

EDITORIAL: HYPERCALVINIST! (7)

Rev. Martyn McGeown

Introduction

Common grace is extended to everyone. It is God's goodness to humanity in general whereby God graciously restrains the full expression of sin and mitigates sin's destructive effects in human society. Common grace imposes moral constraints on people's behavior, maintains a semblance of order in human affairs, enforces a sense of right and wrong through conscience and civil government, enables men and women to appreciate beauty and goodness, and imparts blessings of all kinds to elect and non-elect alike.¹

In our last six editorials, we have (1) introduced the basic charges that Phil Johnson levels against the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) and, therefore, also against the BRF, which agrees with the PRC on these matters; (2) explained the difference between the serious gospel call and the "well-meant" or "free" offer of the gospel; (3) refuted genuine hyper-Calvinism, which denies the duty of all men to repent and believe in Christ; (4) refuted the theory of "common grace," which is a supposed favour of God toward the reprobate; (5) addressed some of the texts that Johnson adduces in favour of his theory of common grace; and (6) addressed some objections made by real hyper-Calvinists. The quote above from Johnson indicates the subject of this final editorial—God's grace and the restraint of sin.

Remember that Johnson claims to be a genuine Calvinist: "Lest anyone wonder where my own convictions lie, I am a Calvinist, affirming without reservation the *Canons of the Synod of Dordt*." Before we address Johnson's point above, we examine the *Canons* on the subject of human depravity. It is my contention that Johnson's view denies the doctrine of total depravity as set forth in the *Canons*, and that God's restraint of sin can be affirmed without recourse to the error of "common grace."

¹ Phil Johnson, "A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism" (www.romans45.org/articles/hypercal.htm).

The *Canons* and Total Depravity

In *Canons* III/IV:1, after setting forth man's original, created righteousness, the Synod explains the consequences of Adam's first act of rebellion:

... he forfeited these excellent gifts, and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections.

Notice what the Synod affirms—this is what man *became*, not what he would have become but for “common grace.” This is what man *is*. This is what the unbeliever *is*. This is what that friendly, unbelieving neighbour on your street *is*. This is what your friendly, unbelieving postman *is*. This is what your kind, helpful, obliging but unbelieving colleague or family member *is*. And this is what you, believing reader, still *are* by nature, but for the grace of regeneration and conversion. Do you believe that or is that too strong? If it is too strong for you, do not call yourself a Calvinist and do not claim that you “affirm without reservation the *Canons of the Synod of Dordt*.”

Having set that forth in *Canons* III/IV:1, the Synod concludes,

Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation (*Canons* III/IV:3).

The “Glimmerings of Natural Light”

The debate between the advocates of “common grace” and the BRF comes to a head in the interpretation of the next article of the *Canons*. In fact, that article was quoted in the infamous “Three Points of Common Grace” adopted by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1924. In the second point, we read, “God by the general operations of His Spirit, without renewing the heart of man, restrains the unimpeded breaking out of sin, by which human life in society remains possible;” and in the third point, we read, “the unregenerate, though incapable of doing any saving good, can do civil good” and “God,

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without renewing the heart, so influences man that he is able to perform civil good.” Johnson appears to believe essentially the same thing.

Canons III/IV:4 consists of two parts. First, the Synod explains what man, despite the fall, still retains in terms of “natural light.” Second, the Synod explains what man does with this “natural light.” Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko take note of the fact that “the committee [that the CRC] synod had appointed to serve her with advice in this matter did not quote the article entirely, but only the first sentence of it.”²

Here is the part of the article to which the CRC appeals in its advocacy of “common grace”:

There remain, however, in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment ...

Article 4 was not written in order to contradict Articles 1-3—Dordt does not return with the right hand what it took away with the left hand. Articles 1-3 are an uncompromising, biblical statement of total depravity, the first petal in the Reformed TULIP. Dordt is not claiming in *Canons III/IV:4* that man is still good after all or that man is still good in some sense. Article 4 is not a denial or a dilution of total depravity. It is, however, an explanation or a clarification. What did man become after the fall? Has he become a beast or a demon? Does man commit every possible sin? Is man’s depravity such that life is impossible, inasmuch as all men are raping, murdering, rampaging demons? And if all men are not raping, murdering, rampaging demons, is that due to common grace or due to the remnants of some goodness in man? Those are the issues in *Canons III/IV:4*.

The key phrase is “the glimmerings of natural light.”

