure to interact carefully with the scholarship cited above—if only to demonstrate the range of interpretation that Calvin’s thought has elicited on the matter of common grace.

Grace in the Reformed Tradition” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1959); J. Douma, *Algemene Genade: uiteenzetting, vergelijking, en beoordeling van de opvattingen van A. Kuyper, K. Schilder en Joh. Calvijn over ‘algemene genade,’* (Goes, The Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1981); Charles B. Partee, “Calvin on Universal and Particular Providence,” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 69-88; Walter Campbell Campbell-Jack, “Grace without Christ? The Doctrine of Common Grace in Dutch-American Neo-Calvinism” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1992), see Chapter 7, “John Calvin: Common Grace in Embryo,” 196-235. See my unpublished paper “Calvin’s Treatment of Divine Grace and the Offer of the Gospel,” Calvin Theological Seminary, Nov. 15, 2000, 8-11, for fuller treatment of these writers.

15. Douma, *Algemene Genade*, 274-275.

16. Campbell-Jack, “Grace without Christ?,” 200.

17. Herman Hoeksema, “Calvin and Common Grace,” *The Standard Bearer* 37/11-13 (March 1, 1961; March 15, 1961; April 1, 1961): 244-245; 268-269; 292-293, 297; idem, *Calvin, Berkhof and H. Kuiper: A Comparison* (Grand Rapids: no publisher, n.d.); Herman Hanko, “The History of the Free Offer of the Gospel (2): the Reformers,” in *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 16 (April 1983): 3-17; David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 83-89; idem, “‘Nothing but a Loathsome Stench’: Calvin’s Doctrine of the Spiritual Condition of Fallen Man,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 35 (April 2002): 39-60. Also see William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 395-402.

Before turning to an extended analysis of Calvin's teaching on common grace, it would be helpful to examine, if only in an abbreviated manner, how some of his Reformed contemporaries addressed the question of God's grace and whether they made use of the concept of a general grace of God—and, if they did, how they defined it.

2. Calvin's Contemporaries on Divine Grace

2.1 Martin Bucer (1491–1551)

Among Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries the doctrine of divine grace comes to varying degrees of strict definition. For example, Martin Bucer¹⁸ Calvin's mentor of sorts at Strasbourg, in treating the doctrine of election, defines grace (*gratia*) as "the free [*gratuita*] favour and goodwill of God," but acknowledges that in the Bible the scope of the word also includes "the free gifts of God," at least understood in a figurative sense.¹⁹

We observe that Bucer articulates a potent doctrine of original sin, maintaining that the focus of its corrupting effects "is neither deed nor word nor thought, but the corruption of judgment and desire whence proceed all evil thoughts and words and deeds."²⁰ Moreover, he maintains that original sin infects and corrupts "the whole man," so that humans have no desire to aspire "after God and his will as the truest good." Consequently, being in this condition, their judgment on all matters is "warped," for nothing is sought or regarded "in its proper place"; rather, they abuse and pervert "all things."²¹ This, however, does not prevent Bucer from acknowledging that there are people—indeed, many people—who, though entrapped in sinful desires and wholly ignorant of God, nevertheless act mostly "with decency and rectitude." In fact, when their works are considered in themselves, excluding the disposition of the doer, they display such virtue that no one can fail to deem them worthy of praise. For the unregenerate remain God's workmanship and function as his instrument, so much so that their lives serve an appointed purpose and God "often produces even in them eminently good deeds."²² Yet this does not mean that

18. On Bucer see Martin Greschat, *Martin Bucer: A Reformer and His Times*, trans. Stephen E. Buckwalter (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004); Hastings Eells, *Martin Bucer* (1931; reprint, New York, 1971); and D. F. Wright, *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

19. Martin Bucer, *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, translated and edited by D. F. Wright, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics, vol. 4 (Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), 109, taken from Bucer's Cambridge *Lectures on Ephesians* of 1550-51 under the heading of "Election."

20. Bucer, *Common Places*, 121, taken from Bucer's *Commentary on Romans*, 5:18-21, 2nd ed. 1562, under the heading of "Original Sin."

21. Bucer, *Common Places*, 122, taken from Bucer's *Commentary on Romans*, 5:18-21, 2nd ed. 1562, under the heading of "Original Sin."

22. Bucer, *Common Places*, 123, taken from Bucer's *Commentary on Romans*, 5:18-21, 2nd ed. 1562, under the heading of "Original Sin."

they are not wholly depraved and totally ruined in Adam. While the Lord performs “many excellent works through them,” this is done for the sake of others. What is more, their lives remain “perverse and vitiated,” being bound over to corruption, so that they fail to praise God as the source of their noble actions.²³ Thus we see that Bucer comes up short of *affirming* a general grace of God or *describing* the good that God produces in unbelievers as gracious. Nevertheless, their good actions are to be wholly ascribed to God and therefore, in some sense, are graciously derived.

Surely if you acknowledge God to be the maker of all things and alone good, you are bound to admit that no one can choose good or avoid evil except so far as the Lord’s free initiative has granted it by his operation within us. Anyone then to whom he has not bestowed his Spirit, whom he determines not to have mercy on but to harden, will sin, and sin willingly of his own accord, and will by a distorted bias abandon himself recklessly to iniquity. For what else can he do, if he can do nothing of himself? How can he do anything good on his own when God alone is good, and no one can receive anything but by God’s gift? This is certainly how a man’s way is ordered: any good you have, you received from God, gratuitously, solely out of his spontaneous will; any you do not have, you lack because you have not received it, and therefore because God has not willed to give it; but nevertheless it is because you do not have, that nothing is given to you and what you seem to have is taken away from you and you are condemned eternally. And yet God is righteous, there is no injustice on his part, despite your inability to comprehend this fact by your own reason.²⁴

The good that unbelievers or the unregenerate do is a merely relative good, for they “neither come to Christ nor are able to do anything truly good,” and are therefore justly condemned for their sin.²⁵ For Bucer, the good or virtuous actions that God works in unbelievers is a divine gift and is gratuitous. But the Strasbourg Reformer comes up short, at least in the writings we have examined, of having any developed idea of common grace.

2.2 Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575)

Heinrich Bullinger is another of Calvin’s theological colleagues who, even more so than Bucer, treats divine grace in a formal and precise manner. In his Fourth Decade, Bullinger seeks to offer a definition of grace that honors the range of meaning that the term has within Scripture itself. For throughout the Bible the word “grace” is

23. Bucer, *Common Places*, 123, taken from Bucer’s *Commentary on Romans*, 5:18-21, 2nd ed. 1562, under the heading of “Original Sin.”

24. Bucer, *Common Places*, 126, taken from Bucer’s *Commentary on Romans*, 5:18-21, 2nd ed. 1562, under the heading of “Original Sin.”

25. Bucer, *Common Places*, 127, taken from Bucer’s *Commentary on Romans*, 5:18-21, 2nd ed. 1562, under the heading of “Original Sin.”

used in a variety of ways, as is the case in common speech.²⁶ It can mean “thanksgiving,” “a benefit,” and can also signify “alms,” as it does in 2 Cor. 8. Likewise, it can indicate “praise” and “recompence,” which we see “in that place where the apostle saith: ‘If, when ye do well, ye are afflicted, and yet do bear it; that is praiseworthy before God’ [*gratia apud Deum*, 1 Pet. 2:20].”²⁷ It can also mean the “faculty” or “licence,” says Bullinger, “to teach and execute an office,” as when the apostle says that he received grace “to execute the office of an apostle.”²⁸ In exploring the range of meaning that is attached to the word “grace” in Scripture, Bullinger also notes that “the gifts of God are called grace, because they are given *gratis*, and freely bestowed without looking for any recompence.” Yet the apostle clearly distinguishes “gift from grace” in Rom. 5, for grace denotes divine “favor” and “good-will” toward us, whereas a gift is what God bestows to us according to his “good-will,” such as “faith, constancy, and integrity.” Thus, those persons about whom we say, ‘They are in God’s grace,’ are the very ones God dearly loves and favors “more than others.” “In that sense,” writes Bullinger, “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord: Joseph found grace in the eyes of the lord of the prison; and the holy virgin is read to have found grace with the Lord, because she was beloved of God, and very dear unto the Lord, as she whom he had singularly chosen from among all other women.”²⁹ However, for his part and in connection with his particular argument, Bullinger wishes to define “grace” as having a specifically salvific content, calling grace that “favour and goodness of the eternal Godhead, wherewith he, according to his incomprehensible goodness, doth *gratis*, freely, for Christ’s sake embrace, call, justify, and save us mortal men.”³⁰

26. Important works on Heinrich Bullinger include Emidio Campi, *Heinrich Bullinger und Seine Zeit: eine Vorlesungsreihe* (Zürich: TVZ, 2004); Bruce Gordon and Emidio Campi, eds., *Architect of Reformation: An Introduction to Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575)* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); Fritz Büsser, *Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575): Leben, Werk, und Wirkung*, 2 vols. (Zürich: TVZ, 2004); Fritz Blanke, *Heinrich Bullinger: Vater der reformierten Kirche* (Zürich: TVZ, 1990); Carl Pestalozzi, *Heinrich Bullinger: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften* (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs, 1858); and Fritz Blanke, *Der junge Bullinger 1504-1531* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1942); also see the shorter treatments of Bullinger’s life and work given by J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), xi-xxvi; David C. Steinmetz, “Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575): Covenant and the Continuity of Salvation History,” in *Reformers in the Wings* (1971; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 133-142; and Justus Heer and E. Egli, “Bullinger, Heinrich” in *Realencyklopädie für protestantische theologie und Kirche*, ed. J. J. Herzog, et al., 3rd rev. ed., 24 vols. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1896-1913): 3:536-549.

27. Heinrich Bullinger, *Sermonum decades quinque, de potissimis Christianae religionis capitibus* (Zürich, 1557), IV.i.178-79; trans. *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, trans. H. I., edited for the Parker Society by Thomas Harding. The Five Decades in 4 vols. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1849; repr., New York, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), Fourth Decade, sermon 1, 6-7 (hereafter cited in the format *Decades* IV.i, 6-7).

28. Bullinger, IV.i.179 (*Decades*, IV.i, 7).

29. Bullinger, IV.i.179 (*Decades*, IV.i, 7).

30. Bullinger, IV.i.179 (*Decades*, IV.i, 7).

In his work, *De gratia dei iustificante nos propter Christum* (1554), Bullinger differentiates between various theological senses of divine grace. According to Bullinger, we meet with three different uses of the word grace (*gratia*) in Scripture and sacred disputation.

