

## Common Grace

Â A paper by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Of AustraliaÂ on the Westminster Standards' position in relation toÂ Common Grace.

### Introduction

During both the history of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the Reformed Churches of the Continent, Scotland and England, there has been, and continues to be, a controversy on the question of God's character as He expresses it through His love. Does God in some way love all men? Does He desire their salvation? Though there are quite a few variations of opinion and belief among those who affirm an universal love of God and/or His desire for all men's salvation, basically there were and still are, two groups within the professing Reformed Churches.

One group believes that in the basic nature of God there is a love for all men that shows itself in God's restraint of sin, and in providing the good things of which men partake of in this life. It is thought that there is a "non-saving" grace, which is nevertheless the expression of a favourable, loving attitude of God toward the reprobate. This universal favourable attitude of God is manifest, it is thought, in such things as rain, sunshine, health and strength etc., which are bestowed by God upon men as undeserving creatures. This "common grace" also preserves a vestige of the good in fallen man thus restraining him from becoming "absolutely" depraved and even rendering him capable of performing good in the way of civil righteousness. Prof Louis Berkhof is representative of those who hold this view of "common" grace.

The other group goes further, and say that not only is there this general love, but it is a love that desires all men's salvation. They say, God in Christ so loved all men that He earnestly desires their salvation. They believe that such a doctrine as this, is basic to the sincerity of God in the gospel being freely preached to all mankind. Both groups make it clear that they are talking of a non-saving love - a general or common grace. It is out of this variety or species of "common grace" that the Medusa of universalism raises one of its many heads in the form of a "well-meant" offer. All that needs to happen for this development is that God's gracious attitude toward the non-elect (in temporal things - rain and sunshine) be applied to the outward call of the gospel to all men. When this happens common "non-saving" grace is translated into the sphere of saving grace in Christ. God no longer offers salvation in Christ to all in the gospel with the one purpose, desire and intention of saving only the elect in Christ, as Reformed theology once vigorously maintained. Now "common grace" determines that God has a favourable attitude toward all men. Now the preaching of the gospel becomes an expression of God's sincere desire, earnest wish and revealed will that all men be saved. Thus, "common grace" becomes the basis for theologians and preachers even in Reformed churches to speak of a "well-meant" offer that stands in flat contradiction to God's eternal decree of election and reprobation. To demonstrate the fairness of this assessment one need only refer to Professors John Murray and Ned Stonehouse, the esteemed Reformed theologians who once served at Westminster Theological Seminary, USA. and such ministers as the Rev. Ken Stebbins, a minister of the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia, and their writings.

Over against what we see as this radically compromised Calvinism, is the doctrine of sovereign particular grace flowing from the fountain of grace in God's eternal decree of double predestination. This we believe, must be held as determinative for the offer of the gospel. God's eternal decree of election in Christ determines God's attitude toward all men, elect and non-elect. This means that God's grace is in all things to the elect, but in nothing to the reprobate. This applies to both the good things that come from God to all men in His providence and to the preaching of the gospel. To the elect all is grace in Christ; to the reprobate nothing is grace for they are never in Christ, not in time nor from all eternity.

We understand that at times the use of the term "common grace" was used in classical Reformed theology. This, however, ought to be sharply distinguished from modern usage of the term. It was used by some to express God's good and perfect dealings with fallen mankind in providence. God's goodness is indeed clearly set forth before all men in providence as He executes His eternal decree of election and reprobation in time. The term "grace" was often used to express the fact that in His providential dealings with men, the God of pure goodness does good in relation to the undeserving and rebellious creature. God's good providence of course is over all creation; minerals, plants, animals, mankind and all spirits. So it was that the term "common grace", when carefully qualified so as to distinguish it clearly from saving grace, was thought to be a suitable term to describe God's dealing with the creature by some Reformed fathers whom we hold in high regard. They taught, however, that God's good works of providence (common grace) implied no favourable attitude of God toward the reprobate. We believe that in the current theological climate, the term "common grace" becomes confusing and even dangerous, and ought not to be used to describe God's good dealings with all men in His works of providence.

