

Common Grace and Biblical Counseling
Wisdom from Reformed Theologians



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Introduction: A Word from Bob

In 2022, I began sharing posts where I collated quotes from Reformed theologians regarding common grace—and how it relates to biblical counseling. I've wanted to collate those quotes into one document and one blog post. Here it is. And here are links to the original posts:

1. [*What Is Common Grace?*](#)
2. [*7 Reformed Theologians on "Common Grace."*](#)
3. [*John Calvin on Common Grace.*](#)
4. [*John Calvin: "Integrationist?"*](#)
5. [*Herman Bavinck on "Common Grace," Part 1.*](#)
6. [*Herman Bavinck on "Common Grace," Part 2.*](#)
7. [*Abraham Kuyper on Common Grace.*](#)
8. [*Every Square Inch of Human Existence: Kuyper on God's All-Encompassing Common Grace.*](#)
9. [*Van Til, Kuyper, Bavinck, and Biblical Counselors: An Assessment.*](#)
10. [*Cornelius Van Til on Common Grace: In His Own Words.*](#)
11. [*Cornelius Van Til: "Zombie-Infected"?*](#)
12. [*David Powlison on Common Grace, Biblical Counseling and Secular Psychology.*](#)
13. [*Powlison on Biblical Counseling and Secular Psychotherapy.*](#)
14. [*John Frame on Common Grace, Biblical Counseling, and Christian Integrative Counseling.*](#)
15. [*Common Grace and Biblical Counseling: Wisdom from Reformed Theologians.*](#)

Please note that each author wrote comprehensively on common grace. Even in a lengthy document, I am only able to provide samplers from each theologian. Here's the order in which you'll find the quotes below:

1. John Calvin
2. Herman Bavinck
3. Abraham Kuyper
4. Cornelius Van Til
5. David Powlison
6. John Frame
7. Charles Hodge
8. John Murray
9. Tim Keller
10. R. C. Sproul

Why Common Grace?

But why expend so much time and energy collating what Reformed theologians taught about common grace? I've done this because common grace has become a major topic of discussion in the modern biblical counseling world. Some biblical counselors are seeking to minimize or even change how the historic Reformed doctrine of common grace has been understood and applied. For example, Francine Tan, in her article in the ACBC's *Journal of Biblical Soul Care*, Fall 2024, Vol 8 #2, "[Common Grace in Debate](#)," suggested a major reworking and significant minimizing of the historic Reformed doctrine of common grace. Tan states,

"Thus, I propose that biblical counselors ought to *revisit how we define CG* and make *a few qualifications to the traditional Reformed view of CG*. When CG is defined as God's non-salvific yet kind posture towards all mankind, displayed in the delay of final judgment, the restraint of sin's full impact on the earth, and the bestowal of temporal gifts for the providential preservation of the world, the doctrine distinctly remains an expression of God's communicable attributes of kindness and goodness. *CG should not be understood as the positive contributions made by unregenerate men through discoveries, insights, or 'good deeds'*" (83).

This significant limiting of the Reformed doctrine of common grace is in opposition to Calvin ([here](#) and [here](#)), Bavinck ([here](#) and [here](#)), Kuyper ([here](#) and [here](#)), Van Til ([here](#) and [here](#)), Frame ([here](#)) and Powlison ([here](#) and [here](#)), to name just a few leading Reformed theologians and one leading Reformed biblical counselor.

A Comprehensive Understanding of Common Grace

To relate common grace to biblical counseling, we first need to see, in a comprehensive way, how Reformed theologians have defined common grace. By comprehensive, I first mean a collation that gives voice to those Reformed authors known as having developed classic statements on common grace. This document does this by focusing on four classic Reformed developers of the doctrine of common grace: John Calvin, Herman Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper, and Cornelius Van Til.

Second, by comprehensive, I mean *quoting Reformed theologians on what they said about common grace, instead of quoting them primarily or only on what they said about total depravity*. As the quotes in this document will demonstrate, Reformed theologians developed their biblical thinking on common grace because they recognized *both* the Bible's teaching on the noetic effect of sin, *and* the Bible's teaching on God's gifts to non-Christians. Total depravity does not annul common grace. Common grace restrains total depravity. The Reformed doctrine of common grace explains how God sovereignly works in the lives and minds of totally depraved unregenerate persons. You'll see this focus repeatedly in the primary quotations contained in this document. Yet, Reformed theologians understood that while the doctrine of total depravity and the doctrine of common grace surely overlap; they are still separate doctrines. Kuyper was quite definitive about this, stating:

“It would **not be appropriate to insert** a fundamental argument for the Reformed doctrine of sin **into a study** concerning common grace” (*Common Grace*, Vol. 2, 51).

Said practically,

Don't quote Reformed theologians on total depravity and then claim that you have presented their position on common grace. Instead, quote Reformed theologians on common grace, knowing that they understood total depravity as they wrote about common grace.

Kuyper, again, explains this connection between these two doctrines, while clearly distinguishing between them.

“We teach, **on the one hand**, the total corruption of our nature by sin; this means that in its corruption, our nature, if left to itself, would immediately surrender itself as prey to eternal death. And we teach, **on the other hand**, that in the actual life of humanity we have our eyes open to the continuing rich development of which humanity proved capable and to so many beautiful things in humanity that come to manifestation. The **dogma of the corruption of our nature through sin** tells us what would become of us if God let go of us; **the dogma of common grace** tells us what can and does still flourish in our human race because God preserves us” (*Common Grace*, Vol. 2, 95).

Third, to relate common grace to biblical counseling, we need to ask and answer a very specific question:

How have Reformed theologians applied the doctrine of common grace in relationship to the use of extra-biblical resources from non-Christians?

As Kuyper emphasizes,

“Common grace touches on the relationship between *theology* and secular *scholarship*” (*Common Grace*, Vol. 2, 214, emphasis in the original).

We can't simply quote Reformed theologians on total depravity. We can't simply quote Reformed theologians on common grace. If we want to relate common grace to biblical counseling, then we must quote Reformed theologians on what they said about *their actual beliefs and practices concerning the Christian use of non-Christian common grace resources*. This document does that repeatedly. It provides you with the first-hand, primary source material so you can make your own informed decisions about how Reformed theologians applied common grace resources in their ministries.

What Is Common Grace?

A Brief Introduction to Common Grace

For the past two years, I've introduced the doctrine of common grace with these words.

In Reformed Christian theology, unregenerate persons are totally depraved and all of their thinking is seen as under the noetic (mind) impact of sin and fallenness.

Yet, also in Reformed thinking, the unregenerate/unsaved person can make valid contributions to society, culture, the arts, research, science, and more.

How can these two truths be held together at one time?

The Reformed doctrine of common grace explains how we can hold to both these biblical truths. It also explains how to engage with and evaluate common grace resources using the lens/spectacles of God's all-sufficient Word.

Some Introductory Definitions of Common Grace

How do Reformed theologians define the doctrine of common grace?

1. "But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths" (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.16).
2. "Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man through fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts.... Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their find observations and artful descriptions of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are.... Those men whom Scripture (1 Cor. 2:14) calls 'natural men' were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good" (Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 2.15, 273-275).
3. "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” ([Canons of Dort](#)).

4. “There is thus a rich revelation of God even among the heathen—not only in nature but also in their heart and conscience, in their life and history, among their statesmen and artists, their philosophers and reformers. There exists no reason at all to denigrate or diminish this divine revelation. Nor is it to be limited to a so-called natural revelation” ([Herman Bavinck’s ‘Common Grace](#), 41).
5. “From this common grace proceeds all that is good and true that we still see in fallen man. The light still shines in the darkness. The Spirit of God lives and works in everything that has been created. Therefore there still remain in man certain traces of the image of God. There is still intellect and reason; all kinds of natural gifts are still present in him. Man still has a feeling and an impression of divinity, a seed of religion. Reason is a priceless gift. Philosophy is an admirable gift from God. Music is also a gift of God. Arts and sciences are good, profitable, and of high value” (Bavinck in his 1894 Lecture, *Common Grace*, quoted in Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 190-191).
6. “The state has been instituted by God.... There is still a desire for truth and virtue, and for natural love between parents and children. In matters that concern this earthly life, man is still able to do much good.... Through the doctrine of common grace the Reformed have, on the one hand, maintained the specific and absolute character of the Christian religion, but on the other hand they have been second to none in their appreciation for whatever of the good and beautiful is still being given by God to sinful human beings” (Bavinck in his 1894 Lecture, *Common Grace*, quoted in Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 190-191).
7. “We are well aware of the fact that non-Christians have a great deal of knowledge about this world which is true as far as it goes. That is, there is a sense in which we can and must allow for the value of knowledge of non-Christians. We do not make this point as a concession but rather as a fact taught directly by Scripture itself and as such observed in daily experience” ([Common Grace and the Gospel](#), 195).
8. Common grace “enables man to do many positive things which he would otherwise not be able to do. And the principle of continuity presupposed in all this is the idea of the image of God as itself revelational of God. The Holy Spirit testifies to man through his own constitution as well as through the facts of the universe around him, that he is God’s offspring and should act as such (see Acts 17:28). The sinner seeks to suppress this revelation within himself and around him. He cannot do so fully. He continues to be an image bearer of God; even the lost hereafter will be image bearers of God. They will continue to receive the revelation of God within their own constitution; they cannot be devoid of ethical reaction.... Common grace is therefore a favor to sinners by which they are kept from working out to the full the principle of sin within them and thereby are enabled to show some measure of involuntary respect and appreciation for the law of God that speaks to them even through their own constitution as well as through the facts of the world outside” ([Common Grace and the Gospel](#), 238).
9. Common grace is “that act of God by which *negatively* He curbs the operations of Satan, death, and sin, and by which *positively* He creates an intermediate state for this cosmos, as well as for our human race, which is and continues to be deeply and radically sinful, but in which sin cannot work out its end” (Abraham Kuyper, [Principles of Sacred Theology](#), 279).

10. "Common grace is God's restraint of the full effect of sin after the Fall, preservation and maintenance of the created order, and distribution of talents to human beings. As a result of this merciful activity of God through the Holy Spirit's work in creation, it remains possible for humans to obey God's first commandment for stewardly dominion over the creation (see Gen. 1:28)" (Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder*, 26).
11. "Anyone who ignores common grace can come to no other conclusion than that all science done outside the arena of the holy, lives off appearance and delusion, and necessarily results in misleading anyone listening to its voice. Yet the outcome shows that this is not the case. Among the Greeks, who were completely deprived of the light of Scripture, a science arose that continues to amaze us with the many beautiful and true things it offers. The names of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have always been esteemed among Christian thinkers. It is no exaggeration to insist that the thinking of Aristotle has been one of the most powerful instruments leading themselves to still deeper reflection. In modern times as well, no one can deny that in the disciplines of astronomy, botany, zoology, physics, and so on, a rich science is blossoming. Although being conducted almost exclusively by people who are stranger to the fear of the Lord, this science has nevertheless produced a treasury of knowledge that we as Christians admire and gratefully use" (*Wisdom and Wonder*, 52-53).
12. Common grace is "every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God" ("Common Grace," in the *Collected Writings of John Murray*, II:96).
13. In common grace, God grants even the non-Christian "gifts, talents, and aptitudes; he stimulates them with interest and purpose to the practice of virtues, the pursuance of worthy tasks, and the cultivation of arts and sciences that occupy the time, activity and energy of men and that make for the benefit and civilization of the human race. He ordains institutions for the protection and promotion of right, the preservation of liberty, the advance of knowledge and the improvement of physical and moral conditions. We may regard these interests, pursuits and institutions as exercising both an expulsive and impulsive influence. Occupying the energy, activity and time of men they prevent the indulgence of less noble and ignoble pursuits and they exercise an ameliorating, moralizing, stabilizing and civilizing influence upon the social organism ("Common Grace," in the *Collected Writings of John Murray*, II:102-03).
14. "The Bible therefore teaches that the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seems to Him good. In this sphere also He divides 'to every man severally as He will.' (1 Cor. xii. 11.) This is what in theology is called common grace" (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II:667).
15. "Common grace is God's favor and gifts given to those who will not be finally saved" (John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 68, n 16).
16. Frame includes six categories related to the biblical doctrine of common grace: 1. God restrains sin (Gen 4:15; 11:6; 20:6; 2 Kings 27:28; 2 Thess 2:7). 2. God restrains his wrath (Matt 19:8; Acts 17:30; Rom 3:25). 3. God gives temporal blessings to all (Matt 5:45; Ps 65:5-13; 104; 136:25). 4. Unregenerate people do good (2 Kings 10:29-31; Luke 6:33). 5. Unregenerate people know truth (Rom 1:20; Matt 23:3-4). 6. Unregenerate people

experience the blessings of the Holy Spirit (Num 22:1-24:25; 1 Sam 10:9-11; Matt 10:5-8) (John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 247-248).

17. "The doctrine of common grace helps us to acknowledge God's goodness in all of creation and enables us to pursue mission with love in a fallen world. The Bible consistently teaches what theologians have come to call 'common grace,' a non-saving grace that is at work in the broader reaches of human cultural interaction. This gift of God's grace to humanity in general demonstrates a desire on God's part to bestow certain blessings on all human beings, believer and non-believer alike. Understanding common grace provides the basis for Christians to cooperate with and learn from non-Christians" (Tim Keller, *What Is Common Grace?*).
18. "We affirm that God's providential common grace brings many goods to people, both as individual kindnesses and as social blessings: e.g., medical treatment, economic help, political justice, protection for the weak, educational opportunity. Wise counseling will participate in and encourage mercy ministries as part of the call to love. We affirm that numerous disciplines and professions can contribute to an increase in our knowledge of people and how to help them. Scripture teaches a standpoint and gaze by which believers can learn many things from those who do not believe" (David Powlison, *Affirmations & Denials*).

The Complex, Comprehensive Nature of the Doctrine of Common Grace

Often we seek to distill common grace into two related concepts: the noetic effect of sin on fallen humanity and God's work within sinful humanity. While that is a legitimate brief summary, the common grace discussion is not nearly as simple as discussing those two topics. Instead, there are two sets of "complimentary" doctrines that we must consider:

1. Sin:

- a. **Total Depravity:** This doctrine does not teach that fallen human beings are as bad as they could be. Instead, total depravity is the biblical truth that every aspect of fallen humanity is impacted by sin.
- b. **The Noetic Effect of Sin:** This discusses sin's impact on the fallen mind/heart. This includes theological concepts such as fallen humanity being dead in sin, and the darkened minds of fallen human beings.
- c. **The Spiritual Antithesis:** Antithesis conveys the idea of difference or distinction. The spiritual antithesis is used to discuss many categories, including the difference between the mind of fallen human beings and the mind of regenerate human beings. In Reformed conversations about common grace, the spiritual antithesis includes the conflict between the fallen worldview and the redeemed worldview.

2. Grace:

- a. **Common Grace:** Common grace is the source of all human virtue and accomplishment, even that of unbelievers who have not been regenerated by the saving grace of God. Common grace includes God's favor toward all humanity; God's restraint of sin; God's preservation of the cosmos, of humanity, and of culture; and

God's distribution of talents to all humanity. The biblical doctrine of common grace addresses God's non-saving blessings on all humanity—saved and unsaved alike.

- b. **The *Imago Dei*:** The image of God in humanity, including biblical passages that teach that the *imago Dei* continues in humanity after the fall.
- c. **The Creation Mandate/Cultural Mandate:** God's call for all humanity for all time to study and shepherd creation, having increasing dominion over creation.
- d. **The Unity of All of God's Revelation:** The Reformers did not bifurcate God's revelation, instead, they united all forms of revelation: special revelation, general/natural revelation (God's revelation *around* humanity) God's revelation in the human conscience (Romans 2) (God revelation *in* humanity).
- e. **General Revelation/The Book of Nature:** Addressing the comprehensive biblical teaching on God's ongoing purpose and use of nature/creation to reveal truth; God has implanted in creation/nature His very DNA, His fingerprints, His reality. God's Creation Mandate commands that all humanity for all time study His creation, and God's common grace enables humanity to do so.
- f. **God's Revelation to Humanity in the Conscience/The Book of Conscience:** The biblical reality that while fallen human beings seek to suppress the truth of God, God continuously reveals Himself by His Spirit to/in every human being (Calvin, Bavinck, Kuyper, Van Til were all insistent no one can totally resist God's sovereign revelation of Himself—they know God, but seek to suppress this internal knowledge of God).
- g. **God's Providential Control of History:** God's affectionate sovereignty in assuring the continuance of history and culture. If not for God's common grace providence, humanity left to itself would destroy one another, but God sovereignly maintains control of humanity and human history to bring about His eternal decree/purposes.
- h. **The Contribution of Non-Christians:** Examining biblical passages on the contributions of the non-Christian to life, knowledge, society, science, and culture.
- i. **The Christian's Engagement with Non-Christian/Extra-Biblical Sources:** Examining biblical passages and Reformed quotes on the Christian engagement with, use of, and evaluation/assessment of non-Christian information, findings, science, philosophy, research, etc.
- j. **The Relationship Between Scripture and Extra-Biblical Sources:** The use of special revelation to assess and evaluate common grace findings. How God's sufficient Scripture provides the lens or spectacles for the Christian to assess non-Christian sources.
- k. **Nature and Grace:** The biblical and historical (church history) study of the relationship between nature and grace. This includes the complex discussion of the extent of the fall in nature. It also includes the biblical truth that nature needs restoring and perfecting. Grace alone does that. Yet, grace restores and perfects nature not by replacing or destroying it but by correcting its directionality.
- l. **Etc.:** These categories are simply a summary of some of the corollary doctrines that relate to the doctrine of common grace.

One Summary of Common Grace: The Three Points of Common Grace (Christian Reformed Church - 1924)

In the 1920s, the Christian Reformed Church debated the doctrine of common grace. In 1924, they developed their official doctrinal statement regarding the Bible's teaching on common grace.

I. The First Point: "Relative to the first point which concerns **the favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect**, Synod declares it to be established according to Scripture and the Confession that, apart from the saving grace of God shown only to those that are elect unto eternal life, **there is also a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general**. This is evident from the Scriptural passages quoted and from the Canons of Dordrecht [II:5](#) and [III-IV:8,9](#), which deal with the general offer of the Gospel, while it also appears from the citations made from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology that our Reformed writers from the past favored this view. Scriptural proof: [Psalm 145:9](#); [Matt. 5:44, 45](#); [Luke 6:35-36](#); [Acts 14:16-17](#); [I Tim. 4:10](#); [Rom. 2:4](#); [Ezekiel 33:11](#); [Ezekiel 18:23](#)."

II. The Second Point: "Relative to the second point, which is concerned with **the restraint of sin in the life of the individual man and in the community**, the Synod declares that there is such a restraint of sin according to Scripture and the Confession. This is evident from the citations from Scripture and from the Netherlands Confession, Arts. [13](#) and [36](#), which teach that **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**; while it is also evident from the quotations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology, that from ancient times our Reformed fathers were of the same opinion. Scriptural proof: [Ps. 81:11-12](#); [Gen. 6:3](#); [Acts 7:42](#); [Rom. 1:24](#); [Rom. 1:26, 28](#); [II Thess. 2:6-7](#)."

III. The Third Point: "Relative to the third point, which is concerned with **the question of civil righteousness as performed by the unregenerate**, Synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confessions **the unregenerate, though incapable of doing any saving good, can do civil good**. This is evident from the quotations from Scripture and from the Canons of Dordrecht, [III-IV:4](#), and from the Netherlands Confession, [Art. 36](#), which teach that God, without renewing the heart, so influences man that he is able to perform civil good; while it also appears from the citations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology that our Reformed fathers from ancient times were of the same opinion. Scriptural proof: [II Kings 10:29-30](#); [II Kings 12:2;14:3](#); [Luke 6:33](#); [Rom. 2:14](#)."