For, to begin with, there is a certain grace of God that is, as it were, general, by which God has created all of us and by which he sends rain on the good and the wicked. Now this benefit of creation is what Pelagius understood in his discussion of God’s grace when he contended that nature itself is sufficient not only for acting but truly even for achieving the mandate of God through free choice. No one who is justified is justified by this general grace, otherwise even the impious would be justified—that is, those who persist in their impiety. Next, there is in the Scriptures another sort of grace, a special grace, namely a unique favor of God by which he embraces us out of his goodness and mercy and adopts us as sons for Christ’s sake through faith. By this grace are justified as many of us as are justified. And St. Augustine, in opposition to Pelagius, was not denying this general grace but in every way was contending that the apostle, in the discussion of our salvation, spoke of that unique grace, that is, that free grace by which God clearly saves us not by any of our merit but only by his mercy for Christ’s sake.... Finally, there is a grace which, when kindly poured out into the hearts of people, brings forth all kinds of good works in such a way that our works may be called the grace of God. Truly not even this justifies; otherwise, works actually justify us—something the apostle denies completely, saying, but if by grace, then not by works. For then grace is no longer grace. If from works, then it is not grace. For work is then not a work [of grace].³¹

31. Heinrich Bullinger, *De gratia dei iustificante nos propter Christum* (Zürich, 1554), 7: “Principio enim est gratia quaedam dei veluti generalis, qua deus nos omnes condidit, & qua super bonos & malos pluit. Ac hoc quidem creationis beneficium intelligebat Pelagius in disputatione de gratia dei, contendens naturam sibi sufficere non solum ad faciendam, verum etiam perficiendam dei mandata per liberum arbitrium. Hac generali gratia non iustificantur qui iustificantur. Alioqui iustificarentur & impij, hoc est, in sua persistentes impietate. Deinde est alia quaedam in Scripturis specialis gratia, favor scilicet dei singularis, qua is nos ex bonitate & misericordia sua complectitur, & adoptat in filios, propter Christum, per fidem. Hac iustificamur quotquot iustificamur. Et S. Augustinus contra Pelagium, non negabat generalem illam gratiam, sed modis omnibus contendebat, Apostolos in disputatione de salute nostra loqui de gratia illa singulari, id est gratuita, qua videlicet deus nullo nostro merito, sed mera sua misericordia propter Christum nos salvos facit.... Postremo est gratia quaedam quae in hominum corda benigne effusa, omnis generis bona opera profert [sic] ut opera nostra dicantur dei gratia. Verum ne illa quidem iustificat. Alioqui enim opera nos iustificarent. Id quod modis omnibus negat apostolos, dicens, Quod si per gratiam, non iam ex operibus. Quandoquidem gratia, iam non est gratia. Si ex operibus, iam non est gratia. Quandoquidem opus iam non est opus.” I am grateful to Mr. Arjen Vreugdenhil for assistance with the above translation.

Here Bullinger clearly distinguishes between a divine grace that brings us to salvation (*gratia specialis*), a divine grace that enables us to bear the fruits of salvation (*gratia effusa*), and a grace that is resident in or expressive of the creation itself, eliciting its benefits (*creationis beneficium*), that is, the created capacity of human beings, along with the gifts and talents that are part of being human (*gratia generalis*).³² Bullinger notes that Pelagius took this “general grace” as sufficient in itself, despite the fall, to enable humans to choose God and live for him. That is, Pelagius misapprehended this general grace of God.

In view of what Bullinger says about this *gratia generalis* in distinction from *gratia specialis*, it is also important to consider his remarks about “the law of nature.” For it would seem that the idea of a “law of nature” is connected to what Bullinger says about a general grace of God, which is expressive of the blessings of the created order itself.

According to Bullinger, there is a law of nature, or what we might call a law of creation, that abides in humans in spite of the fall and its corrupting effects. Bullinger links this to the human conscience. Thus the law of nature is “an instruction of the conscience,” which means that God has oriented human hearts and minds in “a certain direction.” In this way, God instructs humans in what they are both to seek and to avoid.

And the conscience, verily, is the knowledge, judgment, and reason of a man, whereby every man in himself, and in his own mind, being made privy to every thing that he either hath committed or not committed, doth either condemn or else acquit himself. And this reason proceedeth from God, who both prompeth and writeth his judgments in the hearts and minds of men. Moreover, that which we call nature is the proper disposition or inclination of every thing. But the disposition of mankind being flatly corrupted by sin as it is blind, so also is it in all points evil and naughty.³³

It would seem that, for Bullinger, a general grace of God is directly associated with the law of nature and the human conscience—including the divine judgments which are written on the human heart. The original constitution and order of the creation, yes, even its remnants after the fall, bespeak a divine grace in a general sense.

As is evident from the above quotation, however, Bullinger does not deny the fall or its destructive effects. The law of nature, due to human depravity, can be twisted so as to oppose the written law of God; it thus remains and must remain answerable to the law of God. Nonetheless, because of this law of nature, even Gentiles, or at least wise Gentiles, are able to offer wisdom that conforms to the Ten Commandments and the law of God. Pythagoras, for example, confesses but one God who is the maker and keeper and governor of all things. Likewise, Zaleucus, Cicero, Seneca, and others argue for laws that conform to various divine

32. Bullinger so clearly distinguishes between these three sorts of divine grace that he sets each off via a marginal heading.

33. Bullinger, *Sermonum*, II.i.36 (*Decades*, II.194).

commandments.³⁴ But this wisdom does not in itself reach up to God. For Bullinger, nature still needs grace, otherwise it is “without force and effect.”³⁵ In short, this means that to the degree any Gentiles can receive the praise of righteousness (so, Melchizedek, Job, Jethro, and others) and come to salvation, they are “saved, not by the works of nature, or their own deserts, but by the mercy of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁶

This likewise ties into Bullinger’s discussion whether those works that heathens do, which have some show of virtue or goodness, ought to be regarded as sins instead of good works. Expressing views very similar to Bucer, Bullinger maintains that the “worthy deeds” of unbelievers should not be “despised or utterly contemned” inasmuch as such actions are “not altogether done without God.” Moreover, such works are very useful in the maintenance and restoration of “tranquillity” among nations and governments.³⁷

And therefore did the most just Lord enrich certain excellent men and commonweals with many and ample temporal gifts; for upon the Greeks and many Roman princes he bestowed riches, victories, and abundant glory: and verily, civil justice and public tranquillity was in great estimation among many of them. Others received infinite rewards, because they did constantly and manfully execute the just judgments of God upon the wicked rebels and enemies to God. Neither is it to be doubted but that the Lord granted that invincible power to the Roman empire under Actavius Augustus and other Roman princes, to the end that by their strength he might break and bring down the invincible malice of the Jewish people, and so by the Romans revenge the blood of his Son, his holy prophets, and blessed apostles, which had been shed by those furious and blasphemous beasts.³⁸

We see that in Bullinger’s thought the idea of a general grace of God comes to clear expression as he links the concept to the created order and man’s created constitution. The benefits of the creation—even in the remnants after the fall—betoken a divine grace. This is the grace Pelagius commandeered and sought to make sufficient in itself to enable humans to aspire after God and receive salvation. While acknowledging the virtuous works of the heathen as being in some sense dependent on God, Bullinger, like Bucer, comes up short of any “formal” or “full” notion of a general grace of God.

34. See *Sermonum*, II.i.37ff. (*Decades*, II.197ff.).

35. Bullinger, *Sermonum*, II.i.38 (*Decades*, II.205).

36. Bullinger, *Sermonum*, II.i.38 (*Decades*, II.205-206).

37. Bullinger, *Sermonum*, III.x.174 (*Decades*, III.419).

38. Bullinger, *Sermonum*, III.x.174 (*Decades*, III.419).

2.3 Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563)

The next theologian we examine briefly is Wolfgang Musculus.³⁹ Like Bullinger, Musculus also takes up the definition of divine grace in unmistakably formal ways. Musculus addresses himself to the meaning of the biblical words for grace as used in both Hebrew חַן and Greek χάρις. First, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word חַן is occasionally used for “favoure and comelinesse, or whether it be in the bodye or in words....” For example, Prov. 31:30: “Beauty is a deceytfull and vayne grace....” Likewise in Greek the same is sometimes true for the word χάρις. But this is not the common use of the word Scripture. Second, in Hebrew חַן is also called a “favor,” as “when of a special disposition of our minde, we do wish well to any man.” So we see in Genesis 6:8: “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord,” i.e., he found favor before the Lord (LXX: χάρις). This sense is found in diverse places in the Gospels and epistles as well. Thus Luke 1:30: “Thou hast found grace with God”; and the salutations of Paul: “Grace and peace, etc.”⁴⁰ Third, “this worde is also used for a gift, whiche is given of very favour.” So Jacob said to his brother Esau concerning his children: “They be the children which the Lord God hath graciously given thy servant” (Gen. 33:5). And likewise Acts 11:23, where Barnabas is glad in seeing the gift (or grace) of God that had come upon believers. Paul refers to the liberality (χάρις) of the Corinthians which he will have sent to the church in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:3). Paul also bids believers not to receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1).⁴¹ These latter two senses of חַן and χάρις are often used in Scripture, notes Musculus.

Therefore, grace is, as touching this present matter, that affection of favoure, when we love a man hartely, and whatsoever through thys favoure is freely and franckelye given without respecte of anye deserte or duetie. This definition of grace we muste diligentely keepe, that wee maye well understande these thynges, whyche the holye Scripture dothe ascribe unto

39. For an account of Musculus’s life and his theology, see Ludwig Grote, *Wolfgang Musculus, ein biographischen Versuch* (Hamburg, 1855); Rudolf Dellspenger, *Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563) und die oberdeutsche Reformation* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997); Robert B. Ives, *The Theology of Wolfgang Musculus* (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 1965); also see Richard A. Muller, “Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563),” in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 248; Hartmut Lohmann, *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon*, vol. 6 (Herzberg: Bautz, 1993), s.v. “MUSCULUS, (Müslin, Mäuslin), Wolfgang (Dusanus),” 381ff.; and Jordan J. Ballor, *Covenant, Causality, and Law: A Study in the Theology of Wolfgang Musculus*, Ref500 Academic Studies, eds. Herman J. Selderhuis, et al, vol. 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

40. Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes in usus sacrae theologiae candidatorum parati* [hereafter *LC*] (Basel, 1560), 185; trans. *Commonplaces of Christian Religion*, 2nd. ed., trans. John Man (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578), 295-296.

