

SOME COMMENTS ON
KUYPER AND COMMON GRACE

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The development of any particular doctrine in the church's history has often been dictated by the need of the times. This does not mean, of course, that the teachings of the Scriptures are either time- or culturally conditioned.

As soon as the canon of the New Testament closed, the early Fathers begin to reflect on all the teachings given us in these Scriptures.

The first doctrine which had to be faced and developed was the doctrine of God. True, the Old as well as the New Testament had given a great deal of material to describe the God of the Bible. His various attributes were made clear. His great works had been adequately reported. His dealings with both His people and those who did not believe on Him were clearly spelled out. But, the main emphasis of the Old Testament had always been: "Hear O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah".¹ When Jesus Christ comes upon the scene the problem arises — Who is He? He sharpens the conflict by telling the people of His day that the one important question concerning Himself is: What think ye of the Christ; whose Son is He? When the early church fathers sought to give a general view of theology, this was the first problem they had to face. Is it true, as they had always been taught, that there is only one God over-against the polytheism of all the people around them? Then what must they do with Jesus who is called Christ? Or, to compound the problem even more, does the Spirit of God also have rights to the name: God? Are we then serving three Gods or still one God?

This question had been alluded to in the Old Testament but never with that urgency which the birth of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit now bring to the subject. This problem must be settled first before there can be any fruitful study of other theology.

It became a long and complicated debate. The one theologian striving to uphold the ancient form of the "oneness" of God and the other just as zealously emphasizing the three persons in the Godhead. This debate dragged on for many years and was finally settled at the Council of Nicea in 325 A D.

If it is true that God is one in being but there are three divine persons which the entire Christian church acknowledged, what must we then think of the Christ Himself? Is He human? There was no doubt about this question among all those who had seen Him in the flesh. But, if He is one of the divine persons is He then also not truly divine? How are these two natures of the Christ united? These questions again held the attention of the best theologians in the church for a long time. More splinter groups resulted from this debate than from the one dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity. Finally in 451, at the council of Chalcedon the doctrine of the two natures of Christ in one person was adopted.

The next doctrine with which the church concerned itself was the doctrine of man. What is man? Is he one being among the many which our God has created or does he have a very special place? Again opinions differed and they differ to the present day. However the church never left room for any view of evolution regarding the origin of man. No, man was the crown of creation, was made in the image of God. Together with the formation of man comes the whole matter of sin and grace. Man, though the image of God fell into sin. Is there restoration for such? The Bible has a great deal to say on the matter of the sin of man and how he may be redeemed. It was now the task of the church through its theologians to give a clear picture of both sin and the grace of God.

The doctrine of the atonement flowed out of the former. Here, too there were many differences of opinion which led to various church formations. Many believed that man could do considerable work toward his own salvation — Roman Catholics and all Arminian branches of the Protestant churches. Others, the Reformed, believed that man was not able to add one iota to his salvation but that his salvation was entirely due to the grace of God.

Still later controversies arose concerning the application of the work of Christ. What is regeneration? What is conversion? What is calling or faith, etc? There were also the various questions concerning the church and the sacraments. Still later, and we are by no means finished with this one, the doctrine of the last things was discussed.

I give this brief survey of the history of dogma to help you realize that the need of the times gave rise to the development of any particular doctrine. Only when the first was somewhat settled was the church able to proceed to the second. It took a long time in the history of the church before the theology of the day took up the kind of questions we have dealt with in more recent years. In all those former years a doctrine such as that of "Common Grace" did not receive much attention.

Why did Abraham Kuyper emphasize the doctrine of Common Grace so much? I suppose we would be able to approach this question from more than one point of view. But it seems to me that the man who wrote: "There isn't a square inch of human life of which the Sovereign over all things doesn't say: Mine!" had a view of life which required him to deal with cultural matters, or how Scripture and Confession approach cultural matters, more than almost anyone else. He was convinced that the fathers had drawn up the confessions of the church but that the church had allowed these confessions to lie idle for too many years. He felt that these confessions had to be brought into connection with the various problems of the present age for them to be productive. They had to give answers to the problems and needs of our time.³ He was enamored with the idea of the kingship of our God over all of life and wanted to see this kingship displayed everywhere. As the Secession of 1834 showed a renewed interest in the *Canons of Dort*, so Kuyper had to go back to these *Canons* especially to find the doctrinal and confessional basis for his view on Common Grace. He found that this doctrine had been touched upon by John Calvin even though the other reformers make no reference to it. Calvin, however, though not developing this doctrine into the structure later seen by Kuyper and even Bavinck, does make mention of it in various connections. That Calvin was the only one of the reformers to do so can only be understood because Calvin stressed the sovereignty of God in a way as no other reformer did.⁴