Discussing Common Grace

Keep this in mind:

If someone talks about sin, fallenness, total depravity, the noetic effect of sin, the spiritual antithesis, the non-Christian being spiritually dead, and the darkened mind of the unregenerate person, they are **not** discussing common grace.

Too often, especially in the biblical counseling world, people will say they are discussing the application of common grace to the question of whether or not Christians should use non-Christian resources. However, if that discussion **only** or **primarily** quotes Reformed theologians and biblical passages about sin, then they have **not** addressed common grace.

Remember this:

“Cherry-picking” quotes or Bible passages about sin, depravity, and the noetic effect of sin is **not** discussing common grace. Instead, it is discussing the spiritual antithesis. It is discussing **only half** of what the Bible and church history says about how Christians discern what to do with non-Christian resources.

To address the question of whether or not Christians could use non-Christian resources, one would also explore what the Bible says, and what Reformed theologians say, about common grace; God’s favor toward all humanity; God’s restraint of sin, God’s preservation of the cosmos of humanity, and of culture; God’s distribution of talents to all humanity; the *imago Dei*; the Creation Mandate/Cultural Mandate; the unity of God’s revelation; general revelation/the book of nature; God’s revelation to humanity in the conscience/the book of conscience; God’s providential control of history/God’s affectionate sovereignty; the contributions of non-Christians to knowledge society, science, and culture; the Christian’s engagement with non-Christian sources; the relationship between Scripture and extra-biblical sources; and the relationship between nature and grace.

Reformed Theologian #1: John Calvin

John Calvin on Common Grace

Calvin on the “Common Good” and the “Peculiar Grace” of God

The Reformer, John Calvin (July 10, 1509 – May 27, 1564), insisted that it is the Spirit of God who establishes all human competence in arts and sciences “**for the common good of mankind**” and that common grace is a tool given by God that should not be neglected. In the [Institutes of the Christian Religion](#), Calvin taught that the Bible draws a distinction between God’s special or saving grace and His common or non-saving grace.

Calvin explained that there are some “natural gifts” that are “by nature implanted into men” by God, and that these gifts are “bestowed indiscriminately upon the pious and impious.” He argued that this bestowal should be seen as a “peculiar grace of God” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.14).

Calvin on the Believer’s Use of the Unbeliever’s Understanding

According to Calvin, the light of intelligence is to be regarded as a divine grace and its power is discussed extensively in the *Institutes* at II: 2.12-15. For example:

“Whenever we come upon these matters in **secular writers**, let that **admirable light of truth shining in them** teach us that the mind of man through fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless **clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts**.... Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? **Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observations and artful descriptions of nature?** Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects **without great admiration**. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are.... Those men whom Scripture (1 Cor. 2:14) calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, **learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good**” (Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 2.15, 273-275).

Consider what Calvin has written. He describes the writings of non-Christians as “admirable light of truth shining in them.” He describes fallen people as “clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. He includes fields such as law, debate, elocution, and medicine. Regarding philosophers, Calvin specifically highlights philosophical psychology and their fine observations and artful descriptions of human nature.

This gift of peculiar grace is so significant for Calvin that when we come across it manifested in an unbeliever,

“We shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it appears, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole foundation of truth, we shall not despise it **wherever it shall appear**” (Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 2.14).

According to Calvin, to reject truth, wherever it appears, is to dishonor God, who is the sole foundation of truth. Instead, we should “own this assistance” given to us “by the work of the ungodly:

“If the Spirit dwells only in believers, this refers to the Spirit of Sanctification. Nevertheless, he fills, moves and quickens all things by the power of the same Spirit. If the Lord has willed that **we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics and other like disciplines by the work of the ungodly**—let us own this assistance” (Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 2.16).

“While men dispute about individual sections of the law, they agree on the general conception of equity. The fact remains that some seed of political order has been implanted in all men” (Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 2.13).

“Hardly anyone is found who does not manifest talent in some art” (Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 2:17).

For Calvin, God’s common grace extends to matters of philosophy, theology, and even to “a slight taste of His divinity.” However, apart from saving grace, their common grace understandings could only lead them so far.

“Certainly I do not deny that one can read competent and apt statements about God **here and there in the philosophers**. The Lord **gave them a slight taste of His divinity**—sometimes impelled them to make utterances by the confession of which they would themselves be corrected. But their seeing did not direct them to the truth, much less enable them to attain it” (Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 2.18).

In his *Commentary on Hebrews*, while Calvin distinguishes the regenerate from the unregenerate mind, he still commends God’s work in the minds of the unbeliever:

“God indeed favors none but the elect alone with the Spirit of regeneration, and that by this they are distinguished from the reprobate; for they are renewed after his image and receive the earnest of the Spirit in hope of the future inheritance, and by the same Spirit the Gospel is sealed in their hearts. But I cannot admit that all this is any reason **why He should not grant the reprobate also some taste of his grace, why He should not irradiate their minds with some sparks of his light, why he should not give them some perception of his goodness, and in some sort engrave his word on their hearts.**”

In his *Commentary on Genesis*, Calvin noted how Cain's descendants distinguished themselves in animal husbandry, music, and metallurgy. Jabal fathered "those who live in tents and raise livestock, while Jubal "was the father of all who play the harp and flute" and Tubal-Cain "forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron" (Gen 4:20-21). Calvin elaborates on this:

"Moses now relates that, with the evils which proceeded from the family of Cain, **some good had been blended**. For the invention of arts, and of other things which serve to the common use and convenience of life, **is a gift of God by no means to be despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation.**"

Here, once again, Calvin commends the common grace gifts of the unbeliever, while also commanding the believer to refuse to despise such God-given contributions and capacities.

Calvin on the Unbelieving Mind "Clothed and Ornamented with God's Excellent Gifts"

Calvin described the capacity for goodness in the non-Christian as a gift from God. He said that an unbelieving mind:

"Though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, **is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts**" (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.15).

Regarding human understanding, Calvin wrote:

"When we **so condemn human understanding** for its perpetual blindness **as to leave it no perception of any object whatever**, we **not only go against God's Word**, but **also run counter to the experience of common sense**" (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.12).

Thus, for Calvin, denying the unbeliever's perceptual capacities goes against Scripture, experience, and common sense.

While a weakened human understanding stumbles around, according to Calvin:

"Its efforts do not always become so worthless as to have no effect, **especially when it turns its attention to things below**" (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.13).

He then explained himself more fully:

"**To perceive more clearly how far the mind can proceed in any matter according to the degree of its ability**, we must here set forth a **distinction**. This, then, is the **distinction: that there is one kind of understanding of earthly things; another of heavenly**" (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.13).

It is important to understand what Calvin meant by “earthly things.” He includes government, household management, mechanical skills, and the **liberal arts (which includes philosophy) and sciences**. Among the “heavenly things” are the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the kingdom (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.13).

Similarly, the [Canons of Dort](#) explain,

“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.”

Notice that even these “natural things,” for Reformed theology, include significant spiritual issues such as “some knowledge of God,” “differences between good and evil,” and “some regard for virtue.”

Calvin on Types of Common Grace Knowledge

According to Calvin, despite the Fall, unbelievers can come to a knowledge in many fields, and he provides numerous examples. Regarding knowledge of the sciences, Calvin wrote:

“Those men whom Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:14) calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, **sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things**” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.15).

In the next section, he continued along the same lines, even more forcefully admonishing Christians not to neglect the scientific studies of the ungodly:

“**But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths**” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.2.16).

For Calvin, neglecting to use the assistance of the common grace knowledge of unbelievers reflects the sin of sloth—spiritual apathy and mental laziness.

Calvin on “The Ministry of the Ungodly”

Similarly, Calvin made a startling case, in his *Institutes* (Beveridge ed.), 2.2.15–16, for Christians availing themselves of “the work and ministry of the ungodly”:

“Therefore, in reading **profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them** should remind us that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is **still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from**

its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, **not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears....** If the Lord has been pleased to **assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly** in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, **let us avail ourselves of it."**

In his [Commentary on Titus](#), speaking of Paul's positive use of a non-Christian philosopher in Titus 1:12, Calvin explains:

"From this passage we may infer that those **persons are superstitious, who do not venture to borrow anything from heathen authors. All truth is from God;** and consequently, if **wicked men have said anything that is true and just,** we **ought not to reject it; for it has come from God.** Besides, **all things are of God;** and, therefore, why should it not be lawful to **dedicate to his glory everything** that can properly be employed for such a purpose?"

That's quite the commentary by Calvin—Christians are "superstitious" if they refuse "to borrow anything from heathen authors." In our modern biblical counseling world, Christians who borrow from heathen offers are labeled not "superstitious," but "syncretistic." Calvin believes that "wicked men" say things that are "true and just," and that Christians "ought not reject it." In common grace, those "true and just" insights have "come from God" according to Calvin.

What is our assessment? Is Calvin syncretistic? Or, are we superstitious?

John Calvin: “Integrationist”?

No. I do **not** think John Calvin was an integrationist, even though, as we’ll see in today’s post, Calvin valued and used common grace insights from non-believers.

Some biblical counselors are using the word “integrationist” (or “neo-integrationist”) to describe fellow biblical counselors who value and use common grace insights. Like Calvin, many biblical counselors are using God’s Word as the lens or spectacles to assess and evaluate whether or not a given common grace insight—whether descriptive research, scientific research, neuroscience research, etc.—is potentially valid and helpful. Yet, they are being characterized as “integrationists.”

Re-reading John Calvin on the use of extra-biblical sources has me thinking:

If you took Calvin’s name out of his quotes on the validity of extra-biblical common grace sources, some modern biblical counselors would shout: “Calvin is an integrationist!”

If you took Calvin’s name out of his actual positive use of non-Christian sources like Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, some modern biblical counselors would judge Calvin’s motive as using common grace “as a cover for syncretism!”

So, here’s a sampler of some of Calvin’s quotes on extra-biblical resources. Do these quotes make him an “integrationist”? Since they are from 500 years ago, would we make up a new term and call Calvin a “pre-integrationist,” or a “proto-integrationist,” or an “incipient-integrationist”?

A Calvin Sampler: Affirming Plato and Aristotle

To what extent did Calvin depend upon human authorities other than the Bible? To what extent did Calvin praise the ancient pagan philosophers? To what extent did Calvin follow the pagan (and now debunked) science of his day?

Calvin stated that the subtleties of the philosophers “are true, not only enjoyable, but also profitable to learn, and skillfully assembled by them” (*Institutes* I.15.6)” (131).

Calvin complimented pagan philosophers Plato and Aristotle on their teachings about psychology.

“Plato, in some passages, **talks nobly** of the faculties of the soul; and Aristotle, in discoursing of it, **has surpassed all in acuteness....** They **certainly thought more purely and wisely on the subject than some amongst ourselves**, who boast that they are the disciples of Christ” (Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, in *Selected Works*, 3:420).

Stop. Imagine that I took Calvin’s name out of that quote, and you thought that I said this:

“Plato talks nobly of the faculties of the soul. Aristotle in talking about psychology has surpassed all in acuteness! Plato and Aristotle thought more purely and wisely on psychology than many Christians today who claim to be Christ’s disciples!”

I imagine the response might be something like this, “*Kellemen is clearly an integrationist who loves secular psychology more than he loves the Bible and biblical counselors! Kellemen is obviously fascinated with the secular and frustrated with the scriptural!*”

A Calvin Sampler: Heavily Influenced by Secular Philosophical Psychology

In *The Logic of the Body*, Matthew LaPine notes that, “Roy Battenhouse sees **heavy philosophical influence** on Calvin’s anthropology” (133). And, “Likewise Battenhouse suggests that Calvin never quite ‘freed himself from the outlook of his **early reading of Platonism**’” (133-134, from Battenhouse, *The Doctrine of Man in Calvin*, 448).

LaPine further develops the influence of Plato on Calvin.

“Much has also been made of **Calvin’s use of the Platonic term** ‘prison house’ of the soul, referring to the body (*Institutes*, I.15.2). The term originates from Plato’s *Phaedo*.... Alida Sewell notes that Calvin both ‘likely read *Phaedo* personally’ and uses the term ‘prison house’ in his writings **more often than Plato, a total of ninety-one times**” (134, quoting Alida Sewell, *Calvin, the Body, and Sexuality*, 23).

Stop. Once again, imagine that you read my writings and found that **ninety-one times** I used a phrase first used by Plato, or by Freud! Might the response be, “*Kellemen—a Freudian integrationist!*”

LaPine explains that,

“Jean Boisset, likewise, sees in Calvin **an intimate familiarity and recourse to Plato**: ‘These statistics show that **Calvin never ceased**, from 1536 to 1560, to have **recourse to Platonic sources**, that he clarified his borrowings, and that he augmented them in the last edition of the *Institutes* in comparison with those of 1543 and 1550’” (135, quoting Jean Boisset, *Sagesse et Sanitate dans la Pensee de Jean Calvin*, 227).

LaPine contends that the psychological concepts Calvin “inherited were roughly Platonic.... Charles Partee’s comment is apt:

‘Calvin looks at the subject of soul and body, immortality and resurrection through ‘the spectacles of Scripture.’ The lens of Calvin’s spectacles were **certainly tinted by Platonism here**, but the source of Calvin’s view of soul and body is the Scriptures’” (136, quoting, Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, 65).

What’s being said? While Calvin used the spectacles of Scripture to develop his psychology, those spectacles were tinted (tainted) with Platonism!

LaPine opines that Calvin “often supplemented his arguments with appeals to general revelation, famously with his *Sensus divinitatis* (*Institutes* I.15.2). LaPine, continues:

“Edward Adams claims, ‘It seems to me to **have been established beyond any serious doubt that Calvin draws his theory of the *sensus divinitatis* from the Hellenistic philosophical dogma** of the ‘preconception’ (prolepsis) of God. The doctrine of the preconception originated with **Epicurus**, but was taken over and developed by the **Stoics**. The notion of the preconception is prominent in **Cicero’s** dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods* and it is from this source that **Calvin derives it**” (136, quoting, Edward Adams, “*Calvin’s View of Natural Knowledge of God*,’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 3 (November 2001): 284-285).

“When Calvin gets to the ‘true,’ ‘enjoyable,’ and ‘profitable’ teachings of the philosophers on this matter, he produces an intentionally **synthetic account**. While he **does cite Plato’s *Theaetetus*, he engages more with Aristotle than Plato**. Calvin’s account of the faculties [of the soul] explicitly relies on *De anima* [Aristotle]. Irena Backus connects Calvin’s account of the five senses with *De anima* III.1 (425a13-426b21); his account of the imagination with *De anima* III.3 (427a15-429a9); his account of reason with III.4 (429a10-430a9); his account of the passive and active intellect with III.5-6 (430a10-430b9); and his distinction between the three appetitive and cognitive faculties with [Aristotle’s] *Eudemian Ethics* II.7 (1223121-27)” (161 referencing Irena Backus, *Historical Method*, 95). Paul Helm remarks, “**Here we see Calvin’s admiration for Aristotle**” (161, quoting Helm, “Vermigli, Calvin, and Aristotle’s Ethics,’ *Unio Cum Christo* 3, no. 2 (October 2017): 92).

A Calvin Sampler: Influenced by Debunked (and Junk) Science?

Aelius Galenus (129-216 AD), often anglicized as Galen, was a Roman and Greek physician, surgeon, and philosopher. To what extent was Calvin’s thinking influenced by Galen? LaPine explains,

“Finally, we have already noted that Aquinas was unwittingly and indirectly influenced by Galen’s medicine. What about Calvin? To what extent did Galen influence his theology? That Calvin was a Galenist is almost a truism since it was the reigning medical paradigm. It hardly would have been possible for him not to espouse these medical views” (137).

“We have strong evidence of Calvin’s intimate acquaintance with Galenic medicine and its **theories about spirits, the four humors, and even physiological aspects of personality**” (143). Calvin wrote, “In regard to the structure of the human body one must have the greatest keenness in order to weigh, with Galen’s skill, its articulation, symmetry, beauty, and use” (143, quoting Calvin, *Institutes*, I.5.2).

“Specifically, Calvin **integrates** Galen’s views on the spirits and humors in many places. In *De Clementia* he writes, ‘Still it is truer to say that all living beings consist of four elements and divine spirit. This was clearly Aristotle’s opinion. For they derive

flesh from earth, humor from water, breath from air, heat from fire, and natural disposition from divine spirit” (143-144, quoting Calvin, *De Clementia*, 103-105).

“Calvin even cites the **humoral personality theory**, writing to Monsieur de Richebourg of a certain Louis: ‘as he was of a more sanguine **temperament**, was also more lively and cheerful. Charles, who has somewhat of melancholy in his disposition, is not so easily drawn out of himself” (145-146, quoting Calvin, *Selected Works*, 4:252).

Stop. Imagine that I wrote, “The secular concept of temperaments is truer than any other model of the human personality, and should be integrated into our biblical counseling thinking and practice!” Might I be charged with being an integrationist?

A Calvin Sampler: A Platonic Dualist?

LaPine writes about Calvin and dualism.

“In the soul’s relationship to the body, we see something of **Calvin’s respect for Stoic ethics**. Battles writes, ‘**Calvin recognized Seneca’s supreme gift to be in ethics**, and this judgment is certainly borne out in the course of the Commentary” (138, quoting, Ford Lewis Battles, “The Source of Calvin’s Seneca Commentary,” in *John Calvin*, 48).

“In discussing the philosophers’ views, Calvin adds that the soul, though ‘not spatially limited,’ is ‘set in the body, it dwells there as in a house; not only that it may animate all its parts and render its organs fit and useful for their actions, but also that it may hold the first place in ruling man’s life’ (*Institutes*, I.15.6). **Certainly, the language here is Platonic** and Augustinian; Calvin does not use the language of ‘form’ here. But **there are also perhaps some echoes of an Aristotelian**, entelechist model, i.e., the soul as vital principle, especially Calvin’s terminology of animating its parts and rendering its organs useful.... The relation of body to soul in Calvin’s psychology is not perfectly transparent. **It is fair to say he was more Platonic than Aristotelian. But given Calvin’s immediate Scholastic context, it is difficult to make a rigid demarcation**” (155-156).

“Insofar as the medieval development tended toward dualism, Calvin’s position is not surprising in the least. **Calvin simply reflected the common psychological trends of his time**” (159).

A Calvin Sampler: Calvin, Stoicism, and Emotions

LaPine examined Calvin on emotions.

“On the issue of emotion, **Calvin never really rid himself of his Stoic sensibility**” (184).

“The **Stoic** sensibility is especially pronounced in Calvin’s language of bridling emotions. To list just a very few selections from Calvin’s *Commentary on the Psalms*, he suggests bridling affections in commenting on Psalms 21:1; 36:1; 37:8; 39:1-2; 82:1-4; 85:8; 119:147. Uncomfortable with the emotive expression of the Psalms, Calvin seemed to think that the chief value of the Psalms is to uncover hypocrisy... Calvin’s rhetoric only confirms what his psychological structure implies, that there is no room for responding to negative emotion other than suppressing it” (185.).

What Explains Calvin’s Thinking and Practice?

Was all of this accidental? Was it simply that Calvin did not realize how much he was impacted by his intellectual environment? To some extent, that is one possible explanation. Our worldview, no matter how much we insist it is only developed by God’s worldview, is more influenced by the world’s worldview than we realize and care to admit. It is the old “frog in the kettle” analogy of simply not being aware of how the environmental temperature is slowly impacting us.

Perhaps we are all a tad tainted? Perhaps we are all a tad infected? Perhaps all of us, like Calvin, and like Tertullian before him, will one day be exposed by future generations who more clearly see how we were unknowingly effected by the worldview of our fallen world.