41. Musculus, *LC*, 186; *Commonplaces*, 296.

Goddes grace, least we be seduced by some meanes, and make voyde the glorye of the grace of God.⁴²

Next Musculus considers the question whether God, who is just, may also be gracious. Since, according to our flesh, justice conjures up images of God that seem to be at odds with his grace and kindness, how do these dual portraits fit with one another? For “the fleshe judgeth: If there be iustice in God, there is not grace: if there bee grace, then there is no iustice.”⁴³ Musculus argues that no such inconsistency or problem exists in God, who is at liberty; and “we must stoutly knocke downe this thought of our fleshe, as often as we perceyve it to doubt of the grace of God.”⁴⁴

From here Musculus refutes the idea that God is gracious out of some selfish motive. “For the beginnyng of it riseth not of us, but of his goodnesse: nor it tendeth not to any ende of his owne proper commoditie, but to our salvation.”⁴⁵ Musculus thus points to the source of divine grace as residing in divine goodness and specifies its goal as “our salvation.” This brings Musculus to present a description of grace that clarifies its nature, namely that its character is altogether “francke” and “free.” Consequently, whatever is not free, is not grace and does not find its wellspring in God’s goodness, which is absolutely necessary if grace is to be grace, purely conceived.⁴⁶

Having said that, Musculus is cautious and concerned not to assign the beginnings of God’s grace to the temporal order. For the grace of God is eternal, which is also true of his goodness. Since grace is “naturally in God,” it cannot find its beginning in time. “Even like as goodnesse is in him naturally, so is grace also; which you may well call, the nature of goodnesse.” For Musculus, just as the brightness of fire derives from the fire itself, being simultaneous with it, so, by way of analogy, grace proceeds from the divine goodness. Although grace ensues from God’s goodness, both abide in God co-eternally.⁴⁷

Next Musculus considers “how many sortes there be of this grace of Gods goodnesse.” The Schoolman distinguished between two sorts: grace working (or grace going before) and grace working-with-another (or grace coming after). Musculus is not satisfied with this scheme inasmuch as it does not adequately correspond to the language of the apostle.⁴⁸ Instead, he opts for the distinction between “grace purposing” and “grace working.” Of course, he is speaking of grace unto redemption. Thus, in the context of discussing “the grace purposing,” Musculus

42. Musculus, *LC*, 186; *Commonplaces*, 296. “Est igitur gratia, quatenus ad praesentem materiam requiritur, affectus ille fauoris, quo cuipiam bene uolumus ex animo, & quicquid fauoris huius ductu libere & gratuito absq; ullius meriti uel debiti respectu donator. Haec definitio gratiae diligenter retinenda est, ut probe intelligamus, ea quae sacra scriptura divinae gratiae adscribit ne quo pacto seducti, gloriam gratiae Dei euacuemus.”

43. Musculus, *LC*, 186; *Commonplaces*, 296-297.

44. Musculus, *LC*, 186; *Commonplaces*, 297.

45. Musculus, *LC*, 187; *Commonplaces*, 298.

46. Musculus, *LC*, 187; *Commonplaces*, 298.

47. Musculus, *LC*, 187; *Commonplaces*, 298.

48. Musculus, *Commonplaces*, 300.

says this: “It is a greate prayse of the grace of God, that it dothe prevent [precede] the wicked to iustifie and save them: but it is yet a greater matter, that he did purpose and predestinate it accordyng unto the will of his goodnesse, from everlasting before the establishment of the worlde, when the worlde yet was not, muche lesse men dwelling in it.”⁴⁹ Moreover, Musculus insists that those who are not regenerate do not have any power within themselves or any liberty of will that would enable them to obey God’s commands and follow the way of faith and repentance.⁵⁰

We see, then, that Musculus has a very robust doctrine of divine grace in the Augustinian mode. Within that mode, however, the issue is whether he allows any room for a general, non-salvific, grace of God. We discover that Musculus is not adverse to speaking about the unregenerate doing good in some manner. “[The unregenerate man] may in deed be dryven or moved some other way to speake with his tong, or to worke with his hande in some sorte, that which is good.”⁵¹ Perhaps this is associated with what Musculus has to say regarding the Noahic covenant, which he describes as a general covenant in distinction from a special covenant. “The generall covenante is that, which he [God] made with hys whole frame of the earth and all that dwelleth therein, as well beastes as men, with the day also and the night, winter and sommer, cold and heate, seede time and harvest.”⁵² Musculus calls this a general covenant because it has to do with the whole world; consequently, it may also be described as earthly and temporal, for it altogether concerns the regular order of the world. Indeed, in commenting on God’s covenant with the world, as stipulated in the covenant with Noah, Musculus is brought to use the terminology of “common grace.”

And I do not speake for that, that I do condemne so noble, manifest and generall grace of oure creator, withoute which this world can not endure, bycause it is earthly and temporal. God forbidde. Surely he [sinful man] is not worthy to enjoy the good everlasting, that maketh nothing of the earthly and temporall goodes. Yea he is unthankfull for the gifte of hys life, and not worthy to enjoy this aire whiche he doth breath of.⁵³

Clearly, for Musculus, God’s preserving of the world is an expression of divine grace, for with this preservation comes also the gift of life and its temporal benefits.

49. Musculus, *Commonplaces*, 302.

50. Musculus, *LC*, 31; *Commonplaces*, 46.

51. Musculus, *LC*, 31; *Commonplaces*, 46.

52. Musculus, *LC*, 179; *Commonplaces*, 284. “Generale [foedus] est, quod pepigit cum uniuersa hac terrae machine, omnibusque illa inhabitatibus, tam bestiis quam hominibus, cum die etia & nocte, hyeme & aestate, frigate & aestu, semete ac messe, &c.”

53. Musculus, *LC*, 179; *Commonplaces*, 285. “Huius non ob id admoneo, ut tam insignem, tam conspicuam, tamque generalem creatoris nostril gratiam, sine qua mundus durare non poterit: propterea codemnamus quod terrena est & teporaria. Absit. Plane iudignus est sempiternis bonis, qui terrena ac teporaria depreciat. Imo ingratus est dono uite sue ac indignus hoc aere que quotidie spirat.”

However, this is still far removed from affirming that this sort of grace—this general grace—has anything to do with eternal salvation or “the good everlasting.” For the special covenant of God is an everlasting covenant that God mercifully “hathe vouchsaved to make with his electe and beleeveng.”⁵⁴ Thus this covenant does not pertain to all but only to Abraham, the father of all believers, and his seed.⁵⁵

For Musculus, then, a general grace of God comes to expression in the divine preservation of the world, not only according to God’s general providence, but specifically according to a gracious divine covenant, the covenant make with Noah. Moreover, Musculus, like Bullinger, is not unaware of the rich range of meaning of the biblical words for grace. However, insofar as we have been able to ascertain from Musculus’ *Commonplaces*, while he does take up divine grace as a topic of theology, he does not attempt any extended application of the idea of a “general grace” beyond what we have already noted. It is important to note that Musculus is not adverse to using the phrase “general grace,” and when he does so, there is no mention of the Pelagianizing abuse of these words. Instead, the phrase is couched in an overtly gracious context, namely God’s promise never again to destroy the world with a flood—or even more, his promise to maintain the world for the well-ordering of life and blessing.

2.4 Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562)

Peter Martyr Vermigli is the last Reformed theologian, being a contemporary of Calvin, that we wish to analyze briefly on the matter of divine grace.⁵⁶ He, like the other theologians we have examined, presents a formal and strict definition of grace which he believes is in full harmony with Scripture: “It is the good will of God, that commeth voluntarilie of his owne accord, whereby he holdeth us deare in Jesus Christ, and forgiveth us our sinnes, giveth us the holie Ghost, a perfect life, and

54. Musculus, *LC*, 179; *Commonplaces*, 285.

55. Musculus, *LC*, 179f.; *Commonplaces*, 285.

56. Sources on Vermigli include Frank A. James III, ed., *Peter Martyr Vermigli and the European Reformation: Semper Reformanda* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004); Torrance Kirby, Emidio Campi, and Frank A. James III, eds., *A Companion to Peter Martyr Vermigli* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009); Joseph C. McLelland, *Peter Martyr’s Loci Communes: a literary history* (Montreal: Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, 2007); Jason Zuidema, *Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562) and the Outward Instruments of Divine Grace*, Reformed Historical Theology, eds. Herman J. Selderhuis, et al, vol. 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); Mariano Di Gangi, *Peter Martyr Vermigli 1499-1562: Renaissance Man, Reformation Master* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1993); John Patrick Donnelly, *Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli’s Doctrine of Man and Grace* (Leiden, 1976); John Patrick Donnelly, Robert M. Kingdon, and Marvin Walter Anderson, eds., *A Bibliography of the Works of Peter Martyr Vermigli* (Kirksville, MO., Truman State University, 1991); Philip McNair, *Peter Martyr in Italy: An Anatomy of Apostasy* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967); Joseph C. McLelland, *The Visible Words of God: A Study in the Theology of Peter Martyr 1500-1562* (Edinburgh, London: Oliver and Boyd, 1957).

everlasting felicitie.”⁵⁷ Noteworthy about this definition of grace is that it is salvific in purpose, free in origin, and focused wholly in Christ. With this definition, Vermigli understands “not onlie what we may call grace, but also by whom we have the same; and in like maner what the chiefe effects of the same are.”⁵⁸ Later he appeals to Augustine’s exposition of John 1:16—“grace for grace”—wherein grace must be understood as that which is “freelie given.” And if we ask what it is that is freely given, the answer is that which is not rendered as due, for if it were due us, then we must conceive of it as a reward that is rightly bestowed, as if we had been good before God’s grace reached us.⁵⁹

Like Bullinger, Vermigli speaks of the “common grace of creation.”⁶⁰ However, he is quite suspicious of, even hostile to, this terminology—which, given how it is defined in this context, is a reasonable reaction for a Reformed theologian. Vermigli responds to opponents who conceive of common grace as a Pelagianizing preventient or enabling grace, so that in God giving this grace to all people they can proceed to bear fruits of faith and repentance of themselves.