Kuyper began to write on this subject soon after the "Doleantie." This movement had taken place in 1886 and Kuyper starts writing on Common Grace already in 1896. When one considers the tremendous amount of work he had to do for the young denomination and the amount of time taken for the establishment of the Free University in 1880, one wonders where the man obtained his ambition to begin a work of such magnitude so early. The development of his view of Common Grace is found in a series of articles in *De Heraut* for no less than six years, 1896-1902. These articles were

later bound in book form and now constitute three large volumes.⁵

We would not do justice to the magnitude of his writing on this subject by just mentioning the above. Almost as soon as he had ended his series of articles on Common Grace, he begins another very long series on *Pro Rege*. These do have a somewhat different purpose than the former, but many of the themes struck in the earlier work are further developed in this second work of three large volumes. This work was finished in 1910.⁶ By that time he had devoted about fourteen years of his busy life to this particular subject. He deals with the Lordship of Christ not only over the church and the state, but also over home and school and every other sphere of life. His sphere sovereignty, about which he wrote earlier, is clearly outlined in these two major works. If there is anyone who has done a great deal for the development of the doctrine of Common Grace, it was Kuyper. His many writings on this subject indicate the importance he attaches to this particular subject which had received so little attention before.

Before dealing with his specific view of Common Grace, it may be well to ask the question: did this doctrine deserve all the space Kuyper gave to it? Would it have been better if he had used his considerable talents in the development of some other thorny problem in Reformed Theology? Perhaps it is impossible to give a fair answer to this question. There would be those who would say that he has done the church a disservice by writing on it so voluminously while there would also be others who might wish to have seen him approach the subject from a different point of view. However the question is answered, we should take due note of the contributions of this renowned theologian especially when he gives us the works of the prime of his life. He is worth studying!

In all his studies Kuyper had been greatly influenced (negatively, of course) by the spirit of the French Revolution of 1789. The results of that Revolution were still very apparent in his student days. Many hailed it as a great release for the down-trodden of former days and would like to see its principles applied in various sociological and economic areas of Europe of that time. Kuyper was deadly afraid of the spirit of this Revolution. Its motto had been "No god, no master". Voltaire, one of its leading spirits, had even dared to cry out "Down with the scoundrel",⁷ by whom he meant the Christ. The church of that day was impotent — in fact, it had not a little to do with the revolution itself. It seemed as though Satan was enthroned. Does the church do enough by simply preaching the tidings of salvation to a world which is ready to ex-

plode? These were some of the questions Kuyper sought to answer. Does the church speak only to its own members and call the rest of the world to repent? Or does the gospel, the word of God, also have something to say to the philosophy and science in which this world is engaged? All these problems lie in the background of Kuyper's work on Common Grace.

Before briefly touching on Kuyper's particular view of Common Grace, it is well to listen to his most famous colleague who taught Dogmatics at the Theological School at Kampen at that time, Dr. Herman Bavinck. He published a rather lengthy lecture on the subject of Common Grace in the year 1894, therefore about the time that Kuyper began to write on this subject. Bavinck too finds this subject intriguing and very necessary for the church to give due attention to it. It was, therefore, not the hobby of one theologian.

Bavinck, together with Kuyper, concludes that Calvin was really the only one of the reformers who had dealt with the subject of Common Grace. This seems rather strange to many because Calvin is usually considered the sternest of all the reformers. Yet he would not close his eyes to the good things which the natural man still does. Calvin leaves no room for the dualism of many of the thinkers of his day. He believed that if sin had been left to itself, had been left unchecked, it would have ruined everything.