Tertullian famously declared that Jerusalem should have nothing to do with Athens—meaning that secular philosophy should not have any role in our thinking about God and humanity. However, when one reads Tertullian today, it is almost laughable, and certainly sad and ironic, how clearly Tertullian, unbeknownst to himself, was so impacted by the Neo-Platonic thought of his day.

So, yes, some of this likely was Calvin being impacted by his world’s worldview without him realizing it. However, for the great Reformed theologian, John Calvin, much of this was also theological. See the preceding quotes on Calvin and common grace to demonstrate that Calvin based his engagement with extra-biblical thinking on his theological convictions about common grace, the noetic effect of sin, the role of fallen human understanding, and God’s sovereign plan.

The Moral of the Story: “Calvin-Like Biblical Counselors”

Maybe after reading about Calvin and secular information, you want to label John Calvin, the father of Reformed theology, an “integrationist.” I do not.

After all of these quotes, why don’t I see Calvin as an integrationist? Because we can’t “cherry-pick” quotes from Calvin to create a pre-determined narrative about Calvin. And that’s the moral of the story:

- We should not cherry-pick quotes from our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to create a pre-determined narrative about them.

- We should carefully and comprehensively read and accurately and fairly characterize our fellow Christian biblical counselors.
- We've falsely created a new definition of "integration" that claims someone is a "neo-integrationist" for simply believing and practicing the Reformed doctrine of common grace, even when they do so by engaging and evaluating common grace resources using the spectacles of God's all-sufficient Word.
- We create an unseemly spectacle when we place blinders on our spectacles and falsely accuse fellow biblical counselors of not using the spectacles of God's Word as they view common grace resources.

Sadly, here's what has been happening.

1. Some biblical counselors quote a comment or two from Calvin and use it to be able to claim, "See, we affirm common grace!"
2. These same biblical counselors ignore all of the Calvin quotes from post like today that **actually illustrate how Calvin uses non-Christian resources.**
3. Then they judge the motives of fellow Christian biblical counselors, mischaracterizing them as using common grace "as cover for syncretism."

We need to find more apt descriptors for biblical counselors today who are committed to using the spectacles of God's all-sufficient Word to engage and evaluate common grace resources. The apt descriptor is **not** "integrationist" or "a cover for syncretism." The more apt descriptor is:

"Calvin-like biblical counselor."

Amazing Grace! Amazing Common Grace!

So why would someone like John Calvin—the founder of Reformed theology—who emphasized total depravity, also marvel at the common grace insights of the unsaved?

John Calvin was not, ultimately, marveling at the unsaved mind; he was marveling at God's mercy!

John Calvin was not, ultimately, marveling at the wisdom of humanity; he was marveling at the wisdom of God!

In advancing the truth of common grace, John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and all Reformed thinkers are marveling at God's amazing common grace. They understand biblically the truth that many modern biblical counselors misunderstand. They understand the affectionate sovereignty of God.

In common grace, God is sovereignly moving forward His eternal kingdom plan first inaugurated in Genesis that His image bearers would subdue the earth. In God's common

grace, He is affectionately and, yes, graciously, assuring that His will would never be thwarted—not by Satan, not by sin, not by sinners.

Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, and modern biblical counselors who recognize the common grace insights of the non-Christian are not frustrated with the Scriptures and fascinated with the secular.

We are fascinated with how God frustrates the plan of Satan, sin, and sinners!

We are fascinated with how God frustrates even depraved anti-God thinking and causes all things to advance His eternal kingdom purposes.

In celebrating the amazing grace of God's common grace, we are not extolling humanity. Just like saving grace does not extol fallen but saved humanity, so common grace does not extol unsaved humanity.

Common grace extols not the wisdom of humanity—saved or unsaved—but the wisdom of God!

Those modern biblical counselors who decry common grace insights for biblical counseling do not realize that they are decrying the wisdom of God's eternal plan. In their theological misunderstanding, they are decrying the affectionate sovereignty of God who works all things according to the counsel of His will.

Calvin-like biblical counselors glory in God's grace—in Christ's common grace, in God's amazing common grace!

Doxology: Romans 11:33-36

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

³⁴ "Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Reformed Theologian #2: Herman Bavinck

Herman Bavinck on Common Grace, Part 1

Herman Bavinck (December 13, 1854 –July 21, 1921) was a Dutch Reformed theologian and professor. He was a significant scholar in the Calvinist tradition, alongside Abraham Kuyper, B. B. Warfield, and Geerhardus Vos. The quotes in this section are from:

Bavinck, Herman. "[Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace.'](#)" Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, Translator. *Calvin Theological Journal*, 24(1), April 1989.

The Good Gift of Common Grace

Bavinck, following Calvin, taught that common grace is the source of all human virtue and accomplishment, even that of unbelievers who have not been regenerated by the salvific grace of God (Inst., 2.2.12-17). Bavinck's view of common grace articulates a theological worldview that enables us to acknowledge the importance of creation and human culture as good gifts of God that not only form the arena of his redemptive activity but are themselves subject to redemption.

"There is thus a rich revelation of God even among the heathen—not only in nature but also in their heart and conscience, in their life and history, among their statesmen and artists, their philosophers and reformers. There exists no reason at all to denigrate or diminish this divine revelation. Nor is it to be limited to a so-called natural revelation.... The working of supernatural forces in the world of the heathen is neither impossible nor improbable" (41, in all quotes, the **bold emphasis** is added by me).

This is remarkable. Bavinck highlights common grace's impact on the inner person—their heart and conscience, their life and history. He highlights numerous fields that go well beyond the "hard sciences"—government, the arts, philosophy, and reformers. Bavinck also insists that believers neither "denigrate or diminish" this "divine revelation"—coming through common grace's influence on the non-Christian.

"...it would not do to deny the true, the good, and the beautiful that one can see in mankind outside of Christ. That would not only be in conflict with experience but would also entail a denial of God's gifts and hence constitute ingratitude toward him.... All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. The Spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation" (51).

For Bavinck, denying and minimizing common grace equals denying God and lacking gratitude toward God. Bavinck specifies that there is "good" in fallen humanity—because of God's common grace. God's Spirit works wonders in all creation—including fallen humanity.

“Consequently, traces of the image of God continue in mankind. Understanding and reason remain, and he possesses all sorts of natural gifts. In him dwells a feeling, a notion of the Godhead, a seed of religion. Reason is a precious gift of God and philosophy a *praeclarum Dei donum* [splendid gift of God]. **Music too is God’s gift. The arts and sciences are good, useful, and of great value. The state is an institution of God.** The goods of life do not just serve to provide for man’s needs in the strict sense; they also serve to make life pleasant. They are not purely *ad necessitate* [for necessity]; they are also *ad oblectamentum* [for delight]. **Men still have a sense of the truth and of right and wrong; we see the natural love that binds parents and children together.”** (51).

Don’t race past this. The Reformed doctrine of common grace teaches that within fallen humanity the image of God continues, understanding and reason remain, natural gifts exist, and a notion of God dwells within. Reformed theology applauds reason in fallen humanity as a “precious gift of God,” and celebrates fallen philosophy as a “splendid gift of God.” And what should Christians do with non-Christian art and science—see them as “useful, and of great value.” Bavinck refuses to limit common grace to “the hard sciences,” instead including “a sense of the truth of right and wrong,” and “the natural love that binds parents and children.”

Bavinck on Calvin and Engagement with the World

Throughout this article, Bavinck insists that he builds his view of common grace upon the foundation of Calvin’s view of common grace. He also contends that Calvin and Reformed thinking insists on active engagement with the world rather than a separatist approach.

“In this doctrine of *gratia communis* the Reformed maintained the particular and absolute character of the Christian religion on the one hand, while on the other they were second to none in appreciating all that God continued to give of beauty and worth to sinful men. Thereby they acknowledged both the seriousness of sin and the legitimacy of the natural” (52).

Rather than seeing the noetic effect of sin and common grace as at odds, Bavinck sees them as complementary doctrines. Therefore, Reformed Christians are “second to none in appreciating all that God continued to give of beauty and worth to *sinful men*.” Do we acknowledge both the seriousness of sin, *and* the legitimacy of the common grace knowledge of the non-Christian?

“In contrast, the Anabaptists scorn the creation; Adam was of the earth, earthly; the natural order as such is unclean; but Christ, who brought his human nature down from heaven, infuses a new, spiritual, and divine substance into man at his rebirth. The born-again man, since he is wholly renewed and other, may have no intercourse with unbelievers. Consequently, the Anabaptists reject oaths, war, the magistracy, the death penalty, worldly dress and lifestyle, marriage with unbelievers, and infant baptism; the supernatural order thrusts aside the entire natural order” (53).

The Christian worldview of Reformed Christianity refuses to follow a fundamentalist, separatistic dichotomy between grace and nature, between body and soul, between creation and redemption, between the earthly and the heavenly.

“By means of this organic way of relating nature and grace, the Reformation in principle overcame the mechanical juxtaposition and dualistic worldview of the Catholic Church. And thereby, too, **the significance of the cosmos increases greatly....** While it is true that the world has been corrupted by sin, **it nevertheless remains the work of the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth.** Of his own will he maintains It by his covenant, and by his *gratia communis* he powerfully opposes the destructive might of sin. He fills the hearts of men with nourishment and joy and does not leave himself without a witness among them. **He pours out upon them numberless gifts and benefits. Families, races, and peoples he binds together with natural love and affection. He allows societies and states to spring up that the citizens might live in peace and security. Wealth and well-being he grants them that the arts and sciences can prosper**” (60).

A biblical worldview denies a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. All is sacred, because Christ is Lord of all. A scriptural worldview never demeans the body, creation, the earth, the cosmos, because Christ is Creator and Sustainer of all. And He rules His world in affectionate sovereignty—pouring out His innumerable gifts and benefits upon all people—saved and unsaved alike.

“The entirety of the rich life of nature and society exists thanks to God’s common grace. But why should he continue to preserve such a sinful world by a special action of his grace? Does he squander his gifts? Is he acting purposelessly? **Is it not because natural life, in all its forms has value in his eyes in spite of sin’s corruption? The love of family and kin, societal and political life, art and science are all in themselves objects of his divine good pleasure.... Contempt for this divine order of creation is thus illegitimate; it flies in the face of experience and conflicts with Scripture. Here all separatism or asceticism is cut off at the roots. All world-flight is a repudiation of the first article of our Apostolic Creed. Christ indeed came to destroy the works of the devil. But more than that, he came to restore the works of the Father and so to renew man according to the image of him who first created man**” (60).

The Christian worldview understands how Christ values and loves “natural life, in all its forms.” The Christian refuses to have “contempt” for the world, realizing that biblically such contempt is “illegitimate.” We repudiate world flight. We engage with the world.

Bavinck on the Christian Use of the Non-Christian’s Art and Science

Bavinck, again following Calvin, explains the purpose of common grace—in relationship to the arts and science. He also describes the Christian *use* of the non-Christian’s learning.

“Christ came not to do away with the world and the various spheres of life **but to restore and preserve them. Ultimately the same holds for the relation of the Christian religion to the arts and sciences**” (64).

“But here too re-creation is something different than creation. The arts and sciences have their principium not in the special grace of regeneration and conversion **but in the natural gifts and talents that God in his common grace has also given to nonbelievers.** Therefore, **Christian theologians of all times have also profited from pagan art and learning and have insisted upon a classical education for every man of learning, including the theologian. They were not blind to the dangers of such an education, and desired that it take place under Christian leadership. But they nevertheless maintained the right and independence of the arts and sciences, requiring only that they be sanctified by the Spirit of Christ.** Scripture itself, they maintained, gave them freedom to this end. For Moses was reared in all the wisdom of Egypt, the children of Israel decorated the house of the Lord with the gold and silver of Egypt, Solomon used the services of Hiram to build the temple, Daniel was trained in the science of the Chaldeans, and the wisemen from the East laid their gifts at the feet of the baby in Bethlehem” (64).

What is the biblical basis for the arts and sciences? It is *not* saving grace. It *is* common grace—the gifts and talents, the capacities and contributions, that God has given to “*nonbelievers.*” So, what do Christians do with pagan learning? Reject it? Neglect it? Denigrate it? Relegate it? No. “Christian theologians of all times have also profited from pagan art and learning and have insisted upon a classical education for every man of learning, including the theologian.”

“**Theology itself as a science was not born apart from the gifts of the *gratia communis.*** She does of course hold a unique place among the sciences. She has her own principle, object, and goal and derives these exclusively from the *gratia specialis.* **But she would still not be theology in the scientific sense had she not availed herself of the thinking consciousness of man, sanctified by faith, and used it to penetrate revelation and understand its content.** Theology first came into existence in the body of Christ when *gratia communis* and *gratia specialis* flowed together” (64).

“Consequently, **theology accords to the other sciences their full due.** Theology’s honor is not that she sits enthroned above them as *Regina scientiarum* [Queen of the sciences] and waves her scepter over them **but that she is permitted to serve them all with her gifts.** Theology also can rule only by serving. She is strong when she is weak; she is greatest when she seeks to be least. She can be glorious when she seeks to know nothing save Christ and him crucified. **Theology is ultimately nothing other than interpretation of the *gratia Dei* [grace of God] in the arena of science.** Grace she ponders and grace she seeks to understand in its length and breadth, in its height and depth. In the middle of the human woe that life reveals all about us, and also in science, theology raises its doxology of the love of God shown forth in Jesus Christ our Lord. And she prophesies a glorious future in which all

oppositions, including those between nature and grace, shall be reconciled, and all things, whether on earth or in heaven, shall again in Christ be one” (65).

The theologian does not look at science—including science done by the non-Christian—with jaundiced eyes, a suspicious mind, and a haughty heart. The Christian does not reject all science as “scientism.” No, “theology accords to the other sciences their full due.”

Bavinck on the Christian Use of the Natural Sciences and Philosophy

Commenting upon Psalm 8, Bavinck views Scripture’s witness to the royal dominion of fallen humanity over the earth as affirming man’s engagements within the sciences.

“Knowledge of earthly things is possible, and there is a yearning to find out the truth about them. This is the basis of science and scholarship (law, medicine, mathematics, literature, **and the liberal arts**). **These are the natural sciences, with philosophy as their crown. These gifts of the Spirit should not be rejected or despised, for that would be to despise God himself.** Pagans themselves admit that philosophy, the arts, sciences, and laws were gifts from the gods. **We cannot read the writings of the ancients without great admiration. If by the Lord’s will we can be helped by the activities of evil persons** in the study of nature, in logic, in mathematics, **let us then use these things.** Zwingli said that **whatever the pagans said that is good and beautiful, we accept and convert to the glory of our God. We decorate the temple of the true God with the spoils of the Egyptians.**” (*Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, 2019, 162).

Bavinck here calls secular studies “gifts of the Spirit.” Despising these common grace gifts “would be to despise God himself.” What do Christians do with these “pagan” studies? We are “helped by” them; we “use these things;” “we accept and convert [them] to the glory of our God.”

Bavinck looks to Augustine for a Christian approach to the sciences:

“Augustine already urged believers **not too quickly to consider a theory to be in conflict with Scripture**, to enter the discussion on these difficult subjects only after **serious study**, and not to make themselves **ridiculous by their ignorance in the eyes of unbelieving science**. This warning has not always been faithfully taken to heart by theologians” (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:496).

Bavinck’s (and Augustine’s) worldview is quite different from many modern biblical counselors who tend to focus on [co-belligerent sources](#) to demean most science as “scientism.” Perhaps we could say that “Augustine’s warning has not always been faithfully taken to heart by modern biblical counselors.”

Herman Bavinck on Common Grace, Part 2

Some seek to create a division between Bavinck and Calvin on common grace. While Bavinck, a tremendous theologian in his own right, developed his own biblical thinking on common grace, he also was a thorough student of Calvin's teaching on common grace. This is why the next set of quotes comes from:

Bavinck, Herman. "[Calvin and Common Grace](#)." Geerhardus Vos, Translator. *The Princeton Theological Review*, 7(3), 1909, 437-465.

Calvin and Bavinck on the Christian View of Non-Christian Resources

In his introduction to *Calvin and Common Grace*, Bavinck moves immediately to the issue of what Christians do with non-Christian knowledge.

"But if Christianity bears such an absolute character, this fact immediately gives rise to a most serious problem. The Christian religion is by no means the sole content of history; long before Christianity made its appearance there existed in Greece and Rome **a rich culture**, a complete social organism, a powerful political system, a plurality of religions, an order of moral virtues and actions. And even now, underneath and **side by side with the Christian religion a rich stream of natural life continues to flow. What, then, is the relation of Christianity to this wealth of natural life, which, originating in creation**, has, under the law there imposed upon it, developed from age to age? **What is the connection between nature and grace, creation and regeneration, culture and Christianity, earthly and heavenly vocation, the man and the Christian?**" (PDF, 1) (all page numbers are from the PDF linked above).

In his Introduction, Bavinck traces historically the Christian Church's engagement with non-Christian thinking.

"Only gradually could the Church rise to the higher standpoint of trying all things and holding fast to that which is good, and adopted an eclectic procedure in its valuation and assimilation of the existing culture" (2).

Historically, the Church used the Bible to assess extra-biblical resources, "holding fast to that which is good," and assimilated, to varying degrees, "the existing culture." Bavinck is not naïve. He understands that this could lead to a charge that the Church has compromised with the culture. Bavinck will have none of this. Instead of compromise, Bavinck traces a long history—going back to the Gospels themselves—of careful scriptural engagement with culture.

"For not only is the Gospel not ascetic, but even the Christian Church, at least in its first period, never adopted this standpoint. However much it might be on its guard against paganism, **it never despised or condemned natural life as in itself sinful.**

Marriage and family life, secular calling and military estate, the swearing of the oath and the waging of war, government and state, science and art **and philosophy**,—**all these were recognized from the beginning as divine institutions and as divine gifts**. Hence **theology early began to form relations with philosophy**; the art of painting, as practiced in the catacombs, attached itself to the symbols and figures of antiquity; architecture shaped the churches after pagan models; music availed itself of the tunes which Graeco-Roman art had produced. **On every hand a strong effort is perceptible to bring the new religion into touch with all existing elements of culture**” (2).

Bavinck outlines the theological basis for Christian engagement with non-Christian thought.

“It was possible for the first Christians to do this because of **their firm conviction that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, who in times past has never left Himself without witness to the heathen....** But in addition to this **there existed in paganism a continued revelation through nature and the reason, in heart and conscience,—an illumination of the Logos, a speech from the wisdom of God through the hidden working of grace....** No doubt among the heathen this wisdom has in many respects become corrupted and falsified; they retain only fragments of truth, not the one, entire, full truth. **But even such fragments are profitable and good.** The three sisters, logic, physics and ethics, are like unto the three wise men from the east, who came to worship in Jesus the perfect wisdom. **The good philosophical thoughts and ethical precepts found scattered through the pagan world receive in Christ their unity and center.** They stand for the desire which in Christ finds its satisfaction; they represent the question to which Christ gives the answer; they are the idea of which Christ furnishes the reality. **The pagan world, especially in its philosophy, is a pedagogy unto Christ; Aristotle, like John the Baptist, is the forerunner of Christ. It behooves the Christians to enrich their temple with the vessels of the Egyptians and to adorn the crown of Christ, their king, with the pearls brought up from the sea of paganism**” (2-3).

Had you not known that this quote was contained in a document in which Bavinck develops Calvin’s theology of common grace, surely many would be crying out, “Bavinck is an integrationist! He suggests that we spoil the Egyptians and plunder the pagans!” If so, then Augustine, too, needs to be so accused.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine, commenting on Exodus 3:21-22, 35-36 (“plundering the Egyptians”), used a similar metaphor for how Christians might engage with non-Christian thinking.

