



WHY DO WE BELIEVE *THAT* ?  
Introduction to Reformed Theology

**Class 10**

OBJECTIONS TO COMMON GRACE  
&  
FINISHING THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Review – Doctrine of Christ & the Holy Spirit

- JW and Mormon Claims to be Christian
- Holy Spirit
  - Personality
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- Operations
  - General
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- Saving Grace vs. Common Grace



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## Objection to Common Grace

- Three Points of Synod Kalamazoo 1924
- Semantics?
- (Assumed) Theological Contradictions
- Defense
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## Synod Kalamazoo 1924

- Coming out of a controversy concerning the teaching of Dr. Janssen in 1922 (modernist teachings), some ministers who also opposed Dr. Janssen were then suspect of false teaching centering around an understanding of “Common Grace.”
- Synod 1924 came out with “Three Points of Common Grace”<sup>1</sup>
  1. That besides the saving grace of God, shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is a certain kind of favor, or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general
  2. The restraint of sin in the individual person and in society.
  3. The unregenerate, though unable to do any saving good, are able to do civil good.

1. Acts of Synod 1924, 145-146.



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## Objections - Semantics

- What if we don't call it "grace" but providence or something else?
- Herman Hoeksema:

**But is, then, the controversy about common grace not a mere quarrel about words?**

No, for, first, it is by no means a harmless theory that confuses God's providence with His grace; and, secondly the Kuyperian theory of common grace includes much more than this.<sup>1</sup>

1. Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 310.



## Defense - Semantics

- Berkhof: The Biblical use of the term "grace":
  - The word "grace" is not always used in the same sense in Scripture, but has a variety of meanings.
  - In the Old Testament...the noun may denote *gracefulness* or *beauty*, but most generally means *favor* or *good-will*. ...The fundamental idea is, that the blessings graciously bestowed are *freely* given, and not in consideration of any claim or merit.
  - [In] the New Testament... a more prominent meaning of the word is favor or good-will. It may denote the kindness or beneficence of our Lord, or the favor manifested or bestowed by God... In most of the passages however, in which the word *charis* is used in the New Testament, it signifies the unmerited operation of God in the heart of man, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>
- Note: It seems that Hoeksema agrees with this general definition of grace, see Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 107-112.

1. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 426-427 (emphasis original).



## Defense - Semantics

- Geerhardus Vos
  - There exists an essential difference between the working of the Holy Spirit in the sphere of nature and in the kingdom of grace. The latter is a new order of things that cannot be explained by the former, but rests on an immediate intervention of God's Spirit. Grace is not nature. It is certainly true that one also calls grace the natural guiding actions of God, with which He deals with the elect before their regeneration (*gratia praeparans*). But taking the word in this broad sense is not meant to deny the specific difference between the operations of the Spirit in nature and in grace. The word "grace" still has a twofold sense: (1) An attribute in God is called grace; (2) an influence on man that transcends natural influence bears that name. If now something that falls within the sphere of nature is called grace, then it is because the gracious purpose of God adheres to it. One and the same act can occur with respect to two persons and be grace in this sense for the one but not for the other. Still, the act remains specifically the same, and by this purpose is not set outside the sphere of nature. It is absolutely necessary to maintain the sharpest contrast between nature and grace.<sup>1</sup>

1. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 11.



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## Defense - Semantics

- Words do matter. Just like the definition of “covenant” can be defined such that some biblical covenants are excluded (i.e. Covenant of Works), so too can “grace” be defined in such a way that it doesn’t incorporate the full teaching of Scripture.
- If grace as it is conveyed from God to certain objects is defined as the “unmerited, undeserved favor of God”<sup>1</sup> we need to think about who those objects of this grace are:
  - Hoeksema adds, “towards his people.”<sup>2</sup>
  - Vos adds, “towards sinful people.”<sup>3</sup>
- With the definition being only towards “God’s people” then there is no room to see the “unmerited and undeserved” favor of God towards those other than the elect.
  - When the Bible speaks in this manner, it must then mean something else.

1. See Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 109.  
 2. Ibid.  
 3. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 28.



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## Objection – Theological

- Hoeksema and others in the early 1900s saw a “modernizing” trend in the CRC, but also some other significant baggage in their eyes.
  - “Even before this time, it must be recorded, the Christian Reformed Churches had never been wholly purged from the leaven of Pelagianism and Arminianism. The churches were, indeed, officially Reformed, united on the basis of the Three Forms of Unity as their standards, but the actual condition was by no means in full accord with this official stand. . . . Indeed, we do not misrepresent the matter when we state that a strong Arminian tendency had always existed and strongly asserted itself under the pretense of being Reformed and with the claim of being sustained by the Reformed Confessions.”<sup>1</sup>
- To call out and assert that Pelagianism and Arminianism were rife in the church is a very serious claim!