Bavinck finds some of the good and true in fallen man. There is still a light shining in the darkness. He believes that the Spirit of God lives and works in creation. There is still something left of the image of God in man. Man still has rationality. There are natural gifts present among the unbelievers and we must appreciate them as gifts of God.⁸ Happily the Reformed have kept the specific and absolute character of the Christian religion but they can, at the same time, appreciate the good and the beautiful. We must always be careful that we do not fall into the camp of the Pelagians or into the camp of Pietism.⁹ Both of these are enemies of that which is Reformed. It has not always been an easy road to follow between these two dangers. So today we may not completely separate religion and culture, theology and philosophy, head and heart, the heavenly and the earthly calling, religion and ethics, the Sabbath and the work days, the church and the state, etc. He emphasizes the fact that all "world flight" is a denial of the first article of the *Apostles' Creed*.¹⁰ This is an important statement and may well be contemplated by all who wonder about the relation of nature and grace.

Bavinck has one more pithy statement which we do well to quote before leaving him and returning to the work of Abraham Kuyper. Bavinck says: "Theology's honor does not consist of being the queen of the sciences, which sits far above all other sciences, but that she may serve all of them out of her wealth".¹¹ Perhaps the greatest Reformed dogmatician of the past century has given us some very worthwhile material for study in this lecture he gave on Common Grace. Of course, he also deals with the subject at the proper place in his Dogmatics.

In this comparatively brief article I am not able to go into the view of A. Kuyper exhaustively as he deals with this particular subject. That would take volumes. However, there are a few things which should be said to place his view in the proper light. He has often been charged with a weak view of the total depravity of man. This is not a fair criticism. Whether he speaks of particular (saving) grace or of common grace, he always proceeds on the assumption of the total depravity of man.¹² He strongly emphasized the sovereignty of God both in the church and in every other area of life. The world has not been given over to the evil one. God is still on the throne.¹³ This fact is glorious but it is also the one that brings the problems. How are we going to be able to account for many of the things which happen in this world of which God is the absolute Ruler? They have a far easier theology who say that God rules the church and Satan rules the world. But, even though it is an easier theology it is not the true one because it does not do justice to the teachings of the Scriptures. Most theologies have not realized that this science must touch and mold all science, philosophy, etc.¹⁴ Is it any wonder that the whole movement of Christian education received a tremendous stimulation from the views of Abraham Kuyper? Theology is not serving its proper purpose if it restricts itself to the sphere of the church. His view of Common Grace sought to rid the church of the Roman Catholic division of nature and grace. Luther had a much easier time with these problems when he insisted that the opposite of grace is not nature, but, sin. This is the whole area in which the battle of Common Grace is fought in the theology of Kuyper.

To Kuyper it is one life-system over against the other life-system. A world and life view must issue from our theology and from our beliefs. Only Calvinism has the right answers to the questions which arise in this area. All others do half-work or evade the problem.

Although Common Grace has usually been viewed as the proper-

ty of the unbeliever and particular grace that of the believer, Kuyper believes that both believer and unbeliever partake of Common Grace.¹⁵ Of course, only the believer partakes of particular or saving grace. This is a very interesting comment and deserves proper attention. He considers such human traits as personality, actions etc. Therefore, he says, if Common Grace were only given the unbeliever, there would be the possibility that the common grace would triumph over particular grace at times because the personality and actions of the unbeliever often put the believer to shame!

In his mammoth work on Common Grace he first deals with the negative aspect of Common Grace, i.e., that God restrains so that the process of history may be able to continue. This he considers to be the most important element in the doctrine of Common Grace.¹⁶ In the second volume he deals more with the positive side of the issue, i.e., that there is still some good (civil?) which the unbeliever is able to do. In the last volume he deals with the practical aspects of the problem. Throughout these three volumes he deals with the exegesis of pertinent Scriptural passages and also quotes voluminously from other theologians and philosophers. As is his custom, he deals exhaustively with a particular subject and then weaves various other subjects around the main theme.

If one is at all familiar with the life of Kuyper, he is astonished that a man who began in the modernist camp not only turned to the Reformed faith with all that was in him but also saw the implications of that faith and that theology for all of life. No doubt his view of Common Grace was greatly responsible for the many-faceted life he lived. He threw himself into the area of the press. He went to the top in the field of politics. He sought Christian organizations in every sphere of life to counteract the influence of unbelief.