“If those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but **to claim it for our own use** from those who have unlawful possession of it . . . all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; **but**

they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them... These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, **ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel.**"

Augustine, Calvin, and Bavinck used God's all-sufficient Scripture to assess extra-biblical resources and to determine whether or not, and to what extent and in what ways the Christian might use such resources. That is a historical fact. It is also a historical fact that they understood *both sin and* (common) grace.

Calvin and Bavinck on God's Gifts to All People

Bavinck presents Calvin as delicately balancing the scriptural truths of the depravity of the unregenerate person and God's gift of common grace which is the foundation for the legitimate contribution of the unregenerate person.

"...with Calvin reprobation does not mean the withholding of all grace. Although man through sin has been rendered blind to all the spiritual realities of the kingdom of God, so that a special revelation of God's fatherly love in Christ and a *specialis illuminatio* by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the sinners here become necessary, **nevertheless there exists alongside of these a *generalis gratia* which dispenses to all men various gifts.** If God had not spared man, his fall would have involved the whole of nature in ruin. As it was, God immediately after the Fall interposed, in order by His **common grace** to curb sin and to uphold in being the *universitas rerum*... Although for man's sake the whole of nature is subject to vanity, nevertheless nature is upheld by the hope which God implanted in its heart. **There is no part of the world in which some spark of the divine glory does not glimmer.** Though it be a metaphorical mode of expression, since God should not be confounded with nature, it may be affirmed in a truly religious sense that nature is God. Heaven and earth with their innumerable wonders are a magnificent display of the divine wisdom" (9).

Though fallen and unsaved, "there is no part of the world in which some spark of the divine glory does not glimmer." This is not at all limited to material creation. In fact, humanity, including fallen humanity, as the pinnacle of God's creation, especially is a mirror revealing God.

"Especially the human race is still a clear mirror of the operation of God, an exhibition of His manifold gifts. **In every man there is still** a seed of religion, **a consciousness of God, wholly ineradicable**, convincing all of the heavenly grace on which their life depends, **and leading even the heathen to name God the Father of mankind.** The supernatural gifts have been lost, and the natural gifts have become corrupted, so that man by nature no longer knows who and what God seeks to be to him. **Still these latter gifts have not been withdrawn entirely from man. Reason and judgment and will, however corrupt, yet, in so far as they belong to man's nature, have not**

been wholly lost. The fact that men are found either wholly or in part deprived of reason, proves that the tithe to these gifts is not self-evident and that they are not distributed to men on the basis of merit. Nonetheless, the grace of God imparts them to us” (9).

Calvin and Bavinck on Honoring and Making the Most of Art and Science

Based upon their theology of common grace, both Calvin and Bavinck teach that *unregenerate persons can make contributions* in the arts, sciences, and other areas *that regenerate persons should not despise*.

“The reason whereby man distinguishes between truth and error, good and evil, and forms conceptions and judgments, and also the will which is inseparable from human nature as the faculty whereby man strives after what he deems good for himself,—these raise him above the animals. Consequently it is contrary to Scripture as well as to experience to attribute to man such a perpetual blindness as would render him unable to form any true conception. On the contrary, there is light still shining in the darkness, **men still retain a degree of love for the truth, some sparks of the truth have still been preserved.** Men carry in themselves the principles of the laws which are to govern them individually and in their association with one another. They agree in regard to the fundamentals of justice and equity, and everywhere exhibit an aptness and liking for social order (9-10).

“Sometimes a remarkable sagacity is given to men whereby they are not only able to learn certain things, but also to make important inventions and discoveries, and to put these to practical use in life. Owing to all this, not only is an orderly civil society made possible among men, **but arts and sciences develop, which are not to be despised. For these should be considered gifts of the Holy Spirit”** (10).

“Sagacity” is wisdom, knowledge, understanding. Bavinck (and Calvin) taught that “sagacity” is given to (fallen) men.” Rather than despising these and claiming that common grace does not include discoveries and contributions from the non-Christian, instead, “these should be considered gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

“It is true the Holy Spirit as a spirit of sanctification dwells in believers only, but as a spirit of life, of wisdom and of power He works also in those who do not believe. No Christian, therefore, should despise these gifts; on the contrary, he should honor art and science, music and philosophy and various other products of the human mind as *praestantissima Spiritus dona*, and make the most of them for his own personal use” (10).

What does the Bible say that we should do with extra-biblical resources? What does Scripture teach about the Christian use of non-Christian resources? We should “honor art and science,

music and philosophy and various other products of the human mind... and make the most of them for his own personal use.”

“In the diversity of all these gifts **we see the remnants of the divine image whereby man is distinguished from all other creatures**” (10).

“Calvin affirms, it is true, that the virtues of the natural man, however noble, do not suffice for justification at the judgment-bar of God, but this is due to his profound conviction of the majesty and spiritual character of the moral law. **Aside from this, he is more generous in his recognition of what is true and good, wherever it be found, than any other Reformer. He surveys the entire earth and finds everywhere the evidence of the divine goodness, wisdom, and power** (10).

While Calvin and Bavinck each understand the noetic effect of sin, and the need for saving grace, they also each recognize the noetic effect of common grace—finding everywhere even in the non-Christian “the evidence of the divine goodness, wisdom, and power.

Reformed Theologian #3: Abraham Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper on Common Grace

This is the first post of a several-part mini-series on Abraham Kuyper and common grace. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a Dutch Christian, pastor, professor, theologian, and even Prime Minister. Unless otherwise noted, the quotes in this section are from Kuyper's work, *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art*.

Defining Common Grace

Abraham Kuyper defined common grace as:

“That act of God by which *negatively* He curbs the operations of Satan, death, and sin, and by which *positively* He **creates an intermediate state** for this cosmos, as **well as for our human race**, which is and continues to be deeply and radically sinful, but in which sin cannot work out its end” (see *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 279).

Kuyper added:

“God is glorified in the total development toward which human life and power over nature gradually march on under the guardianship of ‘common grace.’ It is His created order, His work, that unfold here. It was He who seeded the field of humanity with all these powers. Without a ‘Common Grace’ the seed which lay hidden in that field would never have come up and blossomed. Thanks to ‘Common Grace,’ it germinated, burgeoned, shot up high and will one day be in full flower, to reward not man but the heavenly Farmer. . . . A finished world will glorify God as builder and supreme Craftsman. What paradise was in bud will appear in full bloom.”

In *Wisdom and Wonder*, Kuyper further develops the doctrine of common grace.

“Common grace is God’s restraint of the full effect of sin after the Fall, preservation and maintenance of the created order, and distribution of talents to human beings. As a result of this merciful activity of God through the Holy Spirit’s work in creation, **it remains possible for humans to obey God’s first commandment for stewardly dominion over the creation** (see Gen. 1:28)” (26).

Common Grace and Creation

Kuyper derived the doctrine of common grace from creation.

“There can be nothing in the universe that fails to express, to incarnate, the revelation of the thought of God” (39).

“The whole creation is nothing but the visible curtain behind which radiates the exalted working of this divine thinking” (39).

“So we can and must confess unconditionally that all of creation in its origin, existence, and progress constitutes one rich, integrated revelation of what God in eternity thought and established in his decree” (40).

Kuyper then asks the question that we all must ask:

“Now the only question is whether we human beings are gifted with a capacity to reflect that thinking of God” (40).

Common Grace and the *Imago Dei*

In part, Kuyper answers that question by tracing the doctrine of common grace to God having created us in His image—the *imago Dei*.

“Every human being is created according to the image of God. On this basis the Reformed churches confess that the original man in his nature, that is, by virtue of his creation, not through supernatural grace **but according to the creation order**, had received holiness, righteousness, and *wisdom*. Here, then attention is drawn to a capacity bestowed upon human beings enabling them to pry loose from its shell, as it were, the thought of God that lies embedded and embodied in the creation, and to grasp it in such a way that from creation they could reflect the thought which God has embodied in that creation when he created it. This capacity of human nature was not added as something extra, but belongs to the foundation of human nature itself” (41).

“In the creation, God has revealed, embedded, and embodied a rich fullness of his thoughts. And, **God created in human beings, as his image-bearers, the capacity to understand, to grasp, to reflect, and to arrange within a totality these thoughts expressed in the creation**” (41-42).

For Kuyper, these *imago Dei* creational capacities continue in humanity even after our fall into sin. Though marred by sin, they are continually impacted by grace—by God’s common grace.

Common Grace and Science

Recall the subtitle of Kuyper’s book *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art*. “For Kuyper, science was not limited to ‘hard’ sciences like chemistry and biology **but also extended to the humanities and social sciences**” (26).

“Science belongs to *the creation*. Just think: if our human life had developed in its paradise situation, apart from sin, then science would have existed there just as it exists now, even though its development would obviously have been entirely different” (35).

“Science arises from creation, and as such has received from the Creator a calling independent of the state and the church” (36).

“The moment human beings employ this capacity for reflecting the thoughts of God from creation, science arises” (42).

“Science arises from the fruit of the thinking, imagining, and reflecting of successive generations in the course of centuries, and by means of the cooperation of everyone” (43).

“Science is not the personally acquired possession of each person, but gradually increased in significance and stability only as the fruit of the work of many people, among many nations, in the course of centuries” (45).

Science, Sin, and Common Grace

Track what Kuyper has said so far.

- God created a universe that reveals the Creator.
- God created image bearers who can study that natural revelation.
- But how do sin and common grace impact our study of the cosmos?

“Sin is what lures people to place science outside of a relationship with God, thereby **stealing science from God**, and ultimately turning science against God” (51).

So, what does that mean for science practiced by non-Christians?

“**Apart from common grace**, the decline of science would have become absolute without that illumination by the Holy Spirit” (52).

“Anyone who ignores common grace can come to no other conclusion than that all science done outside the arena of the holy, lives off appearance and delusion, and necessarily results in misleading anyone listening to its voice. **Yet the outcome shows that this is not the case.** Among the **Greeks, who were completely deprived of the light of Scripture, a science arose that continues to amaze us with the many beautiful and true things it offers.** The names of **Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have always been esteemed among Christian thinkers.** It is no exaggeration to insist that **the thinking of Aristotle has been one of the most powerful instruments leading themselves to still deeper reflection.** In modern times as well, no one can deny that in the disciplines of astronomy, botany, zoology, physics, and so on, **a rich science is blossoming. Although being conducted almost exclusively by people who are strangers to the fear of the Lord, this science has nevertheless produced a treasury of knowledge that we as Christians admire and gratefully use**” (52-53).

According to Kuyper, those who ignore, misunderstand, mischaracterize, or minimize common grace conclude that science done by non-Christians *must* be misleading. However, Scripture and human life denies this. Notice that Kuyper, in speaking of science, illustrates his point with philosophers—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. And his assessment of them? They “have always been esteemed among Christian thinkers.” This would *not* be the assessment of many today in the modern biblical counseling world. Moving to his day, what does Kuyper think of non-Christian knowledge? What does he think Christians should do with non-Christian knowledge? “This science has nevertheless produced a treasury of knowledge that we as Christians admire and gratefully use.” Again, many modern biblical counselors, [such as Francine Tan](#), disagree, opining that Christians should not use common grace contributions from non-Christians.

Kuyper continues:

“We are really confronting a science that has arisen from the world, a science that lies very definitely under the dominion of sin and that **nevertheless on the other hand, may boast of results from which sin’s darkening is virtually absent**. We can explain this only by saying that although sin does indeed spread its corruption, **nevertheless common grace has intervened in order to temper and restrain this operation of sin**” (53).

What is the degree to which common grace mitigates the noetic effect of sin? According to Kuyper, “sin’s darkening is virtually absence.”

“Also as far as science is concerned, the situation we find is explicable **only if we give both of these their due, on the one hand, the darkening of our understanding by sin, and on the other hand, God’s common grace that has placed a limitation on this darkening**. That we very definitely may and must speak in this regard of God’s activity is immediately evident **from the undeniable fact that in people like Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Darwin, stars of the first order have shined, geniuses of the highest caliber, people who expressed very profound ideas, even though they were not professing Christians**. They did not have this genius from themselves, but received their talent from God who created them and equipped them for their intellectual labor” (53-54).

Notice again in this quote that Kuyper includes not only the “hard sciences,” but also the “soft sciences” of philosophy—including the philosophical psychology of Plato and Aristotle. He assesses these philosophical psychologists as “stars of the first order, geniuses of the highest caliber, people who expressed very profound ideas.”

Kuyper addresses this issue further, asking whether the noetic effect of sin means that non-Christians can no longer reason.

“In order to see this, we must not suffice with the general slogan, ‘darkening by sin,’ but must account for how this darkening works. Has it resulted in our inability any longer to think logically? Has sin induced in us an inability to perceive what exists and

occurs around us? Does sin place a blindfold over our eyes so that we no longer see or observe? **Absolutely not.... We have not ceased on account of sin to be rational creatures**" (54).

Almost humorously, or perhaps even sarcastically, Kuyper cautions against sloganeering with terms like "darkening by sin." His caution is a good reminder for us today not to "cherry-pick" one doctrine (such as the noetic effect of sin) while ignoring other complementary doctrines, like common grace, the *imago Dei*, the Creation Mandate, etc.

Still, sin's darkening has its impact.

"Sin's darkening lies in this, that we lost the gift of grasping the true context, the proper coherence, the systematic integration of all things. Now we view everything only externally, not in its core and essence, each thing individually but not in their mutual connection and in their origin from God. That connection, that coherence of things in their original connection with God, can be sense only in our spirit" (55).

However, even here, common grace enters to allow fallen humanity to gain some semblance of coherent insight.

"Wisdom is useful for the moment or for practical living, but it does not construct knowledge of the whole. For that reason, common grace supplies a second element. Once bereft of immediate insight into the essence of things, the pathway was opened so that through the indefatigable labor of further research, observation, analysis, imagination, and reflection, a person can acquire at least some knowledge of the external side of things and can learn to understand the appearance of things together, even if not the law of their motion" (61).

Sin Is a Cracked Mirror

Kuyper used the imagery of a cracked mirror to suggest how even fallen people can at least in part reflect creational truths.

"It is true that a mirror without a crack is preferable. Nevertheless a cracked mirror can assist if necessary. Therefore, we can postulate that the mirror of our consciousness became cracked by sin, and the reflection of the world on that cracked surface would provide us with a knowledge of the world **that is not altogether incorrect**" (63).

Then he provided specific examples of "cracked science."

"It is undeniable that throughout the ages, common grace has been operative among numerous more developed peoples, in order to advance to a high degree the spiritual development in our human race by creating intellectual geniuses and bestowing brilliant talents" (82). [Note: Kuyper's view of the nations and of race are often opposed to Christian thinking on such matters today.]

“Medical science may have gone awry in many ways, but to it still belongs the honor that in God’s hands it has been the instrument for relieving much suffering, for curbing many diseases, and for disarming much latent evil before its outbreak. Natural science has armed us in extraordinary ways against the destructive power of nature, and has subjected that nature to our dominion. **The science of the humanities has affected our human thinking in a way that is wonderfully illuminating and influential**” (97).

Now, does Kuyper’s positive understanding of unbelieving science mean that he has surrendered the idea of the noetic effect of sin? Certainly not. The next example is as relevant today as it was in Kuyper’s day:

“No further argument is required to see that the discipline of medicine yields profound danger if it proceeds in the direction that increasingly ignores the soul, the spiritual dimensions of people, and views a person as nothing more than a body whose expressions of vitality come forth from matter” (99).

Kuyper provides this necessary biblical caution while *also* consistently highlighting the complementary biblical commendation that Christians can use God’s Word to engage with and evaluate the potential usefulness of extra-biblical resources produced by non-Christians.

In Summary: The Antithesis at the Intersection of Faith and Unbelief

In his 1898 Stone Lectures, Kuyper traced the sharp antithesis between faith and unbelief, yet he also gushed in eloquent praise for the achievement of unbelievers who hated his God:

“Sin places before us a riddle, which in itself is insoluble. If you view sin as a deadly poison, as enmity against God, as leading to everlasting condemnation, and if you represent a sinner as being “wholly incapable of doing any good, and prone to all evil,” and on this account salvable only if God by regeneration changes his heart, then it seems as if of necessity all unbelievers and unregenerate persons ought to be wicked and repulsive men. **But this is far from being our experience in actual life. On the contrary the unbelieving world excels in many things. Precious treasures have come down to us from the old heathen civilization. In Plato you find pages which you devour. Cicero fascinates you and bears you along by his noble tone and stirs up in you holy sentiments. And if you consider . . . that which you derive from the studies and literary productions of professed infidels, how much there is which attracts you, with which you sympathize and which you admire.** It is not exclusively the spark of genius or the splendor of talent, which excites your pleasure in the words and actions of unbelievers, but **it is often their beauty of character, their zeal, their devotion, their love, their candor, their faithfulness and their sense of honesty.** Yea . . . not unfrequently you entertain the desire that certain believers might have more of this attractiveness. . . .”

How can Kuyper justify his belief that “the unbelieving world excels in many things”? How can he support his conviction that “precious treasures have come down to us from the old

heathen civilization”? Why would Kuyper devour the writings of Plato and be fascinated with Cicero? (A Christian *fascinated* with the secular!?) How could Kuyper be attracted to, sympathize with, and admire “the literary productions of professed infidels”? Why would Kuyper suggested that Christians should be excited by the attractive lives of unbelievers and frequently wish that believers “might have more of this attractiveness”? The answer to each of these questions:

God’s common grace.

Every Square Inch of Human Existence Kuyper on God's All-Encompassing Common Grace

Minimizing God's Amazing Common Grace?

Some Christians who are just beginning a cursory reading of the Reformed doctrine of common grace fail to understand how all-encompassing common grace is. They do not realize that common grace impacts every square inch of human existence.

Likewise, some biblical counselors want to limit the reach and impact of common grace.¹ However, they fail to understand how Reformed theologians inescapably link together common grace, God's affectionate sovereignty over everything, God's glory in all things, Christ's lordship over all creation, the Creation Mandate/Cultural Mandate, grace and nature, and the body and soul.

Richard Mouw, in his "Introduction" to Abraham Kuyper's seminal three-volume set, Common Grace, explains well how Kuyper saw the comprehensive nature of common grace.

"If some Christians in the English-speaking world only know one thing about Kuyper, it is likely his oft-quoted manifesto: *'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'* That simple but profound affirmation of **Christ's supreme lordship over all of creation—including what human beings are commissioned by God to add to the creation in their cultural engagements**—has to be seen as what undergirds Kuyper's theology of common grace. Christ rules over all—that is basic. But we also need the theology of common grace as a practical fleshing out of how we can best understand the implications of our affirmation of Christ's lordship" (xxix).

A God-Created Instinct to Investigate

Some are talking today about "an instinct to integrate." God's Word talks about an instinct to investigate.

God instilled in humanity an impulse to study and advance creation. With our creation in the image of God, and with the Creation Mandate, God deeply implanted within us the impulse for cultural formation. Kuyper understood this, and he understood how it relates to common grace. Once again, Mouw explains:

"Kuyper is arguably the most prominent proponent of the idea of a cultural mandate issued by God to human beings in the first chapter of Genesis. **God programmed cultural formation into the original creation.** When the Lord instructed the first human pair to 'fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion' over it (Gen 1:28), he was referring to the filling of the Garden with the products and processes of cultural activity.... Art, science technology, politics (as the collective patterns of decision

making), recreation, and the like were all programmed into the original creation in order to display different patterns of cultural flourishing” (xxvii).

God’s Ongoing, Providential Shepherding of the Lives of Non-Christians

Some also fail to understand how this instinct to investigate continues today *in the lives of unbelievers*—because of God’s sovereign providence. Again, Mouw explains Kuyper’s theology of common grace.