1. Hoeksema, *The PRCs in America*, 14-15.



## Objection – Theological

- Berkhof, “And does not Paul say to the Ephesians that they “were by nature children of wrath even as the rest”? (Eph 2:3). Evidently the elect can not be regarded as *always* and *exclusively* the objects of God's love. And if they who are the objects of God's redeeming love can also in some sense of the word be regarded as the objects of His wrath, why should it be impossible that they who are the objects of His wrath should also in some sense share His divine favor?”<sup>1</sup>

1. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 445 (emphasis original).



## Objections - Theological

- In *Saved by Grace: A Study of the Five Points of Calvinism*” Ronald Cammenga and Ronald Hanko (thanks Heidi!) the assertion is made that to hold to the doctrine of common grace is a denial of the elements of these five points (at least those are the sections I saw).
  - A denial of **Total Depravity** because “if man can do anything good, he is not *totally* wicked.”<sup>1</sup>
  - A denial of **Predestination** because “although God’s saving love is discriminating, for some only, there is a love of God that embraces all men without distinction. This is clearly contradictory. In eternity God hates and reprobates some men, but in time and history He loves all men. At the very least, this is a denial of God’s unchangeableness. At the worst, it leads to an obvious contradiction in the direction of a denial of predestination, particularly reprobation.”<sup>2</sup>
  - A denial of **Irresistible Grace** because... well they don’t actually say why, they just say it does!<sup>3</sup>

1. Cammenga and Hanko, *Saved by Grace*, 52-53.  
 2. *Ibid.*, 90  
 3. *Ibid.*, 141.



## Defense – Theological

- There seem to be some significant theological foundations that undergird the denial of common grace for Hoeksema:
  - Complete loss of the *imago Dei* in man after the Fall.
    - Hoeksema, “It is not enough to say that man merely lost this image of God. Surely, he did lose it, and lose it completely. ... The being that was designed to be the image of God changed into the image of the devil.”<sup>1</sup>
  - A supralapsarian understanding of the decree of God.
    - Hoeksema, “We therefore place ourselves without reservation on the standpoint of supralapsarianism, and maintain that it is the Scriptural and the only consistent presentation of the decree of God’s predestination.”<sup>1</sup>
    - *Supralapsarianism* understands that God made the decree of election and reprobation *above* (supra) the decree to create.
    - *Infralapsarianism* understands that God made the decree of election and reprobation *under* (infra) the decree to create. Therefore, God saves from the “common mass of fallen humanity.”
  - Not mutually exclusive, Kuyper was supralapsarian, but yet held to common grace

1. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 213.  
 2. *Ibid.*, 164.



## Objections - Theological

- *Imago Dei* lost because of the Fall or not? (More on this in the Doctrine of Man)
  - The language of *Saved by Grace* seems to indicate that fallen man is not only totally depraved but is in fact *utterly depraved*; Hoeksema's understanding that fallen men now have the "image of the devil."
  - With this understanding it makes sense why they so vehemently reject any notion of God working "grace" upon fallen mankind in a way that is non-saving. In order for that grace to have any effect at all, that person needs to be somewhat regenerated.
  - We would deny that a distribution of common grace requires a person to be "regenerated" because there is still remaining in them the *imago Dei* even if it is distorted and weak.



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## Confessions on the *Imago Dei* Post-fall

- BC 14 – "...and by this sin he separated himself from God, who was his true life, having corrupted his entire nature. ...He lost all his excellent gifts which he received from God, and he retained none of them *except for small traces* which are enough to make him inexcusable" (emphasis added).
- CD 3/4.1 – "...However, rebelling against God at the devil's instigation and by his own free will, he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions."
- CD 3/4.4 – "There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, *by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior.* But this light of nature is far from enabling man to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to him—so far, in fact, that man does not use it rightly even in matters of nature and society. Instead, in various ways he completely distorts this light, whatever its precise character, and suppresses it in unrighteousness. In doing so he renders himself without excuse before God" (emphasis added).