believes that the gospel is to be preached to all mankind, and Christ freely offered, by being set forth and held up as the only remedy that can be found for the consequences of our sin and rebellion. We confess that the sovereign, triune God has graciously and wonderfully provided a remedy in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, and that all who repent and believe may certainly be assured of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. We believe that we should ever be about the work of preaching this news of the gospel as the Lord gives us the means and ability. We hold that we should earnestly plead with, and encourage all to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless the Evangelical Presbyterian Church rejects the notion of the love of God for all men in all its varieties, including the notion that the preaching of the gospel to all men shows His love for and desire of their salvation. We believe that these notions of a universal love in God for all men - common grace, are contrary to the Word of God, and not found in our Confessional Standards. We believe that it compromises not only the character of God, such as His immutability and simplicity, and the glory of His perfect and finished work of salvation and grace, but such basic reformed truths as the inability and ruined state of mankind - his total depravity, and our great need of the salvation of Jesus Christ. In short, we believe it is a compromise of the reformed faith as set forth in our Confessional Standards.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church freely acknowledges that some otherwise good and godly, and in other respects reformed, men have held and do hold, to different variations and types of common grace. While we would seek to support and to encourage such brethren as even hold to these things, in a faith, worship and life we share in common, yet at the same time, we cannot but, in good conscience, stand apart from them on the question of the character and nature of God as expressed in His love. We do so in testimony and witness that we believe the doctrine of the universal love of God, or God's desire for, or delighting in, the salvation of all men, is an error that can lead to the most serious compromises of the character of the God of our salvation. We believe it leads to a departure from the reformed faith - the most consistent expression of the Word of God. We believe we see the fruit of this departure to-day for example, in those who once professed the reformed faith, now teaching that there is no place of eternal punishment, not to mention the compromises made with Arminianism, Modern Humanism and a false ecumenicity.

A Brief Historical Background To The Controversy On God's Nature.

Soon after the wonderful work of God in the Reformation in Europe, there was a departure from the truths concerning the nature and works of God, the nature and work of the redemption purchased by Christ, and the nature and ability of fallen man. All the same issues, we believe, are involved in the common grace controversy.

One of the first such departures from the Reformed faith, was that of James Arminius who denied the reformed doctrine of total depravity - that man was without strength to contribute to his salvation. He taught in effect that God is not fully sovereign in the affairs of men, and that man has the ability to either choose or reject God's salvation. He taught God elects men to eternal life on the basis that He sees in time which man will choose Him and his salvation, rather than what God freely of Himself decides in His sovereign unconditional election. Arminius and his followers taught that Christ died for all men, to make it possible for all to be saved. He denied particular or limited atonement. If a person is not saved, it is because God has done all that He can, but man will not do his part - the denial of God's sovereign irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. We can see the humanism, and man-centredness of such beliefs. We see the stark denial of the absolute sovereignty of God and His grace, and the finished nature of redemption in the atoning work of Christ in such teachings. While these teachings were condemned by the Reformed Churches of the Continent and in Scotland and England at the great Synod of Dort in 1618-1619, the basic notions of man-centredness and of the denial of the sovereignty of God's grace and character, did not die out.

In Scotland, in the early 1600's, John Cameron, a minister of the Reformed Church of Scotland, threatened to compromise the Reformed faith by seeking to retain various elements of Arminianism in his teaching about the nature of God and man. He was resisted in Scotland, but became a lecturer in France at Saumur, and influenced such men as Moses Amyraut, who founded the school of Amyraldianism, and John Davenant, who founded a school of similar persuasion in England. All these men, and those who followed them, including some at the Westminster Assembly, such as Edmund Calamy, Joseph Caryl, Jeremiah Burroughs, and a non-attendant but contemporary of the Assembly, the influential Richard Baxter, as well as the author (presumed to be an Edward Fisher), of the book, called, *The Marrow Of Modern Divinity*, believed in a universal grace, though they made their own various refinements of this teaching.

We believe that the present day views of common grace, in all its various forms, have their roots in the doctrine of the above men. Further, we hold that Cameron should have been opposed in Scotland as compromising the reformed faith with his universalism, as he was. We stand with such men as Francis Turretin, and the Second Helvetic Confession in their opposition of Amyraut and his teaching on the Continent. We fully support the fact that Calamy and the other Davenant divines were opposed by the Scots and others at the Westminster Assembly, in order to prevent common grace sentiments being inserted in the Confessional Standards. Just as the book, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, was opposed in Scotland by the bulk of the evangelical and godly reformed men in the Assembly both in 1720 and 1722, so we also oppose it. We of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of our day, oppose the teaching of common grace, and for

the same reasons as our reformed fathers opposed it. It is a most serious compromise of the Reformed faith.

We are aware that some characterise the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia's view on the grace of God, as an aberrant doctrine to that of the orthodox view of the earlier Reformed Church of Scotland, and to that of the Westminster Confessional Standards. We strongly reject this characterisation. Rather, we believe that it can be shown that it is common grace and its allied doctrines - not particular grace - that are aberrant from the doctrines of the Confessional Standards, and what the earlier Reformed Scottish divines believed.

We acknowledge that at the time that the Westminster Confessional Standards were drawn up, there were, and had been, English Puritan Presbyterians and Independents, who held to various tenets and expressions of common grace. We accept that there were a small number at the Westminster Assembly, whose actions at the Assembly, if not their writings, show that they, to varying degrees, believed that there is a non-saving love in the Godhead for all men, and that He desires their salvation.

We further acknowledge that because of this division at the Westminster Assembly, the Confessional Standards do not specifically condemn all the Amyraldian/Davenant teachings. Yet it is plainly a matter of historical record that while Edmund Calamy and others sought to have their views of a universal grace Confessionally expressed, it was strongly opposed by the Scots, among others, and that the final expression of truths relating to the grace of God, were all particularistic. There is no place, we believe where common grace and its related doctrines can be found in the Confessional Standards, though it was proposed that it embody such sentiments. The Westminster Confession, chapter 3, section 6 and 8:8, and the Larger Catechisms Nos. 57 to 59, are relevant to this controversy. They are positive statements of the Scriptural doctrine concerning the application of the redemption purchased by Christ. Of God's Eternal Decree: Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season; are adopted, sanctified, and kept by His power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

Of Christ The Mediator: To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, He doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same-, making intercession for them, and revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by His Spirit to believe and obey, and governing their hearts by His Word and Spirit; overcoming all their enemies by His almighty power and wisdom, in such manner, and ways, as are most consonant to His wonderful and unsearchable dispensation.

Larger Catechism, Q. & A. No 57: What benefits hath Christ procured by His mediation?  
Christ by His mediation, hath procured redemption, with all other benefits of the covenant of grace.

Larger Catechism, Q. & A. No. 58: How do we come to be made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured?  
We are made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured, by the application of them unto us, which is the work especially of God the Holy Ghost.

Larger Catechism, Q. & A. No 59: Who are made partakers of redemption through Christ?  
Redemption is certainly applied, and effectually communicated, to all those for whom Christ hath purchased it; who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel.

What we should once again note very clearly, is that the whole idea of common benefits or grace is specifically rejected in the above statements, even though Calamy at the Westminster Assembly sought to have them included.

A controversy over the doctrine of God's grace in Christ, and other doctrinal matters arose in Scotland in the early 1700's. Certain ministers of the Church of Scotland, Hogg, Boston, Erskine and others, promoted a species of common grace via a book called, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The Church of Scotland, including the great bulk of the Evangelical Divines, soundly con-demned various "common grace" sentiments of the book. The book contained statements such as the following.[1] It taught of Christ and His work that, "the Father hath made a deed of gift and grant unto all mankind" ... "Christ hath taken upon Him the sins of all men" ... "Whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, He did it for you" ... "Go and tell every man without exception, that here is good news for him, Christ is dead for him". It is true that an attempt was made by several otherwise orthodox Evangelical Scots, to explain these "common grace" statements in such a way that they would be more orthodox, but the fact remains that this book and its teachings had a doctrinal background at variance with the historic reformed view, and was judged to be at variance with the reformed faith by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1720 and in 1722.

It is important to note that in 1831 these Acts against "the Marrow" were used by the then generally Evangelical General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, to judge John Macleod Campbell for teaching Amyraldian type doctrines. This man at his trial, sought to invalidate the Acts of 1720 & 1722 against the Marrow teaching, by saying that the Church had brought in a new doctrine and yet had not proceeded according to its constitution via the so called "Barrier Act", to ratify it. The Assembly in answer stated that their position in the Acts, and their rejection of the teachings of the schools of Davenant and Amyraut, was no new doctrine, but simply the declaration of what was already the teaching of the Church on such matters as the love and grace of God and the question of who benefited from Christ's atoning work. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church likewise believes that it adds no new doctrine to the historic reformed faith as it has come down to us via the Reformed Church of Scotland and the Westminster Confessional Standards, when it today rejects common grace.

We believe that while today a large number of professing reformed Churches would side with the teaching of the "Marrow", and its common grace, we of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church side with the earlier reformed divines of Scotland. We hold with their rejection of common benefits or grace for all men from the death of Christ, or from the character of God, as reference to their writings, and to reputable historians will show. For example, James Walker, the highly respected historian of the Reformed Church of Scotland, in his work *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland, 1560-1750*, Knox Press, pages 79-86, discusses this matter. We quote in part: "It was a part of (a) scheme that Christ had purchased "common benefits", the ordinary temporal blessings of life, and that it is through His grace that the world is sustained as it is, and that all its bounties are enjoyed by mankind... Durham considers whether any mercy bestowed upon the reprobate, and enjoyed by them, may be said to be the proper fruit of or purchase of, Christ's death. And he answers in the negative. The ... fruits of Christ's death, he says, are not divided, but they all go together. So that for whom He satisfied and for whom He purchased anything in any respect, He did so in respect of everything. There may be certain consequences of Christ's death of an advantageous kind which reach wicked men. But that is a mere accident. Nay, to the wicked there may be given common gifts, by which the Church is edified and the glory of the Lord advanced-, but these belong to the covenant redemption, as promised blessings to God's people. It is argued further, that it is very doubtful whether, ... it can well be said that it is a blessing to men who yet reject the Son of God, that they have the morally purifying influences of Christianity, and are more or less affected by them in their character, or by any such blessing as can be said to fall from the tree of life. So, too, thought Gillespie, and so thought Rutherford. ... That the wrath of God did not straightway overtake sinners; that the sun shone, and the showers fell, and the harvests still came round to supply the wants of men, - was this not, in its measure, a revelation of grace? ... the idea was decisively rejected by the evangelical divines.

Halyburton handles the question in his own way in a famous excursus of his *Natural Religion*, - on God's government of the heathen world. "Is that government", he asks, "in any sense one of grace?" He answers in the negative. Not any law of grace, but the law of creation, the law of works, unretracted, unmitigated, reigns everywhere outside the gospel realms; and even by that law, although its penalties are meanwhile suspended, a certain outward order can be still preserved, and a certain system of external rewards and punishments comes in.

A fair representation of the Scottish doctrines may be given in the words... There can be no proper enjoyment of any benefits from Christ, as benefits of His mediatory kingdom, but in a way of communion and fellowship with Him by faith. Thus, no common material benefits, as enjoyed by wicked men or unbelievers, can be looked upon as benefits... These material benefits, in the most general consideration thereof, do proceed from God as the great Creator and Preserver of the world, in which respect they are common to men and beasts. But more particularly, they always come to men in some covenant channel. They come to wicked men, or unbelievers, through the broken covenant, in the channel of its curse; and so, whatever material goodness be in these things to them... yet there is no spiritual goodness attending the same, - no divine love, but wrath."

The Historical Witness Of The Evangelical Presbyterian Church Of Australia against Common Grace.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church from its beginning has stood for sovereign, particular grace as opposed to common grace in its various forms. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church did this, before it even knew of the existence of other contemporary Reformed Churches or men who likewise rejected common grace, when it, through its courts, came to the position of rejecting common grace, and asserting particular grace.

In April 1963, when several students of the Church were attending the John Knox Theological College at the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (Free Church), in St. Kilda, Victoria, a booklet called *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, by Profs. John Murray and Ned Stonehouse of the Westminster Theological Seminary in the United States of America, was set for study. The leading proposition of this treatise is, "that God in the free offer of the Gospel, earnestly longs for and desires the salvation of all men." The rationale for this teaching was a double will in God. There is a desire of His will for all men to be saved, but there is the will of His decrees that not all will be saved. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church stood against these teachings, both of an unfulfilled desire in God for the salvation of all men, and of two conflicting wills in the Godhead. At a Presbytery meeting on the 13th February 1965 it condemned this doctrine. A publication[2] was issued that gave some reasons for the rejection of the teachings of Professors Murray and

Stonehouse on the matter of God's love or grace.

Though the Evangelical Presbyterian Church differs strongly with Professor John Murray on his doctrine of God's grace and the grounds of the offer of the gospel, yet it continued to hold him in esteem as a godly and otherwise orthodox divine in many ways. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church is not sectarian in its view of the Church.

The controversy also involved the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia ("Free Church") in a difference of understanding on the doctrine. The Free Church accused the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of introducing a new doctrine contrary to the reformed faith. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in turn has maintained, that it cannot be established from the Confessional Standards that there is a love in God for the reprobate, and a desire for the salvation of all men-, on the contrary, they are particularistic in their statements concerning the love of God, and that therefore we cannot be accused of adding to the Confessional Standards by denying common grace, or excluding it from our pulpits. We rather assert that the Free Church, while allowing the position of Murray and Stonehouse and akin positions to be held by the majority of its office-bearers, has made an addition to the Confessional Standards.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church maintained as its belief that:

1. The Scriptures clearly define the disposition of God toward the non-elect, as one of a just and perfect hatred and wrath.
2. That since these same Scriptures are applied in the Confession as proof of its doctrine, the Confessional Standards in our judgement must also be interpreted after the same manner. That is, the non-elect, who are predestined to everlasting death according to the statements of the Confession, are under God's disposition of just hatred and wrath, there being no other statement to the contrary in them.

For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, Of God's Eternal Decree, Section 3 & 4 states:

"By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed-, and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished."

Proof texts are used to support the above statements which leave no doubt as to the disposition of God to the non-elect. Consider for example:

Matthew 25:41: Then shall He say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

Romans 9:22,23: What if God, willing to show His wrath, and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction; And that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy which He had afore prepared unto glory.

Proverbs 16:4: The Lord hath made all things for Himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.

Since that time, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has continued to maintain its adherence to particular grace, and its rejection of common grace. This is what it believes to be the truth of God's Word; this is what it believes the Confessional Standards embody, and what was the belief of the early Scottish Reformed Church. It believes that the glory of God's grace and character and the health and soundness of the Church doctrinally, is tied up in holding to its profession on this matter. In the preaching, teaching and writings of its ministers, it has continued to adhere to particular grace, and to reject the different variations of the teachings of common grace. Further arguments from the exegesis of Scripture, the Confessional Standards and the history of the Reformed Churches can be found in such writings.

Conclusion

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia rejects the following statement and like teaching as not taught in the Word of God and the Westminster Confessional Standards, and is in conflict with them: "That there is in God a love and compassion for all men, including the reprobate, and that God desires the salvation of all men in the free offer of the Gospel."

The Presbytery of the Church believes that it has not added to, or taken away from, either the Word of God or the Westminster Confessional Standards, when it condemns the above proposition.

The Presbytery of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, enacted on the 4th July, 1970 not only the condemnation of the above and like propositions, but it further stated:

“That in passing such an act, this Presbytery believes that it has not imposed a doctrinal position not laid down in the Confession, but has rejected the imposition of an innovation in doctrine, which teaches that there is a duplicity of will and purpose in God, which is not taught in the Confession and is contrary to it.”

The Presbytery of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia, meeting on the 22nd. July 1995, issues this paper to make it clear once again what its testimony is and witness in the matter of God's grace, and of our hope and salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.

May the Lord grant us more and more to know and understand His grace and how exalted and glorious He is as the Triune Covenant God of sovereign particular grace. May His grace be in our hearts and minds. May we grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in our daily lives. May we live to the glory of His great Name, and the advancement of His kingdom of grace and truth in the hearts and lives of men, women, boys and girls in the day and age in which we are called upon to live and serve Him.

22nd. July, 1995.

Footnotes 1 Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, (Still Water Revival Books: Edmonton, 1991), see pages 118, 126, 127.

2 *The Desire of God for the Salvation of the Reprobate. An Ambiguous Doctrine Refuted and the Reformed Evangelical Church Vindicated*. At the time the Evangelical Presbyterian Church was known as the Reformed Evangelical Church.