They invent also another fond colour, not much unlike unto the former: [for they saie] that those works of the infidels are not doone without grace. For there is (saie they) a certaine generall grace laid foorth unto all men, and common even unto men not regenerate; wherewith they being after a sort holpen, may merit iustification, and do works which please God. But in so saieing, they fall into the heresie of Pelagius: for he also taught, that men without the graces of Christ, might even by the vertue and strength of nature, and by the doctrine of the lawe worke good works, whereby they might be iustified.⁶¹

What Vermigli finds untenable and erroneous in this appeal to a “common grace” is that those who do so actually turn grace into nature, “for in that they assigne a grace, whereby they can atteine unto righteousnes without Christ, they are both against Christ, and the Mileuitane Councill, and the holie scriptures.” And, again, “in that they make grace common unto all men, they turne it into nature; and

57. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Loci communes D. Petri Martyris Vermilii ... ex variis ipsis autoris scriptis, in unum librum collecti & in quatuor Classes distribute*. Editio secunda (London: Thomas Vautrollerius, 1583), III.2.9 (480): “Est benevolentia Dei vltronea, qua nos charos habet in Christo Iesu, & condonat nobis peccata, dat Spiritum sanctum, vitam integram, & aeternam foelicitatem”; idem, *The Common Places of Peter Martyr*, trans. Anthony Marten (London: Henry Denham, 1583), Part III, chapter 2, 49.

58. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.2.9 (480); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 2, 49.

59. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.2.16 (483); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 2, 53.

60. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.4.84 (560); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 4, 156.

61. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.4.24 (523); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 4, 107.

they saie that some will use it, some will not use it.”⁶² The Pelagian conception thus reemerges in this way.

Vermigli also sharply contests the notion of a “preventing grace” [i.e., a prior acting or prevenient grace] which is to be distinguished from another, more absolute grace, called an “after following grace.” Not that Vermigli denies this distinction as such, provided it receives properly definition, “for we grant there is one grace which preventeth [comes before], and another which followeth after; howbeit, the favour of God through Christ, wherewith we are both prevented [prior acted upon] to will well, and wherewith we afterword being regenerate, are holpen and stirred up to live well, is one and the same.”⁶³ It is beyond doubt that God acts upon us graciously in a prior sense unto our transformation and renewal in Christ. It would be ridiculous to say that in being converted to God we somehow act in ourselves in some way prior to the divine aid and assistance. “He first loveth us, before we can begin to love him; he first stirreth us up by his favour and spirit, before that we can either will, or thinke anie thing that is good.”⁶⁴ It is quite wrong, says Vermigli, to think a person is “imbued with the grace of Christ” while remaining unregenerate and without Christ. To be sure, God grants “illuminations” to the unregenerate on occasion, but insofar as these illuminations fail to change their minds and hearts, they serve to indict and condemn rather than save them.⁶⁵

In discussing the doctrine of predestination and the grace of God that fits with divine election, that is, the grace that brings the elect to salvation, Vermigli again turns to the phrase or idea of a common grace. Thus in the context of discussing how God regenerates sinners and draws them into his kingdom Vermigli asserts emphatically: “We in no wise saie, that grace is common unto all men [i.e. predestinating grace or all the benefits of Christ that belong to those who are predestinate], but is given unto some; and unto others, according to the pleasure of God, it is not given.”⁶⁶ However, Vermigli, implicitly and indirectly acknowledges another sense of divine grace which in some respect is common to all people, for in commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:11—“that One and the selfe-same spirit distributeth unto all men as pleaseth him”—Vermigli states that the Spirit is the source of the “graces and free gifts” that belong to all people. However, he also says that these words may “no lesse be transferred unto the grace, whereby we are renewed unto salvation, seeing God is alike free in the one and the other.”⁶⁷

62. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.4.24 (523); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 4, 107.

63. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.4.24 (523); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 4, 107.

64. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.4.24 (523); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 4, 107.

65. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.4.24 (523); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 4, 107.

66. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.1.38 (462); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 1, 26.

67. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.1.39 (464); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 1, 28. “Quod licet accipiatur de charismatibus & donis, vt loquuntur gratuitis, non minus transferri

We see, then, that for Vermigli what is clearly objectionable about making grace common to all people is that grace is properly speaking a *salvific* term; grace is *saving* grace. And for Vermigli this grace may never, following Pelagius, be erroneously converted into nature. Indeed, the transformation of grace into nature “in no wise agreeth with the doctrine of the holie scriptures.”⁶⁸ Thus Vermigli is not afraid to affirm that “outward calling” is common to the elect and reprobate alike and that God, *according to his mercy*, causes the sun to rise upon the good and the evil. Vermigli also asserts that “both the predestinate and the reprobate are partakers of some of the benefits of God.”⁶⁹ But even this common mercy of God is not altogether common, notes Vermigli. For example, the commodities that are suited for our bodies are unequally distributed among men. Similarly, while some persons enjoy a measure of natural happiness and the blessings of good health, others are born either leprous or blind or deaf or mentally handicapped or otherwise poor, and are without “all manner of natural felicitie; neither attaine they unto it at anie time
⁷⁰

We must also note that Vermigli does not deny diverse degrees of saving grace. He is willing to make this distinction in the context of asking whether grace is resistible. In reply to this question Vermigli argues that “there be sundrie degrees of divine helpe or grace.” While the grace of God that brings us to conversion is *irresistible*, nonetheless, upon conversion believers can and do resist God’s grace. In this connection, Vermigli rejects the Schoolmen’s notion of grace as an “infused *habit*.”⁷¹

Vermigli also acknowledges that natural gifts are sometimes called graces.

I grant indeed, that there be manie free gifts, by which the godlie cannot be discerned from the ungodlie; such are the gifts of toongs, prophesieng, the gifts of healing, and other such like; which things doo no lesse happen unto the evill, than unto the good. On the other side, faith, hope, and charitie, belong onelie to the saints.⁷²

Likewise, there are many “natural gifts”—such as, “pregnancie of wit, strength of bodie, and such like”—that are “sometimes called graces.” Unfortunately, the Pelagians turned these things into free will. Thus, in refuting Pelagius the church had to address this abuse of making the grace of natural gifts into a grace that regenerates

potest ad gratiam qua instauramur ad salutem, cum Deus ex aequo sit liber in vno atque in altero.”

68. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.1.40 (464); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 1, 28.

69. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.1.43 (465); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 1, 30. “... & praedestinos & reprobatos aliquoru beneficium Dei esse participes.”

70. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.1.43 (465); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 1, 30.

71. Vermigli, *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 2, 47.

72. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.1.39 (464); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 2, 52. “Fateor quidem, multa esse charismata, quibus pij ab impijs discerni non possint: qualia sunt, donum linguarum, Prophetia, donum sanationum, & alis hoc genus, quae non minus malis contingent, quam bonis. E diuerso, Fides, Spes, Charitas tantummodo piorum sunt.”

and justifies sinners.⁷³ Vermigli’s burden and concern is that however we decide to speak of and understand grace, we must safeguard that it is something freely and divinely bestowed. This means that grace is neither according to our works nor is it another word for our works. For we are made acceptable to God entirely by “the good will of God,” not by any of our efforts.⁷⁴

2.5 Analysis of Calvin’s Contemporaries in Treating Common Grace

Given this short draft and analysis of a select portion of the writings of Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, and Vermigli on their respective treatments of divine grace, and more specifically a general grace of God, we offer the following conclusions based on the range of material we have considered.

First, the idea of a general grace of God was a theological concept shared by mid-sixteenth-century Reformed theologians. It is clear that Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, and Vermigli (each contemporaries of Calvin), accept to varying degrees some notion of a non-saving divine favor or goodness directed toward the non-elect and unbelievers. Bullinger and Musculus employ the terminology of a general grace of God. This idea, then, is neither a novelty among Reformed writers of this period nor a commonplace; perhaps it is better described as a hybrid notion that emerges from the topic of grace and the nature of human depravity. We have discovered that each of these writers has something to say about a “general grace,” and each even makes “grace” a formal topic of theology—this last trait is absent in Calvin’s theology. Each of these writers is quite clear about the meaning of grace, standing in the Augustinian tradition and conceiving of saving grace in a wholly monergistic fashion; but as an addendum to this topic it is recognized that there also exists a non-saving or general grace of God.

Second, Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, and Vermigli affirm that the idea of divine grace may properly be stretched beyond the narrow range of human salvation. The last three mentioned offer strict and formal definitions of grace. Bullinger and Musculus do so only after they have examined the range of meaning that the biblical terms for grace have in Scripture. That simple exercise, however, demonstrates that the biblical concept of divine grace cannot be narrowly confined to individual salvation, strictly speaking, though of course divine redemption remains the most prominent and vital aspect of the biblical concept of grace as elicited by the biblical materials. Even Vermigli, whom among the writers we examined displayed the most caution toward the language of common grace, does not deny that the unregenerate are granted divine “illuminations,” which are of grace. For example, in considering divine grace, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli respectively offers a specifically Augustinian definition of grace. Vermigli, for instance, calls it “the good will of God, that comes voluntarily of his own accord, whereby he holds us dear in Jesus Christ and forgives us our sins, gives us the Holy Ghost, a perfect life, and everlasting felicity.” The concern of these theologians is to distinguish grace, rightly

73. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.2.14 (482); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 2, 52.

74. Vermigli, *Loci communes*, III.2.14 (482); *The Common Places*, Part III, chapter 2, 52.

understood, from synergistic misconceptions and outright Pelagian abuses. Since at that time the locution “general grace” had, for some, a specifically Pelagian aroma, Reformed theologians were guarded in how they used those words. Some, like Vermigli, were hesitant to use the term, whereas others, like Bullinger and Musculus, were careful to define it. Thus we see Bullinger and Vermigli explicitly attacking a notion of “general grace” that identifies grace with nature along Pelagian lines.

Third, for these Reformed theologians, grace—whether conceived as saving or non-saving in scope—remains a free gift of divine mercy. It is not earned, merited, warranted, or deserved by fallen human beings in any capacity. The gifts that are bestowed to fallen people, whether these gifts be understood as part of the original, unfallen, creation order or as in some way a particularly given talent or ability, or as the station one has in life, bringing some degree of happiness, or as the general welfare of civil order and justice, securing safety and physical wellbeing, all such gifts, and many others, remain *gifts*, which by definition are undeserved and unearned. God freely bestows these blessings to the unregenerate, and by implication, to the reprobate. In so doing all persons owe a debt of gratitude to God for such gifts. Thus the word “grace” invariably emerges in the respective discussions of these theologians. No other word quite suffices to express the fact that what is given to undeserving sinners, even if what is given is not the gift of salvation, is not their due—it is of grace. Musculus, in particular, associates the idea of this general divine grace in the Noahic covenant.