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## Defense - Theological

- The *supralapsarianism* of Hoeksema means that the reprobate were created to be damned, whereas the elect were created to be redeemed. The two are utterly distinct.
- The *infralapsarian* position maintains that all mankind fell in Adam, and therefore at the beginning they are common and indistinct. God, in his perfect electing decree saves his people out of that misery to be redeemed.
- The supralapsarian would not allow the Holy Spirit to “cross over” the dividing line for any reason (they are *only* objects of God’s wrath and can only be); whereas the infralapsarian can see a distinction of the Holy Spirit working on the reprobate in a way that does not cause regeneration, but still can bring divine favor because the starting point for mankind is the same.



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## Defense - Theological

- Both God’s General Revelation and Special Revelation are true sources of God’s revelation.
  - In general revelation we can see men doing acts that are good and moral towards their fellow man.
  - In special revelation we see God moving non-believers according to his purposes and even in a moral manner.
- To deny common grace with the presupposition that God “wouldn’t do that” (when revelation tells us otherwise) is to attempt to reach into the secret counsel of God.
  - Berkhof, “In speaking on this subject we ought to be very careful and allow ourselves to be guided by the explicit statements of Scripture rather than by our bold inferences from the secret counsel of God. There is far more in God than we can reduce to our logical categories.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 445.



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## Defense - Historical

- The doctrine of “common grace” has its roots well before 20<sup>th</sup> century America.
  - Calvin used the modifier “common” with “grace” only four times in his writing, but there does seem to be many instances of him using the term “grace” but not concerning salvation.
  - “Calvin did not hesitate to maintain on the one hand that both the salvation and the perdition of men is determined in the last analysis by no other factor than the will of God. But on the other hand he stresses with equal emphasis the idea that God shows great concern for the salvation of many who are not chosen unto life and in all sincerity offers Christ and the benefits of His redemptive death to reprobates and even pleads with them to flee to the asylum which He opens for them.”<sup>1</sup>
  - “[Calvin] developed alongside of the doctrine of particular grace the doctrine of common grace. This is a grace which is communal, does not pardon nor purify human nature, and does not affect the salvation of sinners.”<sup>2</sup>

1. H. Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, 236.  
2. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 434.



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## Defense - Historical

- Historian Richard Muller states, “There is also good ground for concluding that the modern conception of ‘common grace’ finds its roots more in the period of Reformed orthodoxy than in the era of Calvin...”<sup>1</sup>
- **WCF X.4** (1646), “Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have *some common operations of the Spirit*, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved...”
- In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Reformed theologian **Petrus van Mastricht** and early 18<sup>th</sup> century **Wilhelmus á Brakel** both wrote about “common grace.”
- **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758) “strictly maintains the essential difference between common and saving grace. Says he: ‘Saving grace differs not only in degree, but in nature and kind, from common grace, or any thing that is ever found in natural man.’ He seems to regard the term common grace as a synonym for the common influences of the Spirit of God and for restraining grace. According to Edwards the moral virtues found with the unregenerate are due to common grace. All men have some measure of common or restraining grace as long as they walk this earth. ...It is common grace which makes the unregenerate in some measure tolerable members of human society.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Richard Muller, *PRRD*, 3.574.  
2. From Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, App. iv-v.



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## Defense - Historical

- In 1871-1873, American theologian **Charles Hodge** explains and defends the doctrine of Common Grace.<sup>2</sup>
- **Abraham Kuyper** and **Herman Bavinck** did much to bring the doctrine of common grace into the mainstream of Reformed Theology.
  - Kuyper published three volumes titled *Common Grace* in 1888-1889.
  - Bavinck published a pamphlet on common grace in 1894.
- Biblical theologian **Geerhardus Vos** taught common grace in 1896.
- **Louis Berkhof** might have written the “Three Points” in 1924 and certainly defends the doctrine in his *Systematic Theology* published in 1939.
- After the CRC Controversy **John Murray** published an article, “Common Grace” in 1942 and **Cornelius Van Til** wrote a book on the subject in 1947.

1. Richard Muller, *PRRD*, 3.574.  
 2. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2.654.



## Defense - Conclusion

- Bavinck, “Through this doctrine of *gratia communis* the Reformed [theologians] have on the one hand maintained the specific and absolute character of the Christian religion and on the other have been second to none in their appreciation of everything good and beautiful that God has given to sinful men. Thus they have simultaneously maintained the seriousness of sin and the rights of the natural. And thus they were protected against both Pelagianism and Pietism”<sup>1</sup>
- To deny common grace puts one outside of historic Reformed teaching from the earliest times.
- To deny common grace because it assumes it makes one’s theology “Pelagian or Arminian” is not borne out by the facts of those who have historically held to the doctrine of common grace.