“The capacity for cultural formation was not lost in fallen humanity. Scarred, yes, and even seriously distorted and corrupted. But **the impulse toward cultural activity deeply implanted in human beings by God continues.** And **common grace sees to it that good things are produced, even where rebellious spirits are in charge**” (xxvii).

“To acknowledge, for Kuyper, that God cares about art, athletics, education, business, politics, and entertainment is to acknowledge also that **God will not ever give up on these areas of human cultural achievement**” (xxvii).

Diminishing Common Grace Is Diminishing God’s Glory

Kuyper himself made this connection between God’s sovereignty and common grace. In doing so, Kuyper shows us that common grace glorifies God’s sovereignty. He shows us that that diminishing God’s work of common grace in the unbeliever is diminishing God’s glory.

“The doctrine of common grace is an idea **deduced directly from the sovereignty of the Lord**, a doctrine that is and remains the root conviction of all Reformed people. If God is sovereign, **then his lordship must extend over all of life**, and it cannot be restricted to the walls of the church or within the Christian orbit. The **non-Christian world has not been handed over to Satan**, nor surrendered to fallen humanity, nor consigned to fate. **God’s sovereignty is great and all-dominating in the life of that unbaptized world as well**” (xxxvii).

Denying God’s all-encompassing common grace in the life of the unbeliever is saying that God has handed the non-Christian world over to Satan.

Maximizing Common Grace: Every Square Inch!

In Kuyper’s day, as in ours, some sought to minimize the extent—the height, depth, width, and breadth—of common grace. Kuyper saw this as an unbiblical attempt to minimize common grace’s applicability. Kuyper balks at this. He sees common grace manifest *everywhere—in every square inch of the whole domain of human existence.*

“Common grace **extends over our entire human life, in all its manifestations.** There is a common grace that manifests itself in **order and law**; there is a common grace that manifests itself in **prosperity and affluence**; there is a common grace that

becomes visible in the healthy development of **strength and heroic courage of a nation**; there is a common grace that shines in the development of **science and art**; there is a common grace that enriches a nation through inventiveness in **enterprise and commerce**; there is a common grace that strengthens the **domestic and moral life**; and finally there is a common grace that **protects the religious life against an excessive degeneration**. As for the latter, we only have to compare Islam with the service of Baal Peor (see Numbers 25) to sense immediately what a powerful functioning of common grace is active in the religious realm in Islamic countries. And if we want to get a clear picture of the difference in the effect of common grace in another area, compare then, for example, what we are told of the Egyptians in the days of Moses and the Batavians in the days of Claudis Civilis. Among the Egyptians we see a high development of **wisdom**, as well as skill in various areas of **art and business enterprise**" (497-498).

The Error of Limiting Common Grace to the Earthly and the Inferior

Some today, in an attempt to minimize the Bible's teaching on the extent of common grace, seek to claim that Reformed theologians link common grace to the inferior, the earthly, the natural, the physical, the body, the exterior realms. Common grace operates in the earthly, but not in the spiritual, they want to claim.

Kuyper's biblical theology of God's comprehensive sovereignty belies that lie. For Kuyper, God's common grace operates not only in the inferior, earthly, natural, physical, exterior realms, but also equally in the superior, heavenly, supernatural, spiritual, soul, interior realm. In fact, Kuyper would not call either realm "inferior" or one realm "spiritual" and the other "unspiritual," or one realm "supernatural" and the other "natural," since, for Kuyper, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and secular.

Listen to Kuyper elucidate the comprehensiveness of God's common grace—infiltrating and impacting the whole domain of our human existence.

"Common grace operates **in the entirety of our human life**, but not in an identical way in every part of this life. There is common grace directed to the **internal part of our life** and another part of common grace is directed to the **external dimension of our human life**. The former [internal-directed common grace] operates everywhere that **civic righteousness, family loyalty, natural love, human virtue, the development of public conscience, integrity, fidelity among people, and an inclination toward piety permeates life**. The other part of common grace [external-directed common grace] manifests its operation when **human power over nature increases**, when invention after invention enriches life, faster concourse between countries arises, the arts flourish, the sciences enrich our knowledge, the enjoyments and delights of life multiply, when a glow comes upon every expression of life, it forms become refined, and life's common features grow in their attractiveness" (539-540).

Don't miss Kuyper's Reformed theology of common grace here. Common grace does not only impact the non-Christian's study of nature or science. God's sovereign, all-encompassing

grace equally impacts and permeates the non-Christian in the inner, spiritual, moral realms of civic righteousness, family loyalty, natural love, human virtue, public conscience, personal integrity, relational fidelity, and an inclination toward piety.

Common Grace and the Embodied-Soul

Interestingly, and relevant to discussions in our biblical counseling world these days, Kuyper insists that the doctrine of common grace opens our eyes to God's comprehensive focus on not just our soul, but on our body also—on our embodied-soul. Kuyper speaks of Christians falling into a wrong, one-sided focus on the soul, saying that they wrongly,

“...refuse to take into account **the significance of Christ also for the body, and for visible things**, and for the outcome of world history” (269).

“Consider well that thereby you **run the serious risk** of receiving Christ **exclusively for your soul** and of viewing your life in the world and for the world as something standing alongside your Christian religion and **not as being governed by it**” (269).

Kuyper then describes this false over-spiritualized mindset.

“The world [in this false mindset] is a less holy, almost unholy area that should take care of itself as best it can. And with but one more small step you arrive imperceptibly at the Anabaptist point of view, which ultimately focused everything holy in the soul, and **dug an unbridgeable chasm between this inner, spiritual life of the soul and the life around you**. Then **science becomes unholy**, the development of the **arts, commerce, and business become unholy**, as well as holding office in government—in short, **everything becomes unholy that is not directly spiritual and focused on the soul**. The result is that you end up living in **two spheres** of thought. On the hand the **very narrow, reduced line of thought involving your soul's salvation**, and on the other hand the **broad, spacious, life-encompassing sphere of thought involving the world**. Your Christ then belongs comfortably in that first, reduced sphere of thinking, but not in the broad one. And then **from that antithesis and false proportionality** proceed all narrow-mindedness, inner untruthfulness, not to mention pious insincerity and impotence” (269).

Unfortunately, there are biblical counselors today who, while claiming to respect “true science,” label any science they disagree with “scientism,” and then support their contention through co-belligerent research—only citing research that agrees with their preconceived notions. (For co-belligerent research see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) For Kuyper, dichotomizing the body and soul, minimizing the importance of the body, and denigrating science, results in the sins of “narrow-mindedness, inner untruthfulness, not to mention pious insincerity and impotence.”

Kuyper's Scriptural Remedy

Kuyper describes the scriptural remedy to this false “two spheres” view of life that dichotomizes everything into secular and sacred, rather than seeing everything as sacred.

“Scripture demands the restoration of this balance in our confession. Scripture shows us **Christ as Savior of the soul and also as Healer of the sick, as Expiator of our sins but also as the generous Savior who feeds the five thousand and the four thousand, and who turns water into wine at Cana.** This Scripture not only focuses all the earnestness of our soul on the doctrine of justification, but also **continually places before us in clear contours the resurrection of the flesh.** Yes, in pointing continually to the primacy of God's honor and only then to the salvation of the elect, Scripture cannot unfold before us the final act of the mighty drama without showing us Christ who is also outwardly triumphant over all his enemies, and who celebrates his triumph on a new earth under a new heaven.

And with this clearly in view, you immediately encounter the connection between *nature* and *grace*. If grace were exclusively the atonement for sin and the salvation of the soul, then grace could be viewed as something standing outside nature, as something circumventing nature. Grace could be viewed like a jar of oil poured on turbulent waters, separate from those waters, floating on those waters merely so that the drowning person could save himself in the lifeboat quickly rushing toward him. [In other words, people act as if grace is for salvation only, but is separate from real life—like the proverbial never mixing of oil and water.]

If, on the other hand, it is definitely true that Christ our Savior is **dealing not only with our soul but also with our body; that all things in the world are Christ's and are claimed by him;** that he will one day triumph over all enemies in that world; and that the culmination will be not that Christ will gather around himself some individual souls, as is presently the case, but that he will reign as King upon a new earth under a new heaven—then of course all this becomes entirely different and it becomes immediately apparent that **grace is inseparably linked to nature, that grace and nature belong together.** We cannot grasp grace in all its richness if we do not notice that the fibers of its roots penetrate into the joints and cracks of the life of nature.

And we cannot substantiate this coherence if with grace we focus first on the salvation of our souls and not in the first place on the Christ of God. This is why Scripture continually points out to us that the Savior of the world is **also the Creator of the world....** So here we have the connection of Christ with nature, because he is its Creator, and also the connection of Christ with grace, because in re-creating he revealed the riches of grace in that nature” (*Common Grace*, Vol. 1, 269-271).

Notice how Kuyper connects comprehensive common grace to God's all-encompassing sovereignty over everything—body and soul, earth and heaven, nature and grace. Because God is over all, all is sacred; nothing is secular. Therefore, common grace impacts and infiltrates every square inch of the non-Christian. In Kuyper's own words:

“So this common grace is an **omnipresent working of God’s** forbearance that **reveals itself wherever human hearts beat and spreads its blessing upon those human hearts**” (303).

Common Grace and Universal Sin: Complementary Doctrines

Some might claim that somehow Kuyper was minimizing the spiritual antithesis of sin, total depravity, the noetic effect of sin, the unsaved being dead in sin, and the darkened mind of the unsaved. Not true.

Consider how Kuyper connects the Reformed doctrine of depravity with the Reformed doctrine of common grace. In fact, these two doctrines demand each other. For Kuyper they are less a “spiritual antithesis” and more a “spiritual complement.”

“The Reformed confession has continually **placed full emphasis on the deadly character of sin and has seriously combatted any weakening of the concept of sin.** ‘Completely incapable of any good and prone to all evil’ was the formular in which the Heidelberg Catechism expressed this truth. And when **we stand immovable in this dreadful truth**, then it is quite natural that we find traces—in the paradise narrative, in all the rest of Scripture, in human life around us, and in our own human heart—of **a divine working through which the swift and absolutely fatal effect of sin has been and is still being restrained in many ways, even where there is no saving grace involved at all. Or do we not find among the pagan nations and unbelievers in our own surroundings many phenomena that show a certain inclination toward good things and a certain indignation about all kinds of crime?** True, not an inclination toward anything that has to do with salvation, but an inclination toward what is virtuous and harmonious? Are there not acts of maliciousness and dishonesty, and violations of justice, **against which the public conscience, also among nonbelievers, rebels?** And are there not **many deeds of neighborly love and mercy that can be mentioned that have been performed by unbelievers, sometimes putting believers to shame?** When Pharaoh’s daughter saved the infant Moses from the Nile, did she do evil or good? And is it therefore not clear that the absolute ruin of our nature by sin—a truth we wholeheartedly confess—is in many cases in conflict with reality? And do we then not see clearly how, in the face of such cases, **we must do one of two things: either** surrender our confession of the deadly character of sin or hold on to that confession with all our might, but then also confess along with it that there is a common grace at work that in many cases restrains the full, deadly effect of sin?” (300).

In the quote above, rather than remain generic, Kuyper moved to specifics—Pharaoh’s daughter, the wisdom of the Egyptians. In *Wisdom and Wonder*, Kuyper was equally specific, this time highlighting, among others, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

“The names of **Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have always been esteemed among Christian thinkers.** It is no exaggeration to insist that **the thinking of Aristotle has been one of the most powerful instruments leading themselves to still deeper**

reflection. In modern times as well, no one can deny that in the disciplines of astronomy, botany, zoology, physics, and so on, **a rich science is blossoming. Although being conducted almost exclusively by people who are stranger to the fear of the Lord, this science has nevertheless produced a treasury of knowledge that we as Christians admire and gratefully use**" (52-53).

Kuyper continues in *Common Grace* with these words about common grace throughout human history.

"The history of our human race through all these many centuries is therefore proof that on the one hand the terrible law of sin did indeed rule, but on the other a law of **grace broke that power of sin....** Let us be understood clearly: **this does not apply exclusively to the elect.** Common grace does not treat them in a special way. What we expound here applies to our human race as such..... **Common grace has operated for ages in China and India without there being any church of Christ in those countries. We still enjoy the fruits that have come from common grace in Greece and Rome in the days when even the name of Christ's church had never yet been mentioned....** God has let the wonder of common grace operate **among all peoples and in all nations,** even where this had no direct connection with the salvation of the elect" (300-302).

In every era in every nation, Kuyper witnesses to the biblical truth of God's common grace at work in the capacities and contributions of non-Christians.

Every Square Inch

With Kuyper, all Reformed theologians, and most importantly, with the Bible, may we study common grace in light of the beautiful truth that:

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"

Reformed Theologian #4—Cornelius Van Til

Van Til, Kuyper, Bavinck, and Biblical Counselors: An Assessment

This is the first of a three-part mini-series on Cornelius Van Til and common grace. Here in Part 1, we're focusing on:

Can biblical counselors legitimately follow the common grace teachings of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck? Or, as some claim, to be a true biblical counselor, must we only follow the teachings of Cornelius Van Til on common grace?

The Importance of Cornelius Van Til for Biblical Counselors

Cornelius Van Til (May 3, 1895 – April 17, 1987) was a Dutch-American Reformed theologian, professor, and author. He is credited with being the originator of modern presuppositional apologetics. Both Jay Adams and David Powlison expressed the impact that Van Til's writings had on their thinking (see: [*Presuppositional Counseling: An Introduction to Van Til's Influence Upon Jay Adams*](#) by Jared Poulton).

Some current biblical counselors have taken this impact an additional—**unwarranted**—step, claiming that biblical counselors must exclusively follow Van Til's teaching on presuppositionalism and on common grace, to the exclusion of the writings of other Reformed thinkers, including Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.

If someone wanted to substantiate the claim that biblical counselors can only follow Van Til and not follow Kuyper and Bavinck, they would have to establish that Van Til argued that following Kuyper and Bavinck placed a Christian **outside of Orthodoxy**. With that in mind, we'll start our study of Van Til by highlighting his **alignment with** Kuyper and Bavinck.

Cornelius Van Til on Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck

To say that Van Til was a "detailed theologian" is an understatement. Van Til was notorious for digging into the minutia of theological arguments, and for placing himself in the "Goldilocks Zone" of perfect balance between everyone else who was either to the "left" or the "right" of himself. So, yes, Van Til did distinguish some of his teachings on presuppositional apologetics and common grace from some of the teachings of Kuyper and Bavinck on these matters.

However, Van Til never claimed that alignment with Kuyper and Bavinck put someone outside Reformed thinking. In fact, as we shall see, Van Til greatly praised both Kuyper and Bavinck.

A Letter on Common Grace

In Van Til's book, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, he includes a 50-page "Letter on Common Grace." Van Til wrote this letter to dispute fellow Reformed theologian William Masselink's contention that Van Til's view of common grace was aligned **against** Kuyper and Bavinck. In Van Til's own words:

"My main purpose in this letter is to seek to remove some misunderstandings that have developed with respect to my views" (171).

"My position is reported to be a part of a *reconstruction theology*, a theology of rebellion against the views of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck of Holland" (170).

Van Til is writing specifically to prove that his views are not in rebellion against the views of Kuyper and Bavinck.

Van Til also wrote to dispute Masselink's contention that Van Til's teaching meant that Christians could learn nothing from non-Christians. Van Til is writing specifically to prove that he does believe that Christians can use the results of the scientific work of non-Christians:

"Dear Friend: Recently you wrote me asking about my views on common grace. You remarked that somebody had made a statement in your hearing that if he were to take my position on common grace he did not see how he could make any use of the results of the scientific work of those who are not Christians. This gentleman apparently got the impression that on my view the non-believer must be thought of as being unable to discover any truth at all of any sort in any field" (169).

"I am said to hold to an 'absolutist position,' a posting that involves 'intellectual Anabaptism,' a position that is out of accord with the Reformed confessions, which speak of the 'natural light' that remains in men after the Fall and of the 'remnants' of knowledge of God and of morality that they still possess" (170).

Van Til on His View of Kuyper and Bavinck

Dr. Masselink was a follower of Kuyper and Bavinck. Masselink argued that Van Til was aligned **against** Kuyper and Bavinck. Here's Van Til's response:

"The second point [of Masselink] is calculated to make the reader think that my disagreement with these *great theologians* goes to the root of their theology.... Well, has there been in anything I have ever said or written as much as an insinuation that the root of their thinking was not from the Bible?" (177).

While acknowledging some disagreement over the minutia on common grace, Van Til strenuously disputes the notion that he disagrees with the root of their theology—calling

Kuyper and Bavinck “great theologians.” For any biblical counselor today to claim that a fellow biblical counselor was not a “real biblical counselor” because they follow Kuyper or Bavinck, is to go against Van Til’s own assessment.

Notice Van Til’s high assessment of Kuyper and Bavinck, especially related to presuppositional thinking:

“It is well to emphasize again that **it is from Kuyper, more than from anyone else in modern times**, that we have learned to think concretely. Both on the question of the universal and on that of particular, **Kuyper has taught us that we must build on our own presuppositions**. In similar words I began my section on Bavinck by praising him for having shown, **better than any one before him, the necessity of building up one’s theology from one basic principle, namely, Scripture**” (177).

Speaking of Kuyper and Bavinck as “Amsterdam” and speaking of B. B. Warfield and Charles Hodge as “Old Princeton,” Van Til writes five pages (214-218) about his common agreement with Kuyper, Bavinck, Warfield, and Hodge on seven essential, foundational theological convictions about common grace. He introduces these seven areas of essential agreement saying,

“Here then is, so far as I am now able to see, the direction in which we ought as Reformed Christians to travel” (214).

Then Van Til detailed these seven areas of agreement (over five pages), which I will provide in introductory form:

1. “The foundation of the thinking of both the Amsterdam and the Old Princeton men was that which both **derived via Calvin and from Paul**, namely, the fact that God has unavoidably and clearly revealed Himself in general and special revelation....” (214).
2. “Both the men of Amsterdam and the men of Old Princeton agree that God has promulgated to mankind in Adam His will of command. He set before mankind the task of subduing the earth....” (215).
3. “Amsterdam and Old Princeton agree that the relation between the will of the decree and will of command cannot be exhaustively understood by man....” (215).
4. “Amsterdam and Old Princeton agree on the doctrine of sin....” (216).
5. “Amsterdam and Old Princeton agree on the doctrine of election....” (216).
6. “Amsterdam and Old Princeton agree on the genuine significance of human responsibility....” (216).
7. “Both Amsterdam and Old Princeton taught common grace as well as the common offer of the gospel to the generality of mankind....Therefore, also through common grace the natural man is enabled to do good works....” (217).

That’s five pages of detailed, minute, specific essential theological alignment between Van Til and Kuyper/Bavinck, that Van Til penned specifically to disprove that he was out of alignment with Kuyper and Bavinck.

Speaking further of his alignment with Kuyper and Bavinck, Van Til explains,

“It is therefore the essence of Protestantism, and in particular of the Reformed theology to reject the ‘natural theology’ of Rome. **Kuyper and Bavinck have done so in no uncertain terms**” (220).

Speaking of his views of the theistic proofs, Van Til notes, “my close adherence to the Old Princeton and the Amsterdam [Kuyper/Bavinck] theology.... “Happily I do so **in view of the theology that I have learned from Old Princeton and Amsterdam** [Kuyper/Bavinck]” (223).

Van Til’s Indebtedness to Kuyper and Bavinck for His Presuppositional Apologetics

In his book, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, Van Til notes that in developing his presuppositional Reformed apologetics he is “greatly indebted to the great Reformed dogmatists of modern times, such as Charles Hodge, Thornwell, Dabney, Shedd, Kuyper, and especially Herman Bavinck” (5).

Mentioning Kuyper and Bavinck, Van Til shares, “The greater part of what is presented here is due to the fact that the writer stands on the shoulders of the great Reformed thinkers mentioned above”—Kuyper and Bavinck (23).