Fourth, these theologians view the virtues in the unregenerate as a fruit of a general grace of God. To varying degrees, each of these writers admits the idea of virtue in the non-elect, properly qualified, and affirms that the natural gifts which abide among fallen humans are, in some sense, an expression of divine kindness or mercy. Thus Bucer is careful to maintain that the relative virtues to be found in unbelievers is a divine gift and gratuitous. Bullinger speaks of heathen writers offering wisdom that conforms to the Ten Commandments. In fact, the virtues that non-believers exhibit are “not altogether done without God.” Although Vermigli would shy away from using the word “grace” to describe this, even he acknowledges that God is the author of these blessings, terming them gifts and graces. Thus we see how the idea of a general grace of God is not altogether uncommon in Reformed theology in the middle of the sixteenth century. The gifts that come to fallen humans, the blessings that bedeck their lives, and the benefits that allow the human project—even in its rebellion against God—to move forward are *divine gifts*, *divine blessings*, and *divine benefits*.

Last, the several portraits of grace and common grace as formulated by some of Calvin’s contemporaries prove to be, not surprisingly, distinct but also not incongruous with one another. Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, and Vermigli hold in common the idea that God acts upon unregenerate persons in a manner that is gracious, being undeserved and kindly, but also non-salvific in character. This general sort of divine grace, however, remains distinct from grace in its saving operations. All of the above shows that, among mid-sixteenth-century Reformed theologians, Calvin was not a solitary voice sounding the idea of a general grace of God.

With this short survey, we are in a better position to analyze and access Calvin’s treatment of God’s grace, particularly how he makes use of and employs the idea of common grace.

3. Calvin’s Conception of a General Grace of God

3.1 Calvin’s Varied Use of Terms for Varied Kinds of “Grace”

In his own treatment of divine grace, insofar as we have been able to discover, John Calvin (1509–1564), unlike many of his Reformed contemporaries, nowhere takes up a formal discussion of grace as a topic of theology.⁷⁵ This is true both for saving grace and for an idea of general grace. This is not to say however that Calvin fails to distinguish between different aspects of divine grace. In fact, Calvin sometimes uses words like “special” or “peculiar” in order to set off the idea of a common grace of God from the (typical) salvific grace that God bestows to elect sinners alone. At other times, however, he will employ these adjectives in reference to saving grace. It is not difficult to find clear instances of this very thing. For example, in disputing the notion that all people are “equally the children of God,” Calvin argues that, since in Adam all lost eternal life, the blessing of divine adoption is “an act of special grace,” from which it follows that all those who are not the recipients of this “special grace” are “hated of God and “thus estranged and alienated from Him.”⁷⁶ Here saving grace is special grace. In another context however Calvin calls general or common grace special grace. Thus, in commenting on the effect of the fall on human nature, Calvin maintains that though some are “born fools or stupid, that defect does not obscure the general grace of God [*generalem Dei gratiam*].”⁷⁷ Indeed, this is according to

75. A standard work on Calvin’s theology is François Wendel’s *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Repr., Durham, South Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1987); also see T. H. L. Parker’s *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), for a reliable analysis of Calvin’s *Institutes*; and for biographies on Calvin, see T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975) and Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000). Also see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) for a contextual versus a merely dogmatic reading of Calvin.

76. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism: Treatises on the Eternal Predestination of God & the Secret Providence of God*. 2 vols. in 1, trans. Henry Cole (London, 1856-57; repr. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Co., n.d) [1558], 271.

77. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 2 vols., edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.ii.17. All quotations from the *Institutes* are from the Battles translation unless otherwise indicated. *Joannis Calvinii Opera Selecta*. Ediderunt P. Barth, W. Niesel, D. Scheuner. 5 vols. München, 1926-52; III:259: “Nam quod nascuntur moriones quidam, vel stupidi, defectus ille generalem Dei gratiam non obscurat....”; hereafter cited as *OS*, followed by volume and page numbers.

“God’s kindness,” and so we are delivered from “the destruction of our whole nature.” Then he observes:

Some men excel in keenness; others are superior in judgment; still others have a readier wit to learn this or that art. In this variety God commends his grace to us, lest anyone should claim as his own what flowed from the sheer bounty of God. For why is one person more excellent than another? Is it not to display in common nature God’s special grace [*specialis Dei gratia*], which, in passing many by, declares itself bound to none.... Still, we see in this diversity some remaining traces of the image of God, which distinguish the entire human race from the other creatures.⁷⁸

Here we see Calvin linking what are sometimes called natural gifts to divine grace. But this grace is not at all salvific in character. Nonetheless, Calvin calls this type of grace, a kind of uncommon common grace, “God’s special grace.” Still in another context Calvin argues that believers enjoy life in a twofold way. On one level they experience God’s blessings as his creatures, while on another level they live and move as God’s children. “The former grace is the common possession of everyone, but the latter is granted specially to the elect.” And again, “The former is in a certain way implanted in our nature, but the latter is given to man as a supernatural gift, so that he may cease to be what he was and begin to be what he had not yet become.”⁷⁹ Thus saving grace in this context is special and a gift that is supernatural in character. Likewise, Israel’s very existence is according to God’s kindly labor, being “divinely made by peculiar grace,” which corresponds to God’s sovereign election.⁸⁰

We see, then, that Calvin clearly recognizes that *divine grace* is bestowed upon fallen human beings with diverse intent and effects, which is to say that Calvin distinguishes saving grace from a divine grace that God imparts for another and distinct purpose. In fact, Calvin uses a variety of words to describe this non-saving grace of God, such as terms like “kindness” and “beneficence.” Thus when he affirms God’s providential governance of human society, Calvin observes that the

78. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.17.

79. John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*. [1543], translated by G. I. Davies, edited by A. N. S. Lane. Texts and Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought. General editor, Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 167.

80. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. and intro. by J.K.S. Reid (London: James Clarke, 1961), 139; the French reads, p. 139, n.2: “For he [Pighius] does not consider that Jacob was truly made Israel by a special grace, in that he had been already elected in his mother’s womb.” *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia*, editors, B. G. Armstrong, et al., Series III: Scripta Ecclesiastica, Vol. 1: De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione; De La Predestination Eternelle, edidit Wilhelm H. Neuser; French text edited by Olivier Fatio (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1998), 178: “Interea non cogitat peculiari gratia factum esse divinitus Israellem, qui in utero matris iam electus fuerat.” In the French, 179: “...que Jacob a esté vrayement facit Israel de grace speciale....” Here it is clear that Calvin ties the idea of election to the locution *peculiar* or *special grace*.

Lord is “kindly and beneficent toward all in numberless ways,” though this does not deny the reality of God’s severity toward the wicked and his clemency toward the godly, which is manifested in various ways almost every day.⁸¹ Here we note that Calvin is not saying that a non-salvific kindness or beneficence of God *always* comes to believers and unbelievers in an identical fashion, but he does assert that this kindness rests upon *all people*, so presumably upon elect and reprobate alike.

Calvin’s appeal to a universal (non-saving) grace of God is manifest in numerous contexts and in virtually every genre of his writings.⁸² For example, in his sermon on Deut. 33:1-3—commenting on the phrase, “Yet loveth he the people”—Calvin says the following: “Moses then doeth here compare all men and all the Nations of the earth with the lineage of Abraham which God had chosen: as if hee shoulde say, that Gods grace is spreade out everie where, as wee our selves see, and as the Scripture also witnesseth in other places.”⁸³ The “spread” or “scope” of divine grace is indeed, according to Calvin, “everywhere.” For although God confers “special blessings” (*specialis gratia*) to his chosen people, thereby showing himself to be their Father, his benefits are also “extended in common to all mankind” (*quae communiter ad humanum genus patent*). Indeed, “God exercises his beneficence towards the whole human family.”⁸⁴ Calvin even calls the regular succession of night and day a “beautiful arrangement” that exhibits “the incomparable goodness of God towards the human race.”⁸⁵ Likewise, the regularity of the seasons “clearly indicate with what care and benignity God has provided for the necessities of the human family.”⁸⁶ For Calvin, then, God’s providential provision, bringing forth seedtime and harvest, expresses a divine “benignity.” Similarly, commenting on Psalm 31:19, Calvin asserts that God most certainly knows how to provide and take care of his own children inasmuch as he exercises “his beneficence to aliens from his family.” In this connection, Calvin specifically contests Augustine’s contention that “those who unbelievably dread God’s judgment have no experience of his goodness.” Calvin’s calls that notion “most inappropriate.”⁸⁷

For Calvin, “heavenly providence” can testify to “fatherly kindness.” An example of this is seen in Psalm 107. Chance occurrences are in fact nothing of the sort, not even for those who have no knowledge of God. Many people find themselves in “desperate straits.” But God is a help to the poor and the lost; he protects those who wander in desert wastelands and brings them to refuge; he supplies food to the hungry, sets prisoners free, leads those shipwrecked back to

81. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.7; *CS*, III:51: “ut quum sit erga omnes innumeris modis benignus ac beneficus....”

82. I have not searched for this language in his letters; perhaps it may be found there as well.

83. John Calvin, *Sermons of M. Iohn Calvin upon the Fifth Book of Moses called Deuteronomie*, translated by Arthur Golding (London, 1583; facsimile repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1993), 1188.

84. Calvin, *Comm. Psalm 74:16-17* [1557], *CTS*, 177. *CO*, 31:698.

85. Calvin, *Comm. Psalm 74:16-17* [1557], *CTS*, 177.

86. Calvin, *Comm. Psalm 74:16-17* [1557], *CTS*, 178.

87. Calvin, *Comm. Psalm 31:19* [1557], *CTS*, 515.

port, cures the sick, bringing them back from death. God likewise can either scorch the earth or make it blossom with rain. Psalm 107 further depicts God as lifting up the humble and casting down the proud. These examples, each and all, exhibit God's kindness to the human race. Yet that does not mean God's kindly care is recognized for what it is. Since most people are, as it were, lost in error, this "dazzling theater" of God's kindness blinds them by its very reality and so they fail to comprehend and profit from benefits that should bring them to praise God; on the contrary, the mouths of the wicked and reprobate are stopped.⁸⁸

Calvin further asserts that God must be acknowledged as "the fountain of every good." Thus, he offers this rather broad synopsis:

... not only does [God] sustain this universe (as he founded it) by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment, bear with it in his mercy, watch over it by his protection; but also ... no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause.⁸⁹

The practical consequences of this is that all people ought to ascribe all these blessings to God, for "until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service."⁹⁰

Against opponents who view divine predestination as unjust, and therefore charge God with cruelty for not extending his grace to a wider scope, Calvin offers a reply in the form of some queries:

How was it that whole nations were not utterly destroyed daily, until no more peoples existed? How was it that the whole world was not destroyed, if such a thing were possible, a hundred times a year? How was it that during those same 2,000 years so many glorious proofs of God's patience and mercy towards men were manifested?⁹¹

Notes Calvin, even the apostle Paul celebrates God's patience and longsuffering toward the "vessels of wrath fitted for destruction."⁹² Thus, in Calvin's view, the preservation of the human race is itself an expression of divine mercy, which means it is wholly undeserved, unmerited, and unearned.