Before the fall, according to *Canons III/IV:1*, man was “adorned with a true and saving [Latin: *salutari*, beneficial] knowledge of his Creator and of spiritual

² Herman Hanko and Herman Hoeksema, *Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 1997), p. 137.

things.” That is gone—in its place is “blindness of mind.” The light that man retains is merely “natural.” Everyone has natural light, which is the natural light of reason. However, fallen man retains only “glimmerings” of that light. Imagine the power of Adam’s natural light before the fall compared to man’s darkened mind after the fall. We think that we are modern, sophisticated and intellectual. Adam’s intellect far exceeded ours. What is the power of this “natural light” of reason? Article 4 lists several things: (1) he retains some knowledge of God; (2) he retains some knowledge of natural things; (3) he retains some knowledge of the differences between good and evil; and (4) he discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.

And he does all of this *while remaining totally depraved*.

Let us explain and prove these various aspects of “natural light.”

First, the totally depraved unbeliever retains “some knowledge of God.” This is, however, not a “true and saving knowledge” of God, not the knowledge of love and fellowship, and not a spiritual appreciation of God. Nevertheless, even the dullest atheist knows that God exists. Even the demons know that God exists and they know that without “common grace.” The reader should consult Romans 1:18-23 and James 2:19.

Second, the totally depraved unbeliever retains “some knowledge of ... natural things.” This is, however, not a “true and saving knowledge ... of spiritual things.” Sinful man can engage in intellectual pursuits. He can study the world, develop science and become proficient in many fields of study, but all of it is merely in natural things. That is part of the so-called “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion ...” Man pursues science, art, culture and philosophy, and he does so *as totally depraved*. An unbelieving, cultured scientist with a PhD in physics is as depraved as an idolatrous, cannibalistic savage in the jungles of Papua New Guinea.

Third, the totally depraved unbeliever retains “some knowledge of ... the differences between good and evil.” He knows, for example, that murder is wrong, that theft is wrong and that living faithfully with one wife is good. He knows that because his inner judge—his conscience—reminds him of that.

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Romans 2:14-15 states,

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.

When Gentiles do “the things contained in the law,” they do not obey God’s law, which is impossible (Rom. 8:7), but they display external virtue and avoid external vice. When they display “the work of the law written in their hearts,” this does not mean that God has written the *law* on their hearts—that is regeneration (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10)—but it means that God has written the knowledge of right and wrong in their hearts, and He testifies it to their consciences. All men know the difference between right and wrong. This does not make them good, or even partially good, but inexcusable!

Fourth, the totally depraved unbeliever “discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.” Even the basest of sinners prefer to live in a nation of laws. They see some need for a criminal justice system, even if they hope to escape human justice, and they see the benefit of complying with some moral code. Most people generally obey the law of the land. However, this is not “civil righteousness”—it is self-preservation. Law is good for them and law is good for society. Most are astute enough to discern that lawlessness is counterproductive. Many are restrained by a natural sense of shame or a fear of punishment. But unless the Holy Spirit regenerates a sinner and writes God’s law on his heart, that sinner will never serve God out of thankfulness from the heart.

These “glimmerings of natural light” do not amount to much—they do not produce good works, they do not constitute righteousness, they are not pleasing to God and they are not spiritual or saving good. And their existence has nothing to do with “common grace.”

An Inexcusable Omission

However, the Synod of Dordt did not finish there.

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Here is the part of *Canons* III/IV:4 that the CRC Synod did *not* quote:

But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.

Notice those damning words. Not only do the “glimmerings of natural light” *not* improve totally depraved man, they actually make his judgment before God even *worse* because of his misuse of them. Unregenerate man is “incapable of using it [i.e., the light of nature] aright even in things natural and civil.” When man seems to fulfil the “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1:28, he sins. (In fact, all of his endeavours are not a fulfilling of the “cultural mandate” but a selfish pursuit of pleasure, wealth, power and sin). When man develops science, medicine and technology, he sins. When man pursues any field of study, he sins. When man behaves in an outwardly moral fashion, even when he lets conscience be his guide and when he follows God’s law externally, he sins. When man lives as a law-abiding citizen, in faithfulness to one wife and loves his children, he sins. Everything man does, he does in the service of sin. He cannot use natural light aright *even in things natural and civil* (cf. Prov. 21:4).

Of course, if, instead of pursuing a cure for cancer, man makes and deploys a terrorist bomb, he sins even more. If, instead of living in faithfulness to his wife, he commits adultery or, if instead of loving his children, he neglects or abuses them, he sins even more. If, instead of living as a law-abiding citizen, he becomes a criminal, he sins more. The issue is not between depravity and “common grace,” but between different expressions of depravity.

Moreover, “this light, such as it is [and it is not much], man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness.” Man pollutes—he *wholly* pollutes—his intellectual gifts, his knowledge of God, his knowledge of good and evil, his conscience, and his natural sense of morality and external virtue. He wholly *pollutes* it! Do you believe that or is that too strong? If it is too strong for you, do not call yourself a Calvinist and do not claim that you “affirm without reservation the *Canons of the Synod of Dordt*.”

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The Synod of Dordt did not invent this out of whole cloth. The Synod echoes the teaching of sacred Scripture. Romans 1:18 states that unbelievers “hold the truth in unrighteousness,” where the verb “hold” means to “hold down” or to “suppress.” I Timothy 4:2 speaks of those “having their conscience seared with a hot iron.” Titus 1:15-16 warns that

unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.

Romans 3:12 simply teaches, “there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” No one does spiritual good, saving good, moral good, natural good, civil good or any other kind of good before God.

Yet Johnson writes without a shred of biblical evidence:

Common grace is extended to everyone. It is God’s goodness to humanity in general whereby God graciously restrains the full expression of sin and mitigates sin’s destructive effects in human society. Common grace imposes moral constraints on people’s behavior, maintains a semblance of order in human affairs, enforces a sense of right and wrong through conscience and civil government, enables men and women to appreciate beauty and goodness, and imparts blessings of all kinds to elect and non-elect alike.

At the same time, he insists, “Lest anyone wonder where my own convictions lie, I am a Calvinist, affirming without reservation the *Canons of the Synod of Dordt*.” If Johnson affirms the *Canons*, then he must affirm *Canons III/IV:4*, including the second half of the article, which the CRC in her “Three Points of Common Grace” inexcusably omits.

Walking by Faith, Not by Sight

All of this raises a legitimate question. Total depravity does not *seem* to be true and “common grace,” as Johnson describes it, *seems* to be true. We all know nice unbelievers. Not all men are actual rapists and murderers. Not

all men behave like Adolf Hitler. There are people whom you know, who are unbelievers, to whom you would entrust your house, your car and even your children. Does not God indeed restrain them through “common grace,” so they do not kill you and steal your possessions?

First, we do not judge doctrine by experience. That is a recipe for disaster. What does the Word of God say? “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

Let these words sink in:

“the wickedness of man was great in the earth.”

“[The] imagination of the thoughts of his heart was ... *evil*.”

“*every* imagination of the thoughts of his heart was ... evil.”

“every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was *only* evil.”

“every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil *continually*.”

The question is not, “Do you see and observe that?” but, “Do you *believe* that?”

Second, do you know the heart of your kind, unbelieving neighbour? If you could look into the heart of your kind, unbelieving neighbour, as God can and does, what would you see? You would see that every imagination of the thoughts of your kind, unbelieving neighbour’s heart is only evil continually. And if we could display the imagination of the thoughts of your kind, unbelieving neighbour’s heart on a large screen for you to see, you would no longer think that he was good. If we could do that with the imagination of the thoughts of *your* heart, we would not think that you are good either.

So perhaps we think that we find “good people.” God finds none (Ps. 14:2-3; Rom. 3:10-18).

The answer, then, is not to deny total depravity; it is not to find some remnant of good in man; it is not to teach that God counteracts the natural outbreak of evil in man’s heart by a generous dose of “common grace,” so that he is less evil than he could be. The answer is that sin develops in a human being, in society and in history. Sin develops in God’s providence, not under God’s “common grace,” and sin takes time to reach its full potential.

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The teaching of the *Heidelberg Catechism* is that “we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and *inclined* to all wickedness” (Q. 8). The teaching is not that we actually perform every conceivable form of wickedness. Evil is like a seed in us, which has the potential to grow, but not all wicked people develop in sin in the same way. Some men are more inclined to sexual sins than others: they might develop into pornographers, adulterers or even rapists. Some men are more inclined to greed than others: they might develop into thieves, robbers, fraudsters or simply live as misers. Every one of us has a sinful nature and every one of us is capable of every conceivable sin. And each of us is totally depraved by nature.

Moreover, not all men have the same opportunity to develop in sin, because the development of sin takes time. As sin develops in a man’s life and in society, that man or that society becomes ripe for judgment. For example, Adam and Eve were totally depraved as soon as they disobeyed God in the Garden, but Adam did not immediately break out into every conceivable form of wickedness. When God declared in Genesis 15:16, “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full,” He did not mean that the Amorites were not yet totally depraved—they were—but He meant that the Amorites had not fully developed their potential for wickedness.

Take Adolf Hitler as an example. When Hitler was six years old, he was as totally depraved as he was when he died at age fifty-six. But at age six, Hitler had neither the imagination, nor the opportunity, nor the power to mastermind the Holocaust. The same is true with society: everyone from Adam and Eve onward was totally depraved, but it took over 1,600 years before the whole world was filled with violence and had reached a point where it was ripe for destruction (Gen. 6:11-13). The same is happening in our day: our society is developing in sin, man is finding new ways to sin, which development will culminate in the man of sin, at which point sin will be fully ripe and God’s wrath will be filled up.