In speaking again of the foundation of his presuppositional apologetics, Van Til writes,

“And have I, following such a method, departed radically from the tradition of Kuyper and Bavinck? On the contrary, I have learned all this primarily from them. It is Kuyper’s *Encyclopedie* that has more than any other work in modern times, brought out the fact of the difference between the approach of the believer and of the unbeliever. It is Bavinck’s monumental work which set a ‘natural theology’ frankly oriented to Scripture squarely over against that of Romanism which is based on neutral reason” (301).

Van Til on Bavinck: An Assessment by Brian G. Mattson

In the Spring 2008 issue of the Westminster Theological Journal, Brian G. Mattson wrote, “Van Til on Bavinck: An Assessment” ([WTJ 70:1 \(Spring 2008\)](#)). While indicating areas of distinction, Mattson also noted areas of admiration.

“Cornelius Van Til wrote that ‘**Herman Bavinck has given to us the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times,**’ an indication of his great admiration for the Dutch theologian. References to Bavinck abound in Van Til’s works, and even where absent, the deep impressions made by Bavinck’s four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* are evident in Van Til’s theological writings. He appreciated Bavinck’s commitment to truth and his ability to learn from others. [Quoting Van Til]: ‘[Bavinck] was deeply concerned to make the Christ of the Scripture speak to his age. In this sense he was a truly *modern* theologian.

He studied the development of modern philosophy and science with great care. He knew that true unity of thought and harmony of life could come to man only if he made every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. But he also knew that those who did not center their life and thought in Christ had, in spite of this, much to teach him. As a true Protestant he learned much from Romanism and as truly Reformed he honored Luther. Bavinck's *magnum opus* shows true catholicity of spirit as well as unswerving loyalty to the truth as he saw it."

Mattson continues,

"Van Til admired Bavinck not only for his erudition and catholicity, but also for his character: 'Humble before God and courteous to his fellow-man, Bavinck always refused to compromise his Saviour whose voice he heard in the Scriptures' [quoting Van Til].

Mattson summarizes his thinking like this:

"One other feature of this article is noteworthy, and that is, in spite of Van Til's personal reservations he defends Bavinck against attacks by those whom he deems of a less-than-Reformed persuasion. This recurring motif provides a glimpse into something of Van Til's 'relationship' to Bavinck, though there is no indication the two ever met: a younger brother may criticize the older, but is quick to defend when a perceived interloper does the same. This explains why he often seems comparatively reluctant to criticize Bavinck... Might one suspect that Van Til at bottom realized that Herman Bavinck was, in fact, the one theologian closest to his own views?"

"Bavinck is the one Reformed theologian intellectually closest to Van Til."

Mattson writes in his conclusion:

"If this article establishes anything it is **the deep affinity in their theological instincts**. Van Til never had an intellectual 'friend' like Herman Bavinck. The fact that he sometimes failed to realize it is no reason for contemporary readers of Bavinck to do likewise. One hopes that those whose apologetic sympathies lie with Van Til, yet have new opportunity to study Herman Bavinck in English, might do so without Van Til's **often needless and excessive reservations**; instead, may they eagerly and expectantly mine what truly is 'the greatest and most comprehensive statement of Reformed systematic theology in modern times.'"

**WWCT? (What Would Cornelius Think?):
Van Til, Kuyper, Bavinck, and Biblical Counselors**

So, yes, Van Til's approach to presuppositional apologetics and to common grace was not 100% identical to the approaches taken by Kuyper and Bavinck.

So, no, Van Til would **not** tell biblical counselors that they were not “real” biblical counselors if they studied and derived application from Kuyper and Bavinck.

No, Van Til would **not** call you a “so-called biblical counselor” or a “neo-integrationist biblical counselor” for studying and deriving application from Kuyper and Bavinck.

No, Van Til would **not** judge or mischaracterize your motives as “an instinct to integrate because of your fascination with psychology and your frustration with Scripture” for studying and deriving application from Kuyper and Bavinck.

So, yes, you can be a member of the modern biblical counseling movement and study and derive application about presuppositional apologetics and common grace from Cornelius Van Til, and/or Abraham Kuyper, and/or Herman Bavinck.

Cornelius Van Til on Common Grace: In His Own Words

A Word from Bob

This is Part 2 of a three-part mini-series on Cornelius Van Til and common grace. Here in Part 2, I'm focusing on Van Til's beliefs about common grace, especially related to the use or non-use of findings from non-Christians. I've taken these quotes from Van Til's book, *Common Grace and the Gospel*.

Van Til on the Source of the Unbeliever's Knowledge

Van Til wrote frequently about the book of nature (general revelation) and the book of conscience as the twin foundations of the unbeliever's knowledge.

"As made in the image of God no man can escape becoming the interpretive medium of God's general revelation both in his intellectual (Rom 1:20) and in his moral consciousness (Rom 2:14-15). No matter which button of the radio he presses, he always hears the voice of God" (67).

"God is, and has been from the beginning, revealed in nature and in man's own consciousness. We cannot say that the heavens *probably* declare the glory of God" (76).

"Both parties to the debate on common grace should be willing to agree that Adam and Eve had the requirements of God's law written on their hearts... We should be equally anxious to maintain that God originally spoke plainly to man, both in **'the book of nature' and in the 'book of conscience.'** Wherever man would turn he saw the living God and His requirements. Whether he reasoned about nature or whether he looked within, whether it was the starry heavens above or the moral law within, both were equally insistent and plain that God, the true God, stood before him. It should also be recognized that man was, from the outset, confronted with positive, as well as with natural, revelation. Dr. Vos speaks of this as pre-redemptive special revelation. God walked and talked with man. **Natural revelation must not be separated from this supernatural revelation. To separate the two is to deal with two abstractions instead of with one concrete situation**" (84-85).

"By virtue of their creation in God's image, by virtue of the ineradicable sense of deity within them, and by virtue of God's restraining general grace, those who hated God, **yet in a restricted sense, know God and do good**" (198).

Some people today seek to separate special revelation from natural revelation. Van Til links them together under the one concept of God's inseparable revelation to humanity. Some people also seek to minimize the doctrine of natural revelation simply to creation *around us*. Van Til's biblical theology of natural revelation included, and even emphasized, God's revelation *in* human beings in our conscience.

Common Grace and the Use or Non-Use of Information from Non-Christians

Having established the theological foundation for common grace knowledge, now the two-fold question is:

“What do fallen people do with this revelatory knowledge, and what should believers do with information from non-Christians?”

Van Til consistently taught that unbelievers will distort the truth. No one could dispute that from Van Til’s writings.

However, Van Til went further, exploring whether that distortion meant that there was no value for believers from the findings of unbelievers, because, “Man can never completely suppress the truth” (187).

In Chapter 6 of *Common Grace and the Gospel*, Van Til wrote to dispute the contention by Dr. William Masselink’s that Van Til’s teaching meant that Christians could learn nothing from non-Christians. Notice in the quotes below that Van Til writes specifically to prove that he does believe that Christians can use the results of the scientific work of non-Christians:

“Dear Friend: Recently you wrote me asking about my views on common grace. You remarked that somebody had made a statement in your hearing that if he were to take my position on common grace he did not see how he could make any use of the results of the scientific work of those who are not Christians. This gentleman apparently got the impression that on my view the non-believer must be thought of as being unable to discover any truth at all of any sort in any field” (169).

“I am said to hold to an ‘absolutist position,’ a posting that involves ‘intellectual Anabaptism,’ a position that is out of accord with the Reformed confessions, which speak of the ‘natural light’ that remains in men after the Fall and of the ‘remnants’ of knowledge of God and of morality that they still possess” (170).

“My main purpose in this letter is to seek to remove some misunderstandings that have developed with respect to my views” (171).

What did Van Til believe about the relationship between the noetic effect of sin and common grace?

“The case is similar with respect to **the knowledge of unbelievers and their ability to do that which is relatively good**. The fact that they are in principle opposed to God and would destroy the very foundation of knowledge and ethics, yet, in spite of this, **because of God’s common grace, they can discover much truth and do much good**” (190).

“Gifts of God **to unbelievers** help to make the life of believers possible, and in a measure, pleasant” (192).

“We are well aware of the fact that non-Christians have a great deal of knowledge about this world which is true as far as it goes. That is, there is a sense in which we **can and must allow for the value of knowledge of non-Christians**. We do not make this point as a concession but rather **as a fact taught directly by Scripture itself and as such observed in daily experience**” (195).

“God releases the natural man’s creatural powers so that he can make **positive contributions to the field of knowledge and art**” (200).

Don’t miss what Van Til is claiming. Because of common grace, unbelievers “can discover much truth and do much good.” And Christians “can and must allow for the value of knowledge of non-Christians”—because this is “taught directly by Scripture itself.” And “the natural man” can “make positive contributions to the field of knowledge and art.”

Van Til on Cultural Mandate/Creation Mandate, Common Grace, and Believers Using the Knowledge of Unbelievers

Van Til also explored common grace in the context of the Cultural Mandate/Creation Mandate.

“This sovereign God gave man a task to perform. It was to till the ground, to bring out its powers, to act as prophet, priest, and king in the midst of the world that God had made. He was to engage in scientific, artistic, and philosophical enterprises of every conceivable sort. Such was man’s cultural mandate. It was given to mankind as a whole. It was therefore a task that all men would have in common” (117-118).

“The **covenant keepers will make use of the works of the covenant breakers** which these have been able and compelled to perform in spite of themselves. As Solomon used the cedars of Lebanon (1 Kings 5:8-10), the products of the rain and the sunshine that had come to the covenant breakers, and as he used the skill of these very covenant breakers for the building of the temple of God, so also **those who through the Spirit of God have believed in Christ may and must use all the gifts of all men everywhere in order by means of them to perform the cultural task of mankind**” (138).

“So even after the fall God gives His good gifts to men everywhere, thereby calling them to repentance and to performance of their task.... And then in amazement we note that even after the fall, when mankind as a whole has become the object of His wrath, God still continues to give good gifts unto men” (153-154).

“The gift of logical reason was originally given to man in order that he might order the revelation of God in nature for himself” (230).

The “covenant keepers” are Christians. The “covenant breakers” are non-Christians. For Van Til, the Christian “will make use of the works of the” non-Christian. It is a command:

Christians “must use all the gifts of men everywhere” so by means of them Christians can fulfil the Cultural Mandate.

Van Til: In His Own Words

Toward the end of *Common Grace and the Gospel*, Van Til provides his summary theological conclusion about common grace and the unbeliever.

Common grace “**enables man to do many positive things** which he would otherwise not be able to do. And the principle of continuity presupposed in all this is **the idea of the image of God as itself revelational of God**. The Holy Spirit testifies to man through his own constitution as well as through the facts of the universe around him, that he is God’s offspring and should act as such (see Acts 17:28). The sinner seeks to suppress this revelation within himself and around him. **He cannot do so fully. He continues to be an image bearer of God; even the lost hereafter will be image bearers of God. They will continue to receive the revelation of God within their own constitution; they cannot be devoid of ethical reaction....** Common grace is therefore a favor to sinners by which they are kept from working out to the full the principle of sin within them and thereby are enabled to show some measure of involuntary respect and appreciation for the law of God that speaks to them even through their own constitution as well as through the facts of the world outside” (238).

Unbelievers are image bearers who God, through common grace, enables “to do many positive things.” God continues to reveal Himself to non-believers through creation *around* them and through their conscience *within* them.

Cornelius Van Til: “Zombie-Infected”?

This is Part 3 of a three-part mini-series on Cornelius Van Til and common grace. Here in Part 3, we focus on how some within the modern biblical counseling world might assess Van Til—if they treated his writings the same way they treat the writings of their fellow biblical counselors today.

Of Zombies and the Trojan Horse of Common Grace

In May of 2024, Heath Lambert began a series of podcasts on zombie-infected biblical counselors. You can find one of my responses to Heath’s posts here: [*Engaging Publicly with Heath Lambert’s Public Writings: Part 2: Hearing Heath.*](#)

It is Heath’s contention that many in the modern biblical counseling movement have been “infected” by the “zombie virus” of secular psychology. In a later podcast, Heath sought to connect his “zombie” imagery to the language of Ephesians 2, where the unsaved are pictured as dead in sin, and the language of Ephesians 4, where unsaved thinking is pictured as darkened understanding. Throughout his series of podcasts, Heath and his colleagues at First Baptist Church Jacksonville claimed that some biblical counselors were smuggling secular psychology into the church through the Trojan Horse of a false application of the doctrine of common grace.

Heath Lambert: A Catalyst for Further Study

Both Jay Adams and David Powlison often spoke of using writings, even of unbelievers, as a catalyst for challenging the biblical counselor to return to Scripture to answer questions raised by secular thinking. Heath Lambert’s podcasts and writings have been a catalyst for me to delve more deeply into Scripture and church history regarding common grace.

Because Heath is raising vital questions for those of us in the modern biblical counseling movement, I have spent a great deal of time re-studying the doctrine of common grace. As part of that study, I’ve collated over 32,000 words of quotes from leading Reformed theologians on common grace, [*which you can find here.*](#)

The Valid Question

I’ve been seeking to answer the question:

How have Reformed theologians applied the doctrine of common grace in relationship to the use of extra-biblical resources from non-Christians?

That’s the specific question we need to be asking. No one in the biblical counseling movement is denying the existence of the doctrine of common grace. Though some are, quite remarkably, suggesting that modern biblical counselors should redefine the historic doctrine

of common grace. Francine Tan, writing for ACBC's *Journal of Biblical Soul Care*, shockingly writes,

“Thus, I propose that biblical counselors ought to revisit how we define CG and make a few qualifications to the traditional Reformed view of CG” ([JBSC, 8, no. 1, Spring 2024, 84](#)).

Rather than redefine historic common grace, I want to know if we modern biblical counselors are applying the doctrine of common grace the way the Reformers like [Calvin](#), [Bavinck](#), [Kuyper](#), [Van Til](#), and [Powlison](#) applied it.

Did Reformed theologians so emphasize the antithesis of the noetic effect of sin that they refused to use common grace insights from non-Christians in their ministries?

Or,

Did Reformed theologians minister at the intersection of the noetic effect of sin *and* common grace, and, therefore, use common grace insights from non-Christians in their ministries?

John Calvin: “Integrationist”?

In [John Calvin: “Integrationist”?](#), I was amazed to see how frequently Calvin affirmed specific examples of the philosophical psychology of non-Christians like Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, among others. Was Calvin, therefore, an integrationist? Was he zombie-infected?

No, Calvin was **not** a zombie-infected integrationist. Instead, Calvin believed that because of common grace, non-Christians could make contributions to fields like philosophy and psychology, and Christians could use the spectacles of Scripture to assess those potential contributions.

Calvin's approach is similar to David Powlison's view of using the “lens of Scripture” to assess potential common grace findings. See, [David Powlison on Common Grace, Biblical Counseling and Secular Psychology](#).

Worldview Integration

I would not choose to use Lambert's “zombie” imagery. However, I could agree that someone was “integrationist”:

If a person were building their comprehensive model/theory/theology of biblical counseling (people, problems, solutions) on common grace insights from non-Christian thinkers.

However, I do *not* see biblical counselors doing that. Instead, I see biblical counselors:

Building theologically-saturated models of biblical counseling *and then* using God's Word to assess whether there are any common grace findings that might make any contribution to our ministries to embodied-souls. (For my thinking on this approach, see: [6 Biblical Counseling Convictions.](#))

It is my conviction that simply using common grace insights—assessed with Scripture—is not integration. If it were, then Van Til would be a zombie-infected integrationist.

CVT: Cornelius Van Til

Recently, I began re-reading Cornelius Van Til. (I started reading Van Til in 1978—before many current biblical counselors were even born.) Van Til is “the poster child” for many biblical counselors who claim that other biblical counselors are misusing common grace. Because it has been awhile since I had read Van Til, I didn't know what I would find. Honestly, here's what I thought I'd find:

*Van Til **never affirmed** that non-Christians could make valid contributions to fields like psychology!*

To my shock, I began finding Van Til making numerous statements about contributions that non-Christians can make to every field of study, *including psychology.*

Cornelius Van Til on Contributions from Zombie Psychologists

Cornelius Van Til is one of the most conservative Reformed theologians on the noetic effect of sin, total depravity, common grace, presuppositionalism, and apologetics. Yet, speaking of the “natural man” (the non-Christian, the unsaved person), Van Til explains,

“In *principle* he is hostile to God. **But** he cannot carry through his principle completely. He is **restrained by God** from doing so. Being restrained by God from doing so, **he is enabled to make contributions to the edifice of human knowledge**” (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 22).

“The forces of creative power implanted in him are to some extent **released by God's common grace**. He therefore **makes positive contributions in science** in spite of his principle and because both he and the universe are the exact opposite of what they, by his principles, think they are” (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 22).

Is this just the hard sciences? No. It is fascinating what Van Til says in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (43-44) about how those who are dead in sin can discover truth about people and problems—**the content of psychology.**

“Thus the Christian apologist should, to be sure, **look sympathetically** into the efforts of **men in general** when they seek to **analyze themselves and their problems**. There will be no doubt **elements of truth in such an analysis....**”

“Just now we spoke of elements of truth that may be found **in the non-Christian diagnosis of sin and evil**.... Reformed theologians speak of this restraint upon mankind in general as due to common grace. The restraint of God upon fallen mankind enables it **to help build the culture of the race**....”

“In spite of what he does against God, he yet can and **must work for God**; thus **he is able to make a positive contribution to human culture**. Thus it comes to pass that they of whom Scripture says that **their minds are darkened can yet discover much truth**....”

“But **in spite of being dead in sins, they can, because of God’s common grace, discover truth**.... Fallen man knows truth and **does morally good** things in spite of the fact that in principle he is set against God.”

Consider what these primary source quotations teach us.

- Van Til claims that those who are dead in sin (Ephesians 2) with darkened understanding (Ephesians 4) **can discover truth as they analyze people and problems—the content of psychology**.
- Van Til claims that Christians “**should look sympathetically**” upon spiritually dead people who analyze people and their problems—zombie psychologists!

So how should we view Van Til?

Should we label Van Til “zombie-infected”?

Or,

Should we label Van Til a “Conservative Reformed Theologian” who understands the intersection of the noetic effect of sin *and* God’s common grace and who assesses common grace findings with scriptural spectacles?

Covenant Keepers Using the Works of Covenant Breakers

Van Til labels Christians “covenant keepers” and non-Christians “covenant breakers.” What use can Christians make of non-Christian resources?

“The covenant keepers will make use of the works of the covenant breakers which these have been able and compelled to perform in spite of themselves. As Solomon used the cedars of Lebanon (1 Kings 5:8-10), the products of the rain and the sunshine that had come to the covenant breakers, and as he used the skill of these very covenant breakers for the building of the temple of God, so also those who through the Spirit of God have believed in Christ **may and must use all the gifts of all men everywhere in order by means of them to perform the cultural task of mankind**” (*Common Grace and the Gospel*, 138).

“The case is similar with respect to **the knowledge of unbelievers** and their ability to do that which is relatively good. The fact that they are in principle opposed to God and would destroy the very foundation of knowledge and ethics, **yet**, in spite of this, **because of God’s common grace, they can discover much truth and do much good**” (*Common Grace and the Gospel*, 190).

“Since sinners are not consistent, and have what is from their point of view an old man within them they can **engage in science and in the general interpretation of the created universe and bring to light much truth**. He can discover that which is **true and usable for the Christian**” (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 294).

[Like Calvin](#) before him, Van Til goes far beyond an abstract doctrine of common grace. He moves to specific application—covenant keepers/Christians can and must make use of truth brought to light by covenant breakers/non-Christians—in science, in psychology, in culture...