In Calvin's teaching on divine grace, he manifestly distinguishes a *grace of forgiveness* from a divine goodness that is *common to all*. For example, in his

88. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.8. Also see Calvin's comments on this Psalm 107 in his commentary on the Psalms.

89. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.ii.1.

90. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.ii.1.

91. Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, "The Secret Providence of God" [1558], 340-341.

92. Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, "The Secret Providence of God" [1558], 340-341.

comments on Psalm 145:9—“Jehovah is good to all, &c.”—Calvin explains that the Psalmist in effect says that God not only forgives sin according to his fatherly indulgence and clemency, but he also “is good to all without discrimination, as he makes his sun to rise upon the good and upon the wicked [Matt. 5:45].” While the wicked know nothing of the divine forgiveness of sin, their bondage to sin and innate depravity “does not prevent God from showering down his goodness upon them,” even though they are not “at all sensible of it.”⁹³ What is more, as he says in his lectures on Zechariah, although God “deals very bountifully with the unbelieving,” it is without effect—that is, so far as God being acknowledged as the author of such blessing. Calvin says that as God “pours forth his grace without any benefit” (*profundit sine fructu gratiam suam*), it is as though “he rained on flint or on arid rocks.” Therefore no matter how generously God may confer “grace on the unbelieving, they yet render his favour useless, for they are like stones.”⁹⁴ What is useless about this divine grace is not that it fails to achieve its specified aim, but in achieving that aim it fails to bring forth any knowledge of God or change of heart unto the mending of one’s sinful ways.

3.2 The Restraint of Sin

Another way in which a general grace of God manifests itself is through the restraint of human sin. Calvin discusses sin’s restraint in a variety of contexts, addressing the restraint of human evil both in an external and internal sense. For example, in his *Institutes* Calvin remarks that in every era we observe people who, guided by nature, exhibit virtuous traits and even strive after the same their whole life long. This being so does not, however, mitigate human depravity and corruption, though it does hold it in check. For amid this defilement of human nature, says Calvin, God’s grace (*gratia Dei*) plays a restraining role—“not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly.” Calvin’s reasoning on this score is clear, and it relates directly to the radical and far-reaching effects of original sin. “For if the Lord gave loose rein to the mind of each man to run riot in his lusts, there would doubtless be no one who would not show that, in fact, every evil thing for which Paul condemns all nature is most truly to be met in himself [Ps. 14:3; Rom. 3:12].”⁹⁵ Human inclinations, being altogether wicked, if not curbed, would burst as a flood. While God is pleased to heal this disease in his elect, others he restrains, like putting a bridle on them so that they do not “break loose,” for in his prescience the Lord reckons “their control” to serve the common welfare—that is, “to preserve all that is.”⁹⁶

Calvin addresses himself to this question also in his commentary on Isaiah.

We know how great is the wantonness of the human mind, when every man is hurried along by ambition, and, in short, how furious the lawless passions are when they are laid under no restraint. There is no reason, therefore, to

93. Calvin, *Comm. Psalm 145:9* [1557], CTS, 276

94. Calvin, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets* [1559], Zech. 12:10, CTS, 363. *CO*, 44:335.

95. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3; *CS*, III:274.

96. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3; *CS*, III:275.

wonder if, when the judgment-seats have been laid low, every man insults his neighbour, cruelty abounds, and licentiousness rages without control.⁹⁷

Following this observation Calvin bids us to wisdom, for if we understood our predicament as human beings and how prone we are to wanton lusts and mutual destruction, indeed, how terrible life could be, then we would be far more appreciative of “the kindness of God” (*Dei beneficium*) in preserving us “in any tolerable condition” and keeping us from sorrowful ruin.⁹⁸

Calvin also connects this restraining mercy of God to God’s providence. Believers take comfort in knowing that God’s providential operation extends to all persons, such that, all are under God’s power, “whether their minds are to be conciliated, or their malice to be restrained that it may not do harm.” In numerous ways God intervenes in the common affairs of men to protect his own people and frustrate, or altogether thwart, the evil schemes of the wicked. Moreover, “it is his care to govern all creatures for their own good and safety; and even the devil himself, who, we see, dared not attempt anything against Job without His permission and command [Job 1:12].” Thus, what ought to find recognition in God’s servants, likewise ought to be acknowledged by all persons, namely, all blessings and benefits are from God, filling us with “[g]ratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future...”⁹⁹ But as Calvin observes elsewhere, unbelievers fail to render back to God the gratitude that is his due. “God’s beneficence” is manifest in countless ways, even when others help us in the midst of misfortune or inanimate creatures benefit us, for it is right to reason that God directs hearts and objects as “instruments of his kindness.” Indeed, by divine blessing alone “all things prosper.”¹⁰⁰

Believers also find “never-failing assurance” in knowing that God, according to his providence, works in the midst of the rough-and-tumble of the world for their welfare. Especially comforting is the knowledge that “the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked” are entirely held in check by God. He is sovereign over their fury and it belongs to him to set limits to their rage, “lest they licentiously exult in their own lust.”¹⁰¹

Calvin also treats the matter of sin’s restraint as a function of civil government. Indeed, God has established the magistrate in order to make human social cooperation possible: “... to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquillity.”¹⁰² For Calvin, the function of the civil authority may be likened in importance to the necessities of bread, water, sun, and air. He also argues that the function of the state is to prevent idolatry and protect pure religion, as it must also safeguard that the public peace is not disturbed. In this way personal

97. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:5 [1551], CTS, 132.

98. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:5 [1551], CTS, 131, 132. *CO*, 36:83.

99. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.7.

100. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.1.

101. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.11.

102. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.2.

property is kept safe, trade and social intercourse secured, and honesty and modesty preserved. “In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.”¹⁰³ Sometimes Calvin identifies this sin-restraining function of the magistrate with God’s beneficence or clemency. “Let us, therefore, know that everything which we find to be profitable for the support of life flows from the undeserved goodness of God.”¹⁰⁴ He calls a well-regulated commonwealth “a singular gift of God,”¹⁰⁵ and bids us to take heed “lest, by our ingratitude, we deprive ourselves of those excellent gifts of God” that a well-regulated commonwealth brings—that is, the gifts of bodily support, military forces, skillful governors, prophetic office, mechanical arts, and all such ornaments of God which the magistrate affords and provides.¹⁰⁶ Conversely, remarks Calvin, “when the Prophet threatens, and pronounces it to be a very severe punishment, that these things shall be taken away, he plainly shows that those eminent and uncommon gifts of God are necessary for the safety of nations.”¹⁰⁷ We observe, then, that for Calvin such gifts are not bestowed to all nations in an altogether equal measure, but the magistrate is indeed a gracious provision of God to the nations, and so upon the elect and non-elect alike. “Hence it is evident that they who direct or apply their minds to sap the foundations of civil government are the open enemies of mankind, or rather, they are in no respect different from wild beasts.”¹⁰⁸

3.3 Virtues in Unbelievers

Earlier we alluded to the fact that Calvin recognizes that unbelievers, despite the corrupting effects of original sin and their own unregenerate state, exhibit certain virtues. Calvin briefly discusses the evil Catiline and the noble Camillus.¹⁰⁹ Are we to conclude, given Camillus’s positive character, that human nature, if appropriately nurtured and disciplined, is capable of genuine goodness? In view of Calvin’s pungent doctrine of human depravity, along with his own readiness to make use of secular writers and their positive contributions to the various disciplines of human knowledge, how might his theology account for this seeming conundrum? Indeed, Calvin acknowledges that “the endowments resplendent in Camillus,” for example, “were gifts of God and seem rightly commendable if judged in themselves.” Since humans lack the capacity to improve themselves unto moral integrity and uprightness, their own seeming virtues tainted by vice, Calvin looks for a different solution to this problem. He is confident about his own answer.

103. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.3.

104. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:3 [1551], CTS, 129.

105. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:4 [1551], CTS, 130.

106. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:3 [1551], CTS, 129.

107. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:4 [1551], CTS, 130.

108. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:5 [1551], CTS, 132.

109. See his *Institutes*, II.iii.4, and McNeill’s footnote 5.

Here, however, is the surest and easiest solution to this question: these are not common gifts of nature, but special graces of God, which he bestows variously and in a certain measure upon men otherwise wicked. For this reason, we are not afraid, in common parlance, to call this man wellborn, that one depraved in nature. Yet we do not hesitate to include both under the universal condition of human depravity; but we point out what special grace the Lord has bestowed upon the one, while not deigning to bestow it upon the other.¹¹⁰

However, such “gifts” and “graces” do not mount up to any sort of merit in God’s eyes, since no matter how finely persons may conduct themselves, their own ambitions are always at work and serve as motive, thereby blemishing and sully all virtues before God so that “they lose all favor.” Calvin’s conclusion is that “anything in profane men that appears praiseworthy must be considered worthless.” In short, those who are not regenerated and reconciled to God do not live for or seek God’s glory in any of their actions. Therefore, their virtues are a “vain show”; and although they earn praise “in the political assembly and in common renown among men,” God’s assessment is more sober. For such virtues, as far as acquiring righteousness before God, possess “no value.”¹¹¹ Thus what is “valueless” about such virtues wrought in fallen and unredeemed people is that they might, in any way, obtain for sinners some meritorious status before God or could function in any way to reconcile fallen sinners to God, from whom they are altogether estranged.

Calvin does not wish to say, however, that these virtues (which do not “mitigate human depravity and corruption”) have nothing to do with God’s grace. For he explicitly states that “here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God’s grace [*gratia Dei*]; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly.”¹¹² This inward restraint of sin is part and parcel of an outward restraint as well, which functions negatively in holding in check the full

110. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.4. *OS* III:276: “Quanquam haec certissima est et facillima huius quaestionis solutio: non esse istas communes naturae dotes, sed speciales Dei gratias, quas varie et ad certum modum profanis alioqui hominibus dispensat. Qua ratione, non formidamus in vulgari sermone hunc bene natum, illum pravae naturae dicere. Nec tamen utrunque desinimus includere sub universali humanae pravitate conditione: sed indicamus quid specialis gratiae in alterum Dominus contulerit, quo alterum non sit dignatus.”

111. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.4. Also see Calvin’s comments in his *Comm. Psalm 86:2* [1557], CTS, 381; and his remarks in his treatise *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 134, where, in opposition to Pighius, he writes: “On my side, I admit that virtues which shine in the reprobate are laudable according to their own nature.... But as God looks upon the heart, which is the fount of works, a work, which is generally and in itself good, may be an abomination to God because of the vice latent in it.” *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia*, editors, B. G. Armstrong, et al., Series III: Scripta Ecclesiastica, Vol. 1: De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione; De La Predestination Eternelle, edidit Wilhelm H. Neuser; French text edited by Olivier Fatio, p. 168: “Virtutes, quae in reprobis fulgent, suapte natura laudabiles esse fateor.... Sed quia cordis fontem, unde fluunt opera, Deus respicit, nihil obstat, quominus opus, quod alioqui in se laudatur, ob vitium, quod intus latet, sit abominationi apud Deum.”

112. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3.

possibilities of human evil and positively in preserving the created order, along with the benefits of human talents which God kindly and freely imparts as he pleases. For, according to Calvin, almost everyone exhibits a talent for some art or task, and these talents, in having their origin in human nature, have their origin in God. Natural gifts, such as human reason itself, are demonstrations of divine grace.

Therefore this evidence clearly testifies to a universal apprehension of reason and understanding by nature implanted in men. Yet so universal is this good that every man ought to recognize for himself in it the peculiar grace of God [*peculiarem Dei gratiam*]. The Creator of nature himself abundantly arouses this gratitude in us when he creates imbeciles. Through them he shows the endowments that the human soul would enjoy unpervaded by his light, a light so natural to all that it is certainly a free gift of his beneficence [*beneficentiae*] to each! Now the discovery or systematic transmission of the arts, or the inner and more excellent knowledge of them, which is characteristic of few, is not a sufficient proof of common discernment. Yet because it is bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious, it is rightly counted among natural gifts.¹¹³

Thus, we may see the “admirable light of truth” shining even in secular writers and thinkers. To be sure, the human intellect is wholly fallen and perverted, nevertheless it is also “clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” For Calvin, all truth comes from the Holy Spirit, “the sole fountain of truth,” which explains why the natural man—that is, fallen sinners, unredeemed and unsanctified—are nonetheless capable of insight and discernment. This means that whatever gifts unbelievers display in the arts and sciences, or mathematics, along with their skill in jurisprudence for safeguarding civic order—all such gifts are from the Spirit of God.¹¹⁴

3.4 Divine Love for All

Another way in which Calvin addresses the matter of a general grace of God is how he talks about God’s love for those who are not the objects of his redemption. For he says, “God hates none without a cause.” Yet, insofar as sinners—elect and reprobate alike—are God’s workmanship, the Lord “embraces them in his fatherly love.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, not only does God in some sense love all his creatures, and so cares and provides for them, even more, he acts as a “foster father” to all men, whom he has fashioned after his own image. Man excels every other creature of God’s hands. Thus Calvin does not refrain from saying that God “doth love all people.” But Calvin does qualify that affirmation, for he distinguishes that general or universal love of God from God’s love for his church. Inasmuch as the non-elect remain God’s enemies, his love for them comes to no redemptive realization. This means, as

113. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.14. *OS* III:257-258.

114. See Calvin’s discussion, *Institutes*, II.ii.15-16.

115. Calvin, *Comm. Psalm 92:9-11* [1557], CTS, 502.

Calvin explains, that as his “creatures” God loves them; as “sinners,” however, he hates them.

For all the children of Adam are enemies unto God by reason of the corruption that is in them. True it is that God loveth them as his creatures: but yet he must needs hate them, because they be perverted and given to all evill.¹¹⁶

In short, since sin is wholly opposed to God’s nature, he must declare “irreconcilable war with the wicked.” This, however, actually serves to comfort the church, for the righteous find assurance in knowing that God will not allow evil to prevail or allow the wicked to escape justice.¹¹⁷ Thus, while God may offer innumerable proofs of his love towards the whole human race, he confines his “especial or peculiar love to a few, whom He has, in infinite condescension, been pleased to choose out of the rest!”¹¹⁸ Moreover, his covenant with Abraham, and the formation of Israel into a nation as “his holy and peculiar people,” betokens his love expressed in free adoption versus a divine love “generally.”¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, according to this general, non-redemptive love, God, as Creator and Father of the whole human race, extends his care and blessing to the nations, even as he showed his concern for the ancient city of Nineveh, giving them “the common light of day, and other blessings of earthly life.”¹²⁰ God also shows his goodness and love for the “brute creation,” being bountiful to the beasts of the earth, so much so that even the ravens and wild asses (the less desirable animals) are under his care.¹²¹

3.5 Ingratitude in the Face of Grace

In order to gain an accurate and full picture of Calvin’s understanding of common grace, we must also take note of his remarks concerning the ingratitude of the wicked in the face of this divine mercy. For what we must not miss is that the sin of ingratitude is possible only because a genuine divine kindness or blessing, or expression of mercy, is actually imparted to the non-elect. Which is to say, if a general grace of God is not genuine grace—fully recognizing that it is not salvific grace—if it is, instead, a divine subterfuge, a mere scheme, in order to damn the wicked further, then God takes on sinister characteristics. In fact, some have tried to

116. Calvin, *Sermons of M. Iohn Calvin upon the Fifth Book of Moses called Deuteronomie*, 1189.

117. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 92:9-11[1557], CTS, 502.

118. Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, “The Secret Providence of God” [1558], 268. *CO*, 37:289: “neque tamen hoc obstare quominus peculiarem suum amorem ad paucos restringat, quos ex multis eligere dignatus est.”

119. Calvin, Lectures on the Minor Prophets [1559], Mal. 1:2-6, CTS, 463. *CO*, 44:396: “... generali Dei amore ...”

120. Calvin, Lectures on the Minor Prophets [1559], Jonah 4:10, 11, CTS, 142.

121. See, for example, Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms [1557], CTS, such as: Ps. 22:9-10, pp. 369-370; Ps. 31:19, pp. 513-514; Ps. 36:6, p. 10; Ps. 104:1-12, p. 154; Ps. 145:14-15, pp. 277-278; Ps. 147:7-9, pp. 296-297.

interpret Calvin’s view along these lines.¹²² The problem with this path of interpretation, however, is that a sinner cannot be held more liable or become more guilty before God, if the divine grace that is ignored or neglected, or otherwise abused, *is not grace*.

In Calvin’s portrayal and analysis of this issue, however, what we discover is that the weightier penalty which awaits those who fail to praise God for common blessings is linked directly to the reality of those blessings. In other words, the reality of a general grace of God corresponds to the reality of its neglect by unbelievers, for the reality of the one is commensurate with the reality of the other. For example, even though the reprobate are not the objects of regeneration, they are the objects of many other divine blessings, leaving them without excuse. Thus Calvin argues that since there are countless proofs of God’s love towards the whole human race, any and all failure to acknowledge God as the bestower of these blessings testifies to the ingratitude of those who are perishing or coming to perdition.¹²³ Or as Calvin says in another place, since “the whole order of things in nature shows the fatherly love of God,” exhibiting his condescending care “for our daily sustenance,” all ought to confess “the divine goodness” and “the mystery of his works.” But human depravity and ungratefulness leads people to look proudly and deliberately to secondary causes and so “avert their eye from God.”¹²⁴ Indeed, God will at length “take vengeance” on human ingratitude “when he sees his grace perishing through indifference.”¹²⁵

Calvin also associates this theme with divine providence. Although God has clearly revealed himself in the fashioning and continuing government of the universe, people show their “foul ungratefulness” in refusing to acknowledge and comprehend the many benefits and favors that surround them in an overwhelming manner.¹²⁶ The creation itself, alongside God’s providential care, displays his glory like “so many burning lamps.” Although people live their lives bathed in such undeniable “radiance,” they will smother this light with their own darkness and render themselves “inexcusable.” Alluding to Acts 14:15-17, Calvin notes that God justly allows people to go their own (wayward) way, but he has not left himself without witness, for he sends benefits from heaven, giving rain and fruitful seasons, filling human hearts with food and gladness. “Therefore, although the Lord does not want for testimony while he sweetly attracts men to the knowledge of himself with many and varied kindnesses [Allen: abundant benignity], they do not cease on this account to follow their own ways, that is, their fatal errors.”¹²⁷ What is more:

They have within themselves a workshop graced with God’s unnumbered works and, at the same time, a storehouse overflowing with inestimable

122. For example, the third set of interpreters we examined earlier, Hoeksema, Engelsma, et al.

123. Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, “The Secret Providence of God” [1558], 268.

124. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 65:10[1557], CTS, 463.

125. Calvin, Lectures on the Minor Prophets [1559], Zech. 12:10, CTS, 361.

126. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.4.

127. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.14.

riches. They ought, then, to break forth into praises of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride. They feel in many wonderful ways that God works in them; they are also taught, by the very use of these things, what a great variety of gifts they possess from his liberality. They are compelled to know—whether they will or not—that these are the signs of divinity; yet they conceal them within.¹²⁸

Thus, our very constitution as human beings testifies to God's goodness to us, for we are fashioned in a glorious way, created with the higher and better gifts, so much so that signs of divinity are attached to our human creaturehood. In fact, to be created human versus some lower creature bespeaks divine blessing as well.¹²⁹

We see, then, that with Calvin common grace receives a rather comprehensive treatment, not because he takes it up as a singular topic of theology, but because he integrates and interweaves this idea into numerous other theological topics. Next we turn to an analysis and summary of conclusions regarding Calvin's understanding of common grace in relation to some of his Reformed theological collaborators.

4. Conclusions

The idea of a general grace of God in Calvin's theology, as I have sketched it here, demonstrates that the Genevan Reformer evidences both continuities and discontinuities with some of his Reformed contemporaries. We wish to explore what those continuities and discontinuities are in a moment. First, however, we must observe that Calvin scholarship, insofar as it has addressed itself to Calvin's teaching regarding divine grace, and a general grace of God in particular, has not given any attention to how Calvin's own Reformed contemporaries were addressing the same issue and therefore how Calvin's position was either a novelty or a commonplace or something of a hybrid within the Reformed movement. We have discovered that among the contemporaries of Calvin whom we have examined, each addresses, to some degree, the idea of divine grace. Moreover, each of them has something to say about a "general grace," and each even makes "grace" a formal topic of theology. In that light, it is remarkable that Calvin does not do the same. Not that this constitutes an oversight on his part, for Calvin is quite clear about the meaning of grace, standing in the Augustinian tradition and conceiving of saving grace in a wholly monergistic fashion. Nonetheless, in not giving his attention to a formal discussion of divine grace, Calvin fails to provide himself and his readers with a strict vocabulary for describing and referring to a saving versus a non-saving or general grace of God.

We must also observe that modern scholarship on Calvin's understanding of common grace, no matter which trajectory of interpretation one wishes to consider—that of Bavinck and Kuiper, who argue for a full-fledged doctrine of common grace in Calvin's thought, or that of Douma and Campbell-Jack, who see only the

128. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.4.

129. See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.6; III.xxii.1.

beginnings of such a doctrine, not to mention the interpreters, like Hoeksema, who see any notion of a common grace of God as hostile to and contradictory of Calvin’s whole theological project—this scholarship has failed to consider that Calvin’s views on and theological formulation of the idea of common grace is just one of several Reformed formulations—all of which may be quite congruous with one another and united in expression or perhaps at odds with one another at certain points. Our point is simply to observe that the scholarship on this aspect of Calvin’s theology, insofar as I have been able to discover, has not reckoned with this question. This essay represents an initial, and admittedly brief, attempt to read Calvin on the question of common grace in light of the views of some of his fellow Reformed collaborators.

So what conclusions may be drawn by way of comparison between Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries in their respective treatments of divine grace, and a general grace of God in particular? While we acknowledge that we have not surveyed every instance in Calvin’s writings where he addresses the question of common grace or other issues that become interwoven with it—such as, God’s love for his creatures in distinction from his special love for his church—and while we also have not examined all of the writings of Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, or Vermigli on all these issues or related doctrines, nonetheless, from the range of material we have considered, the following conclusions, I think, accurately reflect how Calvin’s treatment of a general grace of God both agrees with and differs from some of his Reformed contemporaries.

I will first note those areas of commonality in Calvin’s thought with that of his colleagues, and then spell out how his treatment of a general grace of God differs from the other Reformed writers we examined, namely Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli.

First, Calvin, along with Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli, affirms that the idea of divine grace may properly be stretched beyond the narrow range of human salvation. We have seen, for example, that although Bucer formally defines grace in salvific terms, he acknowledges that all good gifts are divine gifts, graciously given. The depths and scope of human depravity is affirmed, while not denying that fallen human beings can act with “decency and rectitude.” God remains the source of every good in human life. Bullinger and Musculus likewise offer strict and formal definitions of grace. They do so only after they have examined the range of meaning that the biblical terms for grace have in Scripture. That simple exercise, however, demonstrates that the biblical concept of divine grace cannot be narrowly confined to individual salvation, strictly speaking, though of course divine redemption remains the most prominent and vital aspect of the biblical concept of grace as elicited by the biblical terms. Even Vermigli, who, among the writers we examined, is most hostile to the idea of a general grace of God, does not deny that the unregenerate are granted divine “illuminations,” which are of grace. For his part, Calvin, demonstrates a readiness to use the word grace in a variety of ways, so that grace can refer both to divine salvation and to non-salvific blessings. In fact, in using terms like “special,” “particular,” “peculiar,” and the like, in reference to grace—something he does in reference to the idea of saving grace in contradistinction from the non-saving variety, and vice-versa—Calvin shows that he conceives of the

biblical term “grace” as possessing a wide range of meaning—as wide as the difference between that which brings salvation and that which brings only temporal blessings or benefits.

Second, for both Calvin and his Reformed colleagues, grace—whether conceived as saving or non-saving in scope—remains a free gift of divine mercy. It is not earned, merited, warranted, or deserved by fallen human beings in any capacity. Thus the gifts that are bestowed to fallen people, whether these gifts be understood as part of the original, unfallen, creation order or as in some way a particularly given talent or ability, or as the station one has in life, bringing some degree of happiness, or as the general welfare of civil order and justice, securing safety and physical wellbeing, all such gifts, and many others, remain *gifts*, which by definition are undeserved and unearned. God freely bestows these blessings to the unregenerate, and by implication, to the reprobate. In so doing all persons owe a debt of gratitude to God for such gifts. Thus the word “grace” invariably emerges in the respective discussions of these theologians. No other word quite suffices to express the fact that what is given to undeserving sinners, even if what is given is not the gift of salvation, is not their due. It is of grace.

Third, Calvin, with his Reformed contemporaries, views the virtues in the unregenerate as a fruit of a general grace of God. Thus Bullinger speaks of heathen writers offering wisdom that conforms to the Ten Commandments. In fact, the virtues that unbelievers exhibit are “not altogether done without God.” Calvin, in particular, develops this idea and offers the fullest exposition of it. In doing so, he is implicitly accounting for, or providing a theological solution to, a recurring conundrum for Reformed writers, namely, how can humans be totally depraved and simultaneously capable of noble acts of self-sacrifice and other upright deeds which bring blessing both to themselves and others? This idea is related as well to the bestowal of natural talents and other human abilities, for the wide and diverse variety of such gifts makes for a well-ordered and productive society. Calvin, again, more than his colleagues, fully expands on this idea and roots it directly to the grace of God. Although Vermigli would shy away from using the word “grace” to describe this, even he acknowledges that God is the author of these blessings, terming them gifts and graces.

Thus we see how the idea of a general grace of God is not altogether uncommon in Reformed theology in the middle of the sixteenth century. The gifts that befall fallen man, the blessings that bedeck his life, and the benefits that allow the human project—even in its rebellion against God—to move forward are *divine gifts*, *divine blessings*, and *divine benefits*. Musculus associates or roots the idea of this general divine grace in the Noahic covenant. Calvin and his colleagues, to greater or lesser degrees, recognize that the preservation of the world, with its diversity of benefits, is an act of God’s grace. Moreover, for Calvin, this grace is not unrelated to the arm of divine providence, which functions as the muscle behind God’s merciful disposition, bringing about the state-of-affairs that blesses life.

Having said that, and having examined the major areas of consensus between Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries, we must also consider those areas where Calvin’s treatment of common grace seems to diverge from one or more of these collaborators in the Reformed movement.

First, whereas Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli are concerned to offer a formal definition of divine grace—Bullinger and Musculus doing so only after an extended analysis of the biblical words—Calvin never gets around to performing this theological service for his readers. This is probably due to the fact that whereas his contemporaries treat “grace” as a formal topic of theological discussion and analysis, Calvin does not give the concept such a place in his theology. Consequently we discover that both with respect to the precision of language regarding “grace” and the kind of issues that emerge in connection with considering “grace,” Calvin seems almost to operate in a different theological climate than that of his Reformed contemporaries. For example, in considering divine grace, Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli each offer a specifically Augustinian definition of grace. Vermigli, for instance, calls it “the good will of God, that comes voluntarily of his own accord, whereby he holds us dear in Jesus Christ and forgives us our sins, gives us the Holy Ghost, a perfect life, and everlasting felicity.” The concern of these theologians is to distinguish grace, rightly understood, from synergistic misconceptions and outright Pelagian abuses. Since at that time the locution “general grace” had, for some, a specifically Pelagian aroma, Reformed theologians were guarded in how they used those words. Some, like Vermigli, were hesitant to use the term, whereas others, like Bullinger and Musculus, were careful to define it. Thus we see Bullinger and Vermigli explicitly attacking a notion of “general grace” that identifies grace with nature along Pelagian lines. Calvin, on the other hand, does not even seem to be aware of a problem on this score. Not that he uses the locution “general grace” in a strict or formal sense, though the phrase does occur from time to time in his writings. He simply does not concern himself with Pelagius’ abuses of the gifts of creation, whereby grace is turned into natural gifts—natural gifts which all people innately possess, giving them the ability to secure salvation for ourselves. For Calvin, divine grace finds expression in a variety of ways and has a variety of objects and aims. Thus, when he wishes to distinguish saving grace from a non-saving grace, he resorts to talking about a peculiar grace of God, or a general grace, or a grace to all, or he will use a variety of other words that function as near synonyms for divine grace, such as divine kindness, beneficence, goodness, etc.

In any case, although Calvin shows little interest in formal definitions of grace, his own treatment of grace, accumulatively, elicits a consistent and clear-cut conception. For, as we have seen, Calvin does think about saving grace in a conceptually distinct way from a general grace of God.

Second, whereas his contemporaries do little or nothing with the idea of divine love and the restraint of sin as aspects of a general grace of God, or as related to this grace, Calvin makes much of both of these ideas. In this respect, his treatment of common grace is much richer, theologically more complex, and even more highly developed than that of his Reformed colleagues—at least this conclusion seems valid given the materials we have examined. We do note, however, that as Calvin addresses the idea of a common grace of God in many varied contexts and in many varied writings, he often, though not always, comes to speak of the restraint of sin in that connection or he associates common grace with the idea of a universal divine love in distinction from God’s love for his church. It seems, then, that Calvin was

quicker to interrelate the idea of a general grace of God to other theological doctrines than was the case with some of his Reformed colleagues.

Third, a specific example of this is how Calvin connects the idea of common grace to God's providence. We do not observe Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli making this move. Clarity is important at this point, however. We are not saying that providence may simply be identified with a general grace of God. Indeed, this would be inappropriate, for divine providence as Calvin talks about it can also express divine judgment. However, providence puts common grace into action; it gives expression to God's kindly and merciful disposition toward sinners in the common events and circumstances of day-to-day life. Calvin calls all sinners to see this providential operation of God for what it is toward them—gracious! Human ingratitude betokens the reality of what has been graciously bestowed. Thus, Calvin, unlike what we have been able to discern from his Reformed contemporaries, treats this general grace of God in relation to other pivotal doctrines of theology.

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Calvin's treatment of the idea of common grace, and that of his Reformed contemporaries deserves further exploration. Specifically, what is needed is an examination of a greater variety of writings and treatises of Calvin's Reformed colleagues. Another potentially fruitful area for exploration surrounding this topic is how a general grace of God relates to the use and function of natural law, especially as this pertains to the civil sphere and the divine ordering of society. Meanwhile, our analysis has demonstrated that Calvin, as part of a wider theological community of Reformed writers, was by no means the lone inventor of either the idea of a general grace of God or the language of the same, this being something of a commonplace among Reformed theologians in the middle of the sixteenth century. Nor was Calvin the only Reformed theologian of this period to appeal to this idea in order to account for certain realities about the ungodly, namely human virtue among the unregenerate within the framework of human depravity. He was, however, as our analysis has demonstrated, unafraid to make use of the idea of common grace, weaving it into the fabric of his thought. It was integral to and very much a part of his broader theological enterprise.