1. Quoting Bavinck, Van Til, *Common Grace*, 14.



## How to Defend Doctrine

- **Properly Understand your Opponent:** An adherent of the doctrine you are opposing must be able to agree with your summary of their belief.
- Beware of “**Slippery Slope Arguments**”: Just because you think a belief will lead to another errant belief doesn’t mean that it will.<sup>1</sup>
  - Person A → “You believe X and I think that will lead to an errant belief in Y, therefore X is wrong.”
  - Person B → “I do believe in X, but I don’t believe in Y.”
- Don’t attack a **Strawman**: The position you are attacking must be real, not an imagined “worse-case” scenario, in other words, “you can’t misrepresent an opponent’s position or argument, usually for the purpose of making it easier to attack.”<sup>2</sup>

1. The actual fallacy is called the “Domino Fallacy”: This fallacy consists of “assuming, without appropriate evidence, that a particular action or event is just one, usually the first, in a series of steps that will lead inevitable to some specific, usually undesirable, consequence” (Damer, *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*, 158).

2. *Ibid.*, 179.



## Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

- Extraordinary Spiritual Gifts (e.g. speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, etc.)
  - Do they continue today?
  - Or Have they ceased?
- **Prophecy** – The Spirit doesn’t give new “revelation” and any gift of prophecy today is in fact, “illumination, fallible insight, and contemporary application of biblical truth.”<sup>1</sup>
- **Healing** – God can still work supernaturally in his world according to his purpose and will to heal (even miraculous healing). But when God does this we shouldn’t jump back to Pentecost and normalize the event.<sup>2</sup>
- Ferguson – “the phenomenon [supposed extraordinary gifts] is indeed an experienced reality, but it is not a self-interpreting reality. . . . An important, but largely unrecognized, element of interpretation is involved in continuationism.”<sup>3</sup>

1. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 236.

2. *Ibid.*, 235.

3. *Ibid.*



## “Tongues” of Pentecost – Repeatable?

- Ferguson, “This becomes all the clearer when we view Pentecost as an aspect of the work of Christ, not a Spirit event separate from it and in addition to it. It is the visible manifestation of a coronation. The events of the Day of Pentecost are the public expressions of the hidden reality that Christ has been exalted as the Lord of glory and that his messianic request for the Spirit made as Mediator on our behalf, has been granted.”<sup>1</sup>
- The miracle on Pentecost was that everybody *heard* the apostles speaking *in their own language*. The miracle wasn’t in the speaking *per se* but in the fact everybody present understood!
  - What about in Corinth and tongues needing an interpreter? Ferguson makes the case that what happened at Pentecost and in Corinth have no essential difference. “...It is more consistent to see the tongues in Corinth as foreign languages requiring translation and interpretation. ...The phenomena, if not actually identical, are certainly functionally equivalent in the church.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 86.  
2. *Ibid.*, 213-214.



## Argument for Cessationism

- Although we need to be careful with “arguments from silence” it is instructive that the Pastoral Epistles are silent concerning extraordinary gifts of the Spirit.
  - One would think Paul would have instructed the Second-Generation Pastors Timothy and Titus if these gifts were to be normative for the church moving forward.
    - What *is* normative is the role of elders and deacons!
- Historically, the Church Fathers recognized the disappearance of extraordinary gifts.
  - Why would they all of a sudden reappear in the last century or so, when we are in the same epoch as the church after the death of the apostles?
- Gifts and miracles are limited to brief periods of biblical history to “serve as confirmatory signs of new revelation and its ambassadors, and as a means of establishing and defending the Kingdom of God in epocally significant ways.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 224.



## Resources – Doctrine of Christ

- Any good Systematic Theology
- Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* and *Manual of Christian Doctrine*
- Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 3 – Christology*



## Resources – Mormons & JW's

- Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*
- Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*
- Ankerberg & Weldon, *Fast Facts on Mormonism*
- There are many other resources available online.



## Resources – Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

- Any good Systematic Theology
- Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* and *Manual of Christian Doctrine*
- Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*
- Michael Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit*



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## Resources – Common Grace

- John Murray, “Common Grace”
- Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 4 – Soteriology*, 10-15.
- Van Til, *Common Grace*
- Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*
- Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*
- Kuyper and Bavinck



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# Next Week

- Doctrine of Man