Van Til did not limit the Christian use of non-Christian thinking to the “hard sciences” or to “earthly, inferior matters.” He saw value and even usefulness in secular philosophy.

“It should be carefully noted that our criticism of [the church’s use of Aristotle] **does not imply that we hold it to be wrong for the Christian church to make formal use of the categories of thought discovered by Aristotle or any other thinker. On the contrary, we believe that in the Providence of God, Aristotle was raised up of God so that he might serve the church of God by laying at its feet the measures of his brilliant intellect.** (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology, In Defense of Biblical Christianity* 2, 1969, 57).

“Brilliant intellect”...speaking of...Aristotle. God raised up a secular philosopher “so that he might serve the church of God...”

Dr. Jared Poulton on Dr. Cornelius Van Til and Secular Psychology

Biblical counselor, Jared Poulton, who wrote his [Ph.D. dissertation on Van Til](#), notes several specific psychology-related contributions that Van Til commended. I’m sharing these, with Jared’s permission, from a larger section of material that Jared recently posted on Twitter/X.

“One of the most fascinating developments in the history of biblical counseling is the fact that very little attention has been given to Van Til’s own **engagements with psychology**. In my doctoral research here is what I found.”

“In *Christian Theistic Evidences* (200), Van Til **‘rejoices’ that non-Christians** have ‘finally come to the study of the abnormal.’”

“Biblical counselors overlook the semi-positive **recommendation of Freudian psychology** in Van Til, since Van Til sees the ‘unconscious’ in Freud as consistent with the Calvinistic position that people are driven by forces that occur in the unconscious (Rom 1:18) (*Christian Theistic Evidences*, 197-198).”

“Since Christians and non-Christians share the same intellect, ‘there may be territories in the field of science where **the unregenerate and the regenerate consciousness may cooperate**’ (Unpublished Manuscripts, Logos).”

“As one example where the unregenerate and regenerate consciences may cooperate, Van Til lists, ‘in the collection of sense material, also in the somatic aspects of psychological science, and thirdly in logic, for the laws of reason have not been abrogated.’ Clearly Christians and non-Christians can cooperate in some of the bodily/somatic aspects of the psychological sciences.”

“In Van Til’s lectures on the Psychology of Religion (1-3), he provides the following charge to pastors: ‘Ministers of the gospel should have a knowledge of a sound psychological approach to men. . . . We see then that **as Christian ministers we can no doubt learn something from the technique of the modern school of psychology of religion. We should always be thankful for any improvement in the technique of handling men that any one offers us.**’”

Dr. Poulton ends his thread with these words:

“Biblical counselors may disagree with Van Til, but we should at least read Van Til correctly.”

Poulton goes even further in his dissertation, *Reforming Counseling: The Adaptation of Van Tilian Concepts by Jay Adams*. Poulton writes, “Van Til’s writings reveal an undisputable reality—Van Til would have disagreed with Adams’s assessment of psychology” (270). He continues:

“While Adams uses Van Tilian presuppositions to argue that Christianity and secular psychology are fundamentally incompatible because of their conflicting presuppositions, **Van Til’s writings reflect both a critical and positive application of presuppositional analysis to the psychological disciplines**” (271).

“In chapter 8 and chapter 9 of *Christian Theistic Evidences*, Van Til addresses the topic of general psychology and the psychology of religion. Within these chapters, Van Til demonstrates a comfortable command over psychology within its historic and modern forms, utilizing a faculty psychology to describe human nature while evaluating modern developments, such as the growth of child psychology and abnormal psychology. **Most notably, he provides quite a different take than Adams on the developments within the psycho-analytic tradition, (270) affirming that Freud, Adler, and Jung have ‘good elements.’** Van Til does not write as one who believes that secular psychology has nothing to offer Christians. **Rather, he references the ‘good things’ accomplished by secular psychology despite his critiques. Van Til even argues that modern psychoanalytic psychology, having shown that ‘the individual’s conscious life is dominated by drives that come up from his unconscious life,’ is consistent with Calvinism, since it explains the suppression of the truth of God in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18).** ‘Scripture,” Van

Til asserts, “is full of the idea of the subconscious. . . . The church has never limited personal responsibility to the self-conscious activity of man” (270-271).

Free from the influence of Thomas Szasz, O. H. Mowrer, and the anti-psychiatry movement, **Van Til views psychology as a legitimate science... Van Til recognizes that non-Christians have legitimate aid to offer Christians and pastors in the ‘technique of handling men.’** It appears that, according to Cornelius Van Til, secular psychologists can serve as servants, not architects, in the building of the spiritual temple of God (1 Pet 2:5) (274).

Poulton concludes his comparison of Van Til and Adams’s views of psychology with this penetrating assessment.

“The logic of Adams’s theological analysis also provides little room for the recognition of any knowledge among non-Christians. Furthermore, Adams’s application of presuppositional analysis **goes beyond Van Til’s assessment of psychology.** Adams rejects the methods and insights of secular psychology and psychiatry because of their foundational principles. **Van Til remains open to the insights of secular psychology**” (274).

Again, does this make Van Til—upon whom Adams built his presuppositional approach to counseling—“zombie-infected”? Or, does it show that even the most theologically conservative Reformed theologian(s) see God’s common grace at work even within the realm of psychology?

Van Tillian Biblical Counselors

I would add to what Jared says. If we read our fellow biblical counselors correctly—in light of Van Til—then:

We should not call them “zombie-infected neo-integrationists.”

Instead, we should call them “Van Tillian biblical counselors.”

The Intersection of Grace and Sin

In our modern biblical counseling world, at times we oversimplify theology. This is true with our discussions of common grace. We simplistically pit two concepts against each other: the noetic effect of sin *and* common grace.

However, Van Til (and Calvin, Bavinck, and Kuyper) interacted about the intersection of several interrelated concepts:

- On the one hand, they considered multiple overlapping theological concepts such as sin, the spiritual antithesis, the noetic effect of sin, total depravity, the darkened minds of those who are dead in sin, etc.

- On the other hand, they considered multiple overlapping theological concepts such as grace, common grace, the *imago Dei*, the Creation Mandate, creation, nature, general revelation (the book of nature), the book of conscience (Romans 2), God's providence, God's affectionate sovereignty in providentially maintaining human society, etc.

Van Til frequently addresses this complexity. For example:

“In practice, therefore, the man of the street is **a complex individual**. He is first the **creature made in the image of God**. He is now in principle **opposed to God**. He is **dead in trespasses and sins....** But he does not live fully from his principle. Therefore he does not react in the exclusively negative way that we would expect him to, if we look at the principle that ultimately controls him. Like the prodigal of the scriptural parable **he cannot forget the father's voice and the father's house....** On the one hand **he will do the good**, in the sense of that which externally at least is in accord with the will of God. **He will live a good moral life**. He will be anxious to **promote the welfare of his fellow men**” (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 225).

“It is therefore of the utmost importance to distinguish between what the natural man is by virtue of his adopted principle and what he still is because of the **knowledge of God as his creator that he has within him** and because of the **non-saving grace** by which he is kept from working out his principle to the full and by which he is therefore also **able to do the morally good**” (*A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 225-226).

Just as Christians never live in perfect consistency with the new person we are in Christ, so the non-Christian never lives in perfect consistency with the old person they are without Christ. The natural man is always also the man created in the image of God and the man influenced by the common grace of God. The natural man can never fully suppress the consciousness of God and can never fully resist the common grace of God. Therefore:

- The non-Christian—under the control of God's sovereign common grace—can discover truth.
- The Christian—under the control of God's sovereign saving grace—assesses common grace findings under the control of God's all-sufficient Word.

Oh the Riches of the Wisdom and Knowledge of God!

In saving grace, we know that where sin abounds, grace superabounds (Romans 5:20). In common grace, where sin abounds, common grace superabounds. God's sovereign plans will never be thwarted. God's common grace will never be thwarted.

Saving grace glorifies God, rather than glorifying the Christian. So also, common grace glorifies God, rather than glorifying the non-Christian.

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Romans 11:33).

Reformed Theologian #5: David Powlison

David Powlison on Common Grace, Biblical Counseling, and Secular Psychology

A Word from Bob

There is much discussion these days in the modern biblical counseling world concerning how the Reformed doctrine of common grace relates to the biblical counselor's attitude toward, the use or non-use of, the engagement with, and the evaluation of non-Christian resources. We've been looking to Reformed theologians for insights into this vital issue.

Many biblical counselors are also quoting David Powlison to support their views. Because Powlison was a nuanced thinker, it is possible to quote him seemingly siding with those arguing for a very limited use of common grace resources, or to quote him seemingly siding with those arguing for a very engaged use of common grace resources. Elsewhere, I've cautioned us to be careful lest we misuse and disrespect the life and ministry of David Powlison. You can read that caution here: [Cherry-Picking David Powlison](#).

Nate Brooks shares a similar caution in his article, [What Did David Powlison Teach About Scripture and Psychology?](#) Under the header of "(Mis)Quoting Powlison," Brooks writes:

"We all, as biblical counselors, are stewards of the literary contributions of David Powlison to our discipline. He was wise, measured, and nuanced. And like all nuanced writers, his work can be easily partially quoted in such a way as to make him appear to deny or to support positions that he himself would not recognize.

By leaning into only his critiques of secular psychology, Powlison can be made to seem quite hostile to secular theories. After all, secular psychology is 'a major enemy of the church' that is "a self-conscious, self-proclaimed competitor" to authentic faith practiced by "secular priest-pastors, shepherding the human soul... administering the institutions of the cure of souls, administering the mental health centers, the counseling offices, and the psychiatric hospitals' ("Modern Therapies and the Church's Faith," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 15.1 (1996): 32-41, 33). While such a quotation accurately captures Powlison's words, it terribly misrepresents his actual belief system.

Likewise, it's not difficult to make Powlison a proponent of what he would deny, as he affirms that '[t]he operations of God's common grace can cause unbelievers to be relatively observant, caring, stimulating, and informative' ("Affirmations and Denials: A Proposed Definition of Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 19.1 (2000): 21). Secular theories 'embody helpful skills in knowing, in loving, and in speaking,' meaning that when wise biblical counselors '...encounter psychological information,' we should say, 'I'm listening, so tell me anything and everything you know about everybody and anybody' ("How Does Scripture Teach Us

to *Redeem Psychology?*” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26.3 (2012), 19). Selectively quoting this side of Powlison’s thought makes him seem like an integrationist, seeing the therapies themselves as curing humanity’s greatest problems.”

In this section, I will provide you with a collation of many of David Powlison’s first-hand quotes about common grace, and about the biblical counselor’s relationship to extra-biblical resources. Please consider this section an introduction to Powlison on biblical counseling and common grace, as I hope to further expand my research and writing on Powlison on this issue.

As I’ve read Powlison on biblical counseling and common grace, it’s become increasingly apparent what a robust thinker, avid reader, and eclectic researcher he was. David Powlison was *not* afraid to read and think “outside the biblical counseling box.” Because of that, as you trace his writings, it is easy to see *development* in his thinking on how biblical counselors engage with extra-biblical resources. In order to convey something of this development over time, under each heading, I’ll be providing these quotes in chronological order—and perhaps you’ll sense something of Powlison’s developmental thinking...

David Powlison on Common Grace and Biblical Counseling

In Powlison’s *Affirmations & Denials* (2000), in several places he develops the role of common grace in biblical counseling. Powlison specifically addresses this issue under his header of “*God’s providence and the interplay between His common grace and the intellectual-practical effects of sin.*”

“We affirm that **numerous disciplines and professions can contribute to an increase in our knowledge of people and how to help them.** Scripture teaches a **standpoint and gaze by which believers can learn many things from those who do not believe.**”

Powlison here confirms that unbelievers can make a positive contribution to what counseling is all about—“our knowledge of people and how to help them.” He also teaches what Calvin taught—that Scripture provides the “spectacles” (Calvin), or lens, or “standpoint and gaze” (Powlison) so believers can learn many things from unbelievers.

Powlison is quick to explain what non-Christian systems can’t do.

“We deny that any of these disciplines and professions can align and **constitute a system of faith and practice** for wise counseling.”

Scripture is all-sufficient to build our theology of people (anthropology), problems (hamartiology), and solutions (soteriology); it is all-sufficient to provide the lens by which we engage and evaluate any and all common grace resources from non-Christians. For Powlison, common grace does **not** build our model of counseling; common grace **can** contribute to our understanding of people and people-helping—assessed by Scripture.

Powlison makes the same balanced points in his subsequent affirmation and denial statement about common grace.

“We deny that secular disciplines and professions **are entirely benighted** by the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic effects of sin. **The operations of God’s common grace can cause unbelievers to be relatively observant, caring, stimulating, and informative.** We affirm that the **personality theories** are essentially false theologies, and the psychotherapies are essentially false forms of the cure of souls. Even the more descriptive and empirical psychologies are significantly **skewed by secular presuppositions**, and **their findings need to be reinterpreted by the biblical worldview.**”

The Bible provides the authoritative interpretive lens by which we reinterpret common grace contributions of unbelievers. We build our personality theory from Scripture; we use Scripture to engage with and evaluate secular personality theories.

In his first category of affirmations and denials, Powlison also emphasizes the Bible’s authoritative role for theory-building, alongside the scriptural reality of common grace resources related to understanding people and their problems.

“We affirm that the Bible, as the revelation of Jesus Christ’s redemptive activity, intends to **specifically guide and inform counseling ministry.** We deny that the Bible intends to serve as an encyclopedia of proof texts containing **all facts about people and the diversity of problems in living.**”

In 2010, Powlison was a contributing developer to the [Biblical Counseling Coalition’s Confessional Statement](#). On common grace and biblical counseling, Powlison and other biblical counseling leaders wrote:

“When we say that Scripture is comprehensive in wisdom, we mean that the Bible makes sense of all things, **not that it contains all the information people could ever know about all topics. God’s common grace brings many good things to human life.... We affirm that numerous sources (such as scientific research, organized observations about human behavior, those we counsel, reflection on our own life experience, literature, film, and history) can contribute to our knowledge of people, and many sources can contribute some relief for the troubles of life.**”

As part of this common grace approach to biblical counseling, David Powlison affirmed the importance of a variety of areas and avenues that biblical counselors follow.

“We recognize the complexity of the relationship between the body and soul (Genesis 2:7). Because of this, we seek to remain sensitive to physical factors and organic issues that affect people’s lives. In our desire to help people comprehensively, we seek to apply God’s Word to people’s lives amid bodily strengths and weaknesses. We

encourage a thorough assessment and sound treatment for any suspected physical problems.

“We recognize the complexity of the connection between people and their social environment. Thus we seek to remain sensitive to the impact of suffering and of the great variety of significant social-cultural factors (1 Peter 3:8-22). In our desire to help people comprehensively, we seek to apply God’s Word to people’s lives amid both positive and negative social experiences. **We encourage people to seek appropriate practical aid when their problems have a component that involves education, work life, finances, legal matters, criminality (either as a victim or a perpetrator), and other social matters.**”

Powlison and others encouraged biblical counselors to learn from secular psychology and from Christian integrative counselors.

“We seek to **engage the broad spectrum of counseling models and approaches.** We want to **affirm what is biblical and wise.** We want to **listen well to those who disagree with us, and learn from their critiques.**”

In a [2012 article](#) (*How Does Scripture Teach Us to Redeem Psychology?*), Powlison had much to say about the value of secular psychology. Biblical counselors, according to Powlison, must start by *looking for the good in secular psychology*. To do otherwise equals “sectarian contentiousness.” Here’s Powlison in his own words:

“*Look for the good.* To make true sense of the psychologies, our critical **thinking must intentionally look for the good. This has to be underlined.**”

Sectarian contentiousness only sees the bad, and does not produce redemption. But as in all the other mixed cases needing redemption, **there is good in Psychology:**

- **Secular researchers and clinicians know reams of significant facts about people and problems, about strengths and weaknesses.** (We may not have noticed or known some or many of those facts. In encountering psychological information, **I’m listening**, so tell me anything and everything you know about everybody and anybody.)
- Secular theories seek to **answer crucial questions and address hard problems.** (We may not have thought to ask those questions or address those problems. I want to take to heart hard questions that need answering.)
- **Secular therapies often embody helpful skills in knowing, in loving, and in speaking** so as to catch the ear of strugglers. (We may be relatively clumsy. O skillful God, make me more probing. Make me more patient and kind. Make me more able to speak constructive words, according to the need of the moment, that I might give grace to those who hear.)” (18).

“We gain much and lose nothing by being appropriately **attentive to and appreciative of their strengths**” (19). “**Secular** therapists describe troubled people

so **vividly!** Their **desire to help** is so **palpable!**" (19). "We gain a point of contact with **non-Christian psychologists** when we **wed** something true and clear to the very things they know, care about, pursue, and do" (20).

Clearly, Powlison insists that biblical counselors should be secular psychology-aware, secular psychology-informed. Clearly he suggests numerous categories and areas where secular psychology can make contributions to biblical counseling.

In a [2018 article](#), Powlison had even more to say about the benefits of common grace insights for biblical counseling.

"But it is a **true common grace that secular theories and practices always retain an instinct for the first word in that definition of human flourishing: love.** Like most thoughtful people and most religions, **they value human kindness** and certain other aspects of person-to-person goodness. They **witness and grieve the pain and misery** caused by bad behavior, bad feelings, bad thoughts, and bad experiences. They know that caring for others is better than narcissism, arrogance, manipulation, revenge, and self-righteousness. To be cherished is far better than to be despised. Hope is far better than despair. Safety is far better than danger. Sanity and realism are far better than paranoia and delusion. Treating others well and being treated well is far better than all forms of using, misusing, mistreating, abusing, and betraying. A constructively purposeful life is far better than a pointlessly self-destructive lifestyle. To be part of the solution is far better than being part of the problem. And so forth!"

Powlison on the Usefulness of Secular Psychology

In a [1993 article](#), Powlison noted how Jay Adams saw the value of secular psychology.

"This is not to say that biblical counselors should ignore or dismiss the various secular psychologies. For example, see Jay Adams's *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), page 31: Question: 'Don't you think that we can learn something from psychologists?' Answer: '**Yes, we can learn a lot; I certainly have. That answer surprised you, didn't it? If it did, you have been led to believe, no doubt, that nouthetic counselors are obscurantists who see no good in psychology**'" (24).

"Every wise biblical counselor engages in lifelong empirical researches, informally if not formally. In this process **psychologists, sociologists**, historians, counselees, the non-Christians who live next door, *USA Today* and Agatha Christie **may contribute to our grasp of the styles and how they develop.** Often in counseling or reading—and even in our own repentance!" (21).

"Biblical counselors who fail to think through carefully the nature of biblical epistemology run the danger of **acting as if Scripture were exhaustive**, rather than comprehensive; as if Scripture were **an encyclopedic catalogue of all significant facts**, rather than God's revelation of the crucial facts, richly illustrated, that yield a world view sufficient to **interpret whatever other facts we encounter**; as if

Scripture were the whole bag of marbles rather than the eyeglasses through which we interpret all marbles; as if our current grasp of Scripture and people were **triumphant and final**" (32).

It's safe to say that neither Adams nor Powlison were fascinated by secular psychology or frustrated with Scripture. It's also safe to say that Adams and Powlison were secular psychology-informed. It's safe to say that Powlison wanted biblical counselors to be research-aware, research-informed. It's safe to say that historically biblical counselors did *not* avoid secular psychology, but that psychologists and non-Christians can make contributions to the thinking of biblical counselors.

Powlison (and Adams and Bettler) on the Use of Secular Psychology

In a [1988 article](#), *Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling*, Powlison boldly lays out his concern at the very beginning of his article. "Counseling in the Christian church continues to be compromised significantly by the secular assumptions and practices of our culture's reigning psychologies and psychiatries" (53-54). However, by the end of his article, he develops the crucial need for contemporary biblical counselors to "appreciate" secular psychology.