He describes the need for a true conception of Common Grace in these words: "A church life which consists only of ecclesiastical duties, defeats itself, and striving to walk worthily in the way of the good, it exchanges its deep religious character for a superficial ethical one. The result of this (exchange) always was and always will be, that those who feel themselves gripped by spiritual forces, don't feel at home in the church, and unite with people of like mind and thus cause the sects to flourish".¹⁷

Kuyper has at times been criticized for not making a sufficient distinction between Common and Particular Grace. This criticism does not hold when we consider the following quotation:

"Regeneration, the gift of special grace, removes the cancer of sin by taking out its root. In place of sin it gives the power of eternal life. Common Grace doesn't do anything like it. It holds down but doesn't quench. It tames but doesn't change the nature. It keeps back and holds in leash, but as soon as the restraint is removed, the evil races forth. It trims the shoot but doesn't heal the root. The wickedness of man's ego is kept but it prevents the full fruition of wickedness. It is a limiting, a restraining, a hindering power which slows and brings to a halt."¹⁸

When we consider all that Kuyper has written on this subject we realize that he is seeking to meet a real problem head-on and yet, whether he has succeeded is still a question. There are many dangers in a denial of common grace and there are also dangers in an emphasis on this subject. There is always the possibility that the former will not do justice to all God's works — both in nature and in grace and an over emphasis on it almost erases the distinction between the world and the church; between belief and unbelief. The Synod of 1924 of the Christian Reformed Church, which considered this doctrine in detail and in some depth, warned the leaders of the church of the latter danger.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that four years later, the Synod of 1928 warned the church of the evil of worldliness!

The Synod of 1924 took up this matter because there were various protests at this Synod against the teachings of the Revs. H. Hoeksema and H. Danhof, who denied the doctrine of Common Grace. Many years have passed since that historic Synod, and one wonders whether things could not have gone differently. Was the view of Dr. Abraham Kuyper the only way in which the matter could be approached? It is quite commonly held that one of the most ardent supporters of Kuyper's view of Common Grace influenced the Synod of 1924 greatly (Dr. V. Hepp). When the Synod had determined that the above named brethren were Reformed but one-sided, it blundered. To be Reformed is enough! Who is so balanced in all his views that it cannot be said of him that he is one-sided? We need only sign the *Form of Subscription*—no more may be asked! It may well be questioned whether the decisions of the Synod of 1924 anent the matter of Common Grace should ever have been adopted. There were minor things over which people stumbled. The name: Common Grace, or *Algemeene Genade* or *Gemeene Gratie* were not considered proper. But, no one else has come up with a better name! It was stated too that Grace is never "Commón". This is true, of course, but doesn't touch the real issue.

The fact that the Synod of 1924 wrote Three Points of doctrine concerning the matter of Common Grace bothers me far more. In about the space of two weeks a doctrinal position was adopted which should have been the study of many years by the best theologians in the church. Did it deal with an important doctrine? Yes. Did it deal with a fundamental doctrine whereby the division is made between Reformed and unreformed? No. There was too much haste.

Yet, the Synod of 1924 urged the church and its theologians to study this doctrine in greater depth in the years to come.²⁰ Evidently Synod did not believe that the last word had been spoken on it in the voluminous writings of Abraham Kuyper.

Abraham Kuyper has done the church a service by bringing this doctrine to its attention in a way it had never been done before. We owe much to Kuyper and all his writings. But, as is true of all theologians, we must read them with care and with an open mind.

NOTES

¹Deuteronomy 6:4

²Matthew 22:42

³J.C. Rullmann, *Abraham Kuyper—Een Levensschets* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1928)

⁴Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1928). Cf. also many references in Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1902)

⁵Preface to Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 1.

⁶Preface to Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1911), vol. 1.

⁷Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1898) 10.

⁸Herman Bavinck, *De Algemeene Genade* (Kampen: G. Ph. Zalsman, 1894) 27.

⁹Bavinck, *De Algemeene Genade*, 30.

¹⁰Bavinck, *De Algemeene Genade*, 45.

¹¹Bavinck, *De Algemeene Genade*, 53.

¹²Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 1, 248.

¹³Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 1, Preface.

¹⁴C. Van Til, *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1947), Preface.

¹⁵Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 2, 298.

¹⁶Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 1, 242.

¹⁷Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, vol. 1, V.

¹⁸Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, Vol. 1, 51.

¹⁹*Acta der Synode van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, 1924* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Printing Co., 1924), 136.

²⁰*Acta der Synode, 1924*, 150.