The development of sin, as all other things, is under the sovereign control of God. God wills that sin develop in the human race and that sin reach its full potential. God does not will this because He delights in sin—He hates sin!—but because God wills that sin be seen as the dreadfully wicked thing that it is, so that He can be glorified in saving sinners from it and so that He can be glorified in punishing it.

In addition, God *does* restrain man's sin, but He does not restrain sin inwardly and graciously by His Holy Spirit. God does not restrain sin in such a way that man becomes less than totally depraved or even able to do good. God restrains sin through various means—He uses the law as a restraint; He uses a sense of fear, shame, self-preservation and other motives to restrain sin; He even uses sickness and death to restrain sinners. All of these restraints act like a muzzle on a rabid dog.

But that is not “common grace.”

Conclusion

We have now come to the end of our answer to Johnson's “Primer on Hyper-Calvinism.” I remind the reader why I took up the pen in the first place. Johnson slandered the PRC, and, by extension, the BRF and others who agree with the truth of particular grace, with these words:

The best-known American hyper-Calvinists are the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). They deny that there is any sort of “offer” (in the sense of a proffer or tender or proposal of mercy) in the gospel message. They also deny that they are hyper-Calvinists, because they insist that the only variety of hyper-Calvinism is that which denies the gospel call (Type-1 above).³

The most articulate advocate of the PRC position is David Engelsma, whose book *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* is an interesting but in my view terribly misleading study of the question of whether PRC theology properly qualifies as hyper-Calvinism. Engelsma does some selective quoting and interpretive gymnastics in order to argue that his view is mainstream Reformed theology. But a careful reading

³ Johnson is mistaken here also. The PRC (and BRF) do not deny the false charge that we are hyper-Calvinists “because [we] insist that the only variety of hyper-Calvinism is that which denies the gospel call [Type-1 above].” We deny that we are hyper-Calvinists because we insist that the only variety of hyper-Calvinism is that which denies *duty faith* (and duty repentance) [Type-2 above].

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of his sources shows that he often quotes out of context, or ends a quote just before a qualifying statement that would totally negate the point he thinks he has made. Still, for those interested in these issues, I recommend his book, with a caution to read it very critically and with careful discernment.

We have taken issue with Johnson's remarks not out of denominational loyalty or in order to defend our theological friends or even in order to defend ourselves but because Johnson's statement is *not true*. The ninth commandment, as explained in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, requires that "I love the truth, speak it uprightly, and confess it; also that I defend and promote, as much as I am able, the honor and good character of my neighbor" (A. 112). God hates lies and He especially hates lies about Himself. Johnson labels an entire denomination of churches and one of those churches' leading theologians, Prof. David J. Engelsma, with the dishonourable epithet of hyper-Calvinist. He also makes unsubstantiated charges against Engelsma's book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*, accusing Engelsma of "selective quoting and interpretative gymnastics." For this charge, he has not offered one word of evidence.

We have found Johnson's fivefold definition of hyper-Calvinism wanting. Only one of his five points, namely, a denial that faith is the duty of every sinner, is *genuine* hyper-Calvinism. A denial of the "well meant" or "free" offer is *not* hyper-Calvinism. A denial of "common grace" is *not* hyper-Calvinism. The standard against which genuine Calvinism is to be measured is *not* Phil Johnson, *not* even Calvin's *Institutes* and *certainly not* the *New Dictionary of Theology*, but it is the *Canons of Dordt*, which Johnson claims to "affirm without reservation." The *Canons* explain the relationship between the serious call and the saving desire of God, and from the *Canons* one would never reach Johnson's faulty definition of hyper-Calvinism. Ultimately, of course, the authority is the Word of God, which is why we have given a careful exegesis of key texts of Scripture pertinent to the topic.

Finally, I pray that in my writing of these editorials and in your reading of them, we have not harboured rancour against Johnson in our hearts. In much theological polemics, there is more heat than light. We have as much as possible avoided personalities. We have been interested in expounding the *truth*: the truth about God, about Christ, about man, about sin and about salvation.

It is my desire that Johnson might reexamine his “A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism” and come to realize that, while he might not agree with us on this matter, we do not deserve to bear the opprobrious name of hyper-Calvinists, for we insist most strongly that God’s grace is particular and that the reprobate, who are never partakers of that particular, effectual, saving grace, are nevertheless required by God to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ as He is set forth in the gospel.

That is, we are genuine, biblical, Reformed, creedal Calvinists!

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