"Perhaps it seems a paradox, but **the final crucial issue** for contemporary biblical counseling is the need to define more clearly the nuances in our relationship to secular thinking. The relationship of presuppositional consistent Christianity to secular culture is **not simply one of rejection**. Half of what biblical presuppositions give us is a way to discern the lie that tries to make people think about themselves as autonomous from God. **But the other half of what biblical categories do is give us a way of appreciating, redeeming, and reframing the culture of even the most godless men and women**" (5).

Almost four decades ago, Powlison urged biblical counselors to understand God's common grace, to understand the noetic effect of sin, and to use the Bible as our spectacles or lens for engaging with and evaluating extra-biblical resources.

In a 1993 article, [25 Years of Biblical Counseling: An Interview with Jay Adams and John Bettler Conducted by David Powlison](#), Powlison outlines six words describing what modern nouthetic biblical counseling does with secular psychology (you can [read my summary here](#)). According to Adams, the goal of the discussion was:

*"To produce a word that adequately and accurately expresses **what a biblical Christian does with secular knowledge.**"*

They use six "R" words. Note that **none** of these "R" words are "**Reject.**" Instead, Adams, Bettler, and Powlison explain that biblical counselors should **recycle** secular knowledge, **reinterpret** secular knowledge, **reshape** secular knowledge, **reconcile** secular knowledge, **redeem** secular knowledge, and **recast** secular knowledge. Bettler suggests that biblical counselors recycle error (in light of the truth). Sounds a bit like "integrating."

In a [1996 article](#), Powlison illustrates **reinterpreting** secular psychological theory using Adler as a specific example.

“Take as an example Alfred Adler’s *Understanding Human Nature*. He has a **seventy-page section that is one of the finest descriptions of total depravity I’ve ever read**. What’s interesting is that Alfred Adler doesn’t believe in total depravity; he doesn’t believe in sin. But he dissects things right down to why people pick their noses. He gets into the dirt of life and looks at the tricks and the chaos and the self-centeredness. He cares to help. **But here’s where we see the distorting, pervasive effects of sin**. Adler’s observations don’t just hang in space as good ideas that a Christian can bring unaltered into a Christian framework. What Adler or anyone else describes and cares about is controlled by a grid, a framework of presuppositions. That has an effect even on Adler’s “data” in three ways” (38).

Here we see Powlison both affirming insights from Adler (“a seventy-page section that is one of the finest descriptions of total depravity I’ve ever read”) and assessing those same insights theologically (“but here’s where we see the distorting, pervasive effects of sin”). Throughout his article, Powlison illustrates “the reinterpetive task” by which “Christians can engage our culture’s belief systems” (39).

Summarizing David Powlison

Perhaps one way of summarizing David Powlison’s position on common grace, biblical counseling, and secular psychology might be to say that he was:

Theologically-saturated, sufficiency of Scripture-centered, total depravity-alert, common grace-focused, and psychology-informed.

Powlison on Biblical Counseling and Secular Psychotherapy

The Bible and Extra-Biblical Sources

In 2007, David Powlison wrote one of his most influential articles: [“Cure of Souls \(and the Modern Psychotherapies\).”](#) This is a detailed, thirty-five page article that could easily be a booklet if not a small book. In this article, as the title suggests, Powlison specifically addresses how biblical counselors view, use, and engage with secular psychology theory and practice. Powlison also contrasts how Christian integrative counselors and biblical counselors see the relationship of the Bible to extra-biblical resources.

It is in this article that Powlison introduces his acronyms “COMPIN” and “VITEX.” COMPIN is Powlison’s summary of the biblical counseling position on secular psychology which states that,

“The Christian faith contains *COMPrehensive INternal resources* to enable us to construct a Christian model of personality, change, and counseling” (11).

The other model—the Christian integrative counseling model—is “VITEX,” which:

“Believes that secular psychologies must make a *VITal EXternal contribution* in the construction of a Christian model of personality, change, and counseling” (11).

In an article about how Christianity provides comprehensive resources for building a biblical counseling model of people, problems, and solutions, it may be surprising to read how Powlison describes the biblical counselor’s view and use of extra-biblical information. One might assume that since biblical counselors do not believe secular psychology makes a *vital* contribution to building a counseling model, that therefore secular psychology makes *little* contribution. However, this is *not* Powlison’s position at all.

Can a Biblical Counselor Be Sufficiency-Centered and Psychology-Informed?

Put in the language of 2024, Powlison is saying that biblical counselors are sufficiency-centered and psychology-informed. That is quite the claim. Let’s see how Powlison develops his theology of the Christian use of non-Christian resources.

Insisting that biblical counselors “believe that the Bible fiercely resists syncretism” (8), Powlison adds:

“But they [biblical counselors] still claim that **something can be learned from the psychologies**: wrong does not mean stupid; error **must borrow elements of truth** to be plausible; God often allows observant and persuasive error to expose lacunae, crudities, and distortions in His own children’s thinking and practice. That Scripture is ‘sufficient’ to transform us never means that the Bible is ‘exhaustive’” (8).

So, what should biblical counselors do with such secular information? Study it!

“There is solid theological rationale for viewing **secular disciplines as fit subjects for hard study**. The **stuff of psychology does not necessarily wholly overlap the Bible**” (9).

Powlison, as always, is careful and nuanced. Biblical counselors do not build their model on secular psychology, however, they are secular psychology-informed:

“While the modern psychologies will **stimulate and inform**, they do not play a constitutive role in building a robust model” (11).

“But as honest observers and thinkers, COMPIN advocates **want to gain what knowledge they can**, both **theoretical and applied**, from the **social sciences** and other fields” (13).

“Theoretical and applied”—that is, theology and methodology. Powlison asserts that biblical counselors want to gain knowledge about the theory and methods of counseling from the social sciences—from modern psychotherapies.

Speaking of COMPIN biblical counselors and of VITEX Christian integrative counselors, Powlison explains,

“Both sides say **we can learn something from psychology**; both sides say **the Bible gets final say**” (13).

In Powlison’s eyes, biblical counselors learn from secular psychology and use biblical eyes to assess what they learn.

Maintaining Our Priorities

In the *Cure of Souls*, Powlison discusses tiered priorities, with the first priority being building our counseling model from Scripture, the second priority being biblically assessing non-biblical models, and:

“Our third priority must be **to learn what we can from defective models**. We will always be stimulated, challenged, **and informed** by those with whom we disagree and whom we aim to convert. Articulating our own model (1st) and critiquing other models (2nd) **frees us to learn from others** without being counter-converted or becoming syncretistic. Such learning also enables us to enter the frame of reference of those we hope to persuade” (14).

Thus, according to Powlison, biblical counselors are sufficiency-of-Scripture-centered, while being psychology-informed.

But what about specifics? In Powlison's theology, what can biblical counselors learn from non-believers?

"The third priority: learning what we can from other models. **We can learn from everything around us.** Saying that God Himself 'learns' from ancient Near Eastern societies is inaccurate. But there is no doubt that **God's prophets and apostles learn from everything around them.** God adapts His message to time, place, language, culture, and people. **The Bible freely co-opts surrounding cultures** as one aspect of God's redemptive, transformative working. God's servants work with what is around them linguistically, politically, religiously, economically, artistically, educationally, agriculturally, militarily. Committed to knowing the truth and critiquing error, **they then appropriate lots of things.** Redemption **works with what is at hand, the "human documents,"** both individual and social, and the **cultural products"** (15).

"From the standpoint of fundamental model building, such learning plays a distinctly tertiary role. **But this third priority is not unimportant.** Because we ourselves are both limited by finitude and tainted by sin, God often uses "perceptive error" to reprove His people. It's part of how He makes us work to refine our understanding and application of His truth. **Others may be seeing things we aren't seeing, doing things we aren't doing, asking questions we aren't asking.** God's redemptive revelation is constitutive, but even counterbiblical theories may be provocative. **And extra-biblical knowledge—of ourselves and our world—is always the grist with which biblical truth works continually to extend the range and depth of understanding.** We learn, critique, reinterpret, convert, apply. **We are able to traffic in the extra-biblical constructively** when we know what we ought to know that reorients and controls our gaze (the first and second priorities)" (15).

"This is God's world, so everything, even if it intends to efface God, bears witness to God—**understood and reinterpreted through biblical eyeglasses.** **The Bible freely traffics in the extrabiblical,** in the creation, in fallen cultural products, in the terminology of the very contemporary falsehoods that God is attacking. But God always interprets or reinterprets. He is imperial. Biblical truth is a corrective gaze" (15).

This is classic Powlison:

Eyes open to God's world; eyes focused with the corrective lens of God's Word.

Powlison explains how the Bible itself models how to engage with extra-biblical sources.

"The Bible never fears secular education. Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22); God gave Daniel and his friends knowledge and intelligence in every branch of Chaldean literature and wisdom (Dan. 1:17); Paul was a man of great learning (Acts 22:3, 26:24). But Moses, Daniel, and Paul interpreted life through God's redemptive grid. Paul could quote with favor an "anthropologist" who studied life in Crete (Titus 1:12), and he could weave the words of Greek literati into his

argument in Athens (Acts 17:28). Where the living, speaking, seeing, acting God rules, **His servants move freely into the culture of their time and place. The Bible gives no warrant for Christians to be intellectual isolationists, to be biblicistic, cut off from culture, speaking a private language to our own kind**” (15).

Powlison does not give short shrift to this, instead, he gives frequent attention to the biblical counselor’s engagement with extra-biblical models.

“Third, we will **develop our model through interacting with contemporary models. Their successes can certainly reprove us, and help us see more clearly places where we are inept and ignorant**—as long as we do not counter-convert. Their observations of what makes human life go and not go **can inform us**—if we radically reinterpret them from within our world view. At every point, the first priority must be first, the second second, the third third” (16).

There it is again and again and again:

Engaged with the world; enlightened by God’s Word.

Eyes Wide Open

In Powlison’s theology, as long as we keep the first thing first—the authority/sufficiency of Scripture—then we can engage extra-biblical sources wisely.

“First, the necessity of reordering our priorities **does not mean that it is wrong to closely study psychological, relational, and counseling processes. Exactly the opposite.** Psychological study that submits itself to God’s truth becomes part of the joyous outworking of the church’s first priority. When we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, we enter into a vast practical-theological task, not a concordance search for the proof-text for every problem. Adopting a frankly biblical worldview, we should get about the business of hard, fruitful study, in subordination to the mind of Christ” (16).

Notice that Powlison does not say, “a cursory study of psychology.” He says “closely study” modern psychotherapy theory and methodology. Sufficiency of Scripture, rather than shutting our eyes to the world, opens our eyes to *engage and evaluate the world through the Word.*

Instead of the sufficiency of Scripture secluding us from secular psychology, it motivates us to be psychology-informed.

“Careful ‘psychological’ study is one direct implication of the sufficiency of Scripture and of getting our first priority straight” (17).

We tend to think that the implication of sufficiency is avoiding being psychology-informed. Powlison claims the opposite. A “direct implication of the sufficiency of Scripture” is being psychology-informed—“careful ‘psychological’ study.”

Powlison and Adams

Is Powlison deviating from classic Jay Adams nouthetic counseling? Powlison does not believe so.

“Adams’s formal epistemology is a rather typically reformed transformationist position toward **the observations and ideas of secular disciplines**. He denied their necessity for constructing a systematic pastoral theology, but **affirmed their potential usefulness** when appropriated through Christian eyes. Epistemologically, Adams is a radical Christianizer of secularity, not a biblicistic xenophobe. He is no triumphalist, believing that Christian faith has already arrived at the sum of all wisdom, but believes that **secular disciplines can both challenge and inform us**” (30).

According to Powlison, Jay Adams was secular-psychology-informed while being sufficiency-of-Scripture-centered.

In a footnote, Powlison adds this about Adams:

“Adams’s transformationist attitude towards culture is most apparent in his attitudes towards medicine. He is less interested in and more suspicious of the social sciences, **but never denies that things can be learned from anyone and everywhere**. In *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (p. 80), **he even cited a swami favorably!** Adams’s **willingness to appropriate and rework insights from secular theorists** is most evident in his discussions of moralistic therapies (e.g., Mowrer and Glasser) and existentialists (e.g., Frankl). No doubt, if Aaron Beck’s cognitive-behavioral therapy had been prominent in the early 1970s when Adams wrote in this vein, Beck would have come in for treatment similar to what was extended to the moralists and existentialists. Adams rarely demonstrated the same sort of carefully critical appreciation when discussing psychodynamic and humanistic psychologists, **which in my view is a weakness in how he applied what he believed**. The playing field is level, and **none of the secular psychologies are either uniquely privileged or uniquely hobbled** in comparison to each other” (footnote 3, page 35).

Adams learned from a swami! He appropriated insights from secular therapists—especially the behaviorists like [Mowrer](#) and Glasser. And notice what Powlison is saying. He would have *gone further* than Adams by studying and being informed by psychodynamic and humanistic psychologists.

In another footnote, Powlison argues against those who say that Adams was opposed to learning from psychology.

“Roger Hurdling’s *The Tree of Healing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985) is an exception to the ritual charge that Adams is against ‘psychology’. He recognized Adams’s **principlal willingness to learn from and interact with secular psychological knowledge and theory**, but accurately observed that this was not a

“developed argument” in Adams’s overall writing and practice (285)” (footnote 2, page 35).

Powlison agrees with Hurding: Jay Adams had a willingness to learn from secular psychological knowledge and theory.

Summarizing David Powlison

Based on the *Cure of Souls*, how might we summarize Powlison’s theology of biblical counseling and modern psychotherapies?

- Sufficiency-of-Scripture-centered and psychology-informed.
- Eyes open to God’s Word; eyes focused with the corrective lens of God’s Word.
- Engaged with the world; enlightened by God’s Word.
- Engage and evaluate the world through the Word.

Reformed Theologian #6: John Frame

John Frame on Common Grace, Biblical Counseling, and Christian Integrative Counseling

John Frame (1939) is a Calvinist theologian known especially for his work in presuppositional apologetics and systematic theology. He is a student of Cornelius Van Til and is one of the foremost interpreters of Van Til. This post not only explores Frame's thinking on common grace, but it also delves into his thinking on how common grace relates to biblical counseling and Christian integrative counseling.

Defining Common Grace

John Frame defines common grace succinctly:

“Common grace is God’s favor and gifts given to those who will not be finally saved” (*Systematic Theology*, 68, n 16).

He then offers six categories related to the biblical doctrine of common grace:

- God restrains sin (Gen 4:15; 11:6; 20:6; 2 Kings 27:28; 2 Thess 2:7).
- God restrains his wrath (Matt 19:8; Acts 17:30; Rom 3:25).
- God gives temporal blessings to all (Matt 5:45; Ps 65:5-13; 104; 136:25).
- Unregenerate people do good (2 Kings 10:29-31; Luke 6:33).
- Unregenerate people know truth (Rom 1:20; Matt 23:3-4).
- Unregenerate people experience the blessings of the Holy Spirit (Num 22:1-24:25; 1 Sam 10:9-11; Matt 10:5-8) (*Systematic Theology*, 247-248).

Frame relates common grace to the concept of “civic righteousness”:

“Some people contribute much to the well-being of society—by helping the poor, by becoming great artists, musicians, authors, and public servants, and in other ways—without a heart to serve God. This is often called *civic righteousness* in the theological literature” (*Systematic Theology*, 247-248).

The Non-Christian’s Contribution to Society and Science

In his book *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Frame writes that:

“...unbelievers are able to do things that look good to us. They don’t look good to God, for God knows the heart. But they look good to us, **and they often bring benefits to society**. So **non-Christians often improve society through their skills and ideas**. They make **scientific discoveries**, produce labor-saving inventions, develop businesses that supply jobs, produce works of art and entertainment.

He nuances his understanding with these words:

“We should acknowledge from the outset that the adjective “common” does not appear in the Bible as a modifier of the noun “grace.” But we are justified in making use of it in view of how God’s dealings with non-Christian people is portrayed for us in Scripture. Our task will be to determine in what sense, if any at all, the grace of God is given to or is operative in the lives of those who persist throughout life in unbelief and rebellion against God. (For a discussion of common “goodness” or “love” vs. common “grace,” see John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 429–30.)

Twitter/X

On a Twitter/X Thread on October 14, 2024 Frame wrote the following: (@DrJohnFrame <https://x.com/DrJohnFrame/status/1845936741779152971>)

- Couple aspects of common grace. Unregenerate people do good: In one sense, no one can do good apart from the saving grace of God. We have seen that man is depraved (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Rom. 3:9–18). “Those who are in the flesh [instead of God’s Spirit] cannot please God” (Rom.8:8).
- But Scripture does attribute good, in lesser senses, to the unregenerate, such as King Jehu (2 Kings 10:29–31). Jesus said that even the wicked do good things to those who do good to them (Luke 6:33).
- **Unregenerate people know truth:** In Scripture, knowledge is ethical, something that we engage in either obediently or disobediently (see chapters 29–32). So although all people know God (Rom. 1:21), they suppress that knowledge. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–2:15.
- But Jesus says the Pharisees, for all their disobedience, are able in some measure to teach correctly (Matt. 23:2–3).

Common Grace, Biblical Counseling, and Christian Integrative Counseling

How might Frame relate common grace to the issue of biblical counseling and Christian integrative counseling? Frame provides a lengthy, nuanced perspective in an April 11, 2016, article, *Biblical Counseling, General Revelation, and the Sufficiency of Scripture*. (**Note:** I am **not** presenting Frame’s view as **my** view. I am simply sharing how Frame seeks to work out common grace and God’s revelation in terms of counseling.)

To understand Frame’s arguments in this article, we must understand his triperspectival view of epistemology. In this view, Frame discusses the unity of God’s revelation in three forms:

1. Special revelation,
2. General revelation, and
3. “Existential revelation” (the revelation in people as image bearers).

While giving priority to special, Frame also insists that all three modes of revelation provide insight for human life.

“Keep in mind that the normative perspective is not Scripture. The normative perspective includes ALL of God’s revelation, and that of course is universal. So theologians distinguish ‘special revelation,’ ‘general revelation,’ and the revelation in man as the image of God, what I call ‘existential revelation.’ In the triperspectival understanding, each of these perspectives includes the other two. So the normative perspective includes everything. It sees God **and his entire creation as supplying norms for human decisions.**

Scripture is not the normative perspective. It is a part of the normative perspective, but also part of the situational and existential perspectives. It is a book which is normative, but also a fact of the objective world (situational) and a fact of human experience (existential).

What is distinctive about Scripture is that it is the covenant document that God inspired to govern his people and ultimately to govern mankind. In that respect, Scripture is different from other ‘norms.’ We describe it as necessary, authoritative, clear, and sufficient. Winnie the Pooh is also part of the normative perspective (since everything is part of the normative perspective), but it has a very different function from Scripture within the normative perspective. Scripture is inerrant; Winnie is not.

Again, I don’t think there is any inconsistency between my doctrine of Scripture and my triperspectival epistemology. Scripture is a very special kind of norm, ruling all the other norms in the normative perspective. It is also part of the situational perspective, the fact that illumines all the other facts. And it is part of my subjective experience, the experience that governs all my other experiences.

As I say, it fits together nicely. But of course it is possible for Christians to misunderstand this and to set up an illegitimate dichotomy between Scripture and the three perspectives, as when someone says ‘Scripture is our rule, not the normative perspective.’ Of course Scripture is our rule, our ultimate authority. But everyone understands that we USE Scripture by APPLYING it to situations outside of Scripture. So to use Scripture, we must understand things beyond Scripture. That is, to use this norm, we must understand situations and persons. So to use our authