

# Common Grace

Excerpted from ‘*A simple critique of Dominionism*’.

## **The ideas of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)**

Kuyper was an esteemed Calvinist pastor who later became Prime Minister of the Netherlands. He wrote many valuable books, such as a defence of particular grace<sup>1</sup> (forgotten by most modern Calvinists), but is best known as the originator of the modern idea of common grace. He penned a three volume work on this called *Gemeene Gratie*, to differentiate between his idea of common grace and the common grace of the modern well-meant free offer in the Gospel, to which he was opposed (something else modern moderate Calvinists fail to see).<sup>2</sup>

Kuyper agreed that his views on common grace were novel and not found in Calvin or Reformed confessions. This common grace prevented man from becoming a beast at the fall of Adam and enabled him to do good works that pleased God and were a benefit to the church, and even were of abiding value in the kingdom. This set him in direct opposition to Scripture, which clearly states that natural man can do no good at all, nothing pleasing to God, and can do no spiritual work. As Augustine and Calvin stated, sinners can only accomplish ‘*splendid sins*’. Even the ploughing of the wicked is sin according to the Bible.

The idea of common grace has been grabbed by postmillennialists to further Kuyper’s aims and enable the church to conquer the world.

Kuyper’s mistake was to leave the ministry and enter politics, where he was successful. He founded a political party, became the head, and won a place in the Lower Chamber but could not get sufficient members elected to get him the Prime Ministerial position. So he formed a coalition with the Roman Catholic party to secure enough votes and became Prime Minister. Kuyper had to justify this odd coalition where sentiment against Catholics was strong. He did so with his theory of common grace.

Kuyper was spurred on by his idealistic view of the Netherlands. He believed that the Reformed Church of the Netherlands was the true church because it was a state church (Erastianism). This church is responsible for the spiritual state of all citizens, even non-Christians – thus every baby was baptised and marriages conducted in church.

Kuyper considered the Netherlands to be a genuine Reformed country with a genuine Reformed Church supported by a Reformed government. He saw a future in which the Netherlands would become the fountain-head of a mighty stream of the Reformed faith that would flow throughout all the world and make of the entire world a Reformed community, with every sphere of life subordinated to the rule of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Particular Grace*, now available from RFP. In this he utterly repudiates the idea of a free offer to all in the Gospel and interprets the universalistic texts in the NT (e.g. 2 Pt 3:9 and 1 Tim 2:4) in a particularistic way. Kuyper, in this early stage of his life, was soundly Reformed.

<sup>2</sup> The common grace that included a free Gospel offer to all was called *Algemeene Genade* (‘common grace’) while his view was *Gemeene Gratie* (‘general grace’).

<sup>3</sup> Herman Hanko, *Forum on Common Grace*; private blog.

Thus Kuyper wanted to be in the position of supreme power to enable the government to realise this dream; he could only achieve this in a coalition with Catholics.

This co-operation, in Kuyper's thinking, would begin in the Netherlands where all the citizens, under the auspices of a State Church, could promote the Reformed faith and from the Netherlands would come a great revival that would spread throughout all the world and make this world a better place to live. This thinking has been carried on in many places where, under the supposed banner of the Reformed faith, labours are put forth to improve this world.<sup>4</sup>

This compromise led to many evils, not least the theological justification of common grace. In the end Kuyper was only Prime Minister for two years and never achieved his aspirations.

Kuyper's dream where every country and every institution of society is subordinated to the rule of Jesus Christ is continued in other postmillennial dominionists and notably Reconstructionism. Kuyper also wrote another book called *Pro Rege* ('For the King'). The main thrust of this is that all creation and all institutions of society must be subjected to the rule of Christ. When this happened, as Kuyper expected, the kingdom of Christ would be realised in this world. This is a materialistic and worldly interpretation of God's kingdom, which Christ said is not of this world.

Dutch immigrants to the US beginning at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to a curious situation. Some held to a free offer of the Gospel coming from the Churches of the Secession of 1834, while others held to Kuyper's view coming from his new denomination. Both joined the Christian Reformed Church and this led to tension and indeed enmity. However, both these views contributed to the development of the current situation in modern Dominionism.

The historical context is important for us to understand Kuyper. The Netherlands had long had a strong Reformed, national church, *De Hervormde Kerk* (Reformed Church), and had a strong post-Reformation history. The Synod of Dort (Dordrecht), perhaps the most important synod in history which led to the Synod of Dort canons still used today as an authoritative Reformed confession, was held in Holland. The Netherlands fought long and hard against Spanish imperial oppression in order to maintain its Reformed faith. Also in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the Dutch had expanded their colonial empire and trading companies throughout, Indonesia, America, the West Indies, South Africa and elsewhere. Missionaries set up stations and churches in all these places. It could easily be seen to be an ever-growing rise of postmillennial ideas coming to fruition.

Kuyper originally invented this idea of common grace because he was searching for a way to explain that there is a lot of seeming good in the world, which makes it possible for the church to survive. But Kuyper was also looking for some theological basis to justify co-operation between the wicked and the people of God; he found that theological basis in his theory of common grace. Because the Holy Spirit enables the unregenerate to do good, therefore the righteous may work along with the wicked in the pursuit of certain mutually desirable goals that can be realised in this world. These mutually desirable goals serve to bring about the kingdom of Christ here below.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Hanko, op. cit.

### *Summary of Kuyper's ideas*

1. Common grace enabling sinners to do good works and please God. These good works can be used to establish the kingdom of Christ in this world.
2. Common grace restrains sin in society.
3. Common grace enables believers to work hand in hand with sinners to achieve good works for a Christianised society.
4. The Dutch Reformed church, working with a Reformed government, was the true church which would come to dominate the world and lead to a global Christian revival.

### *Criticism of these ideas*

1. Sinners cannot do good works and cannot please God.
2. There is no Biblical mention or description of the idea of common grace. It is a modern invention (by Kuyper).
3. Unbelievers cannot work hand in hand with believers to build the church. The church is a spiritual institution, in Christ, and is a mystery and unknown to the world. Only Christ can build the church using believers of his choice.
4. No state church is the true church. The history of the Dutch churches shows continual apostasy and fragmentation.
5. Christ's kingdom is not of this earth and will not appear until the Second Coming. There is no materialistic prototype of this kingdom on earth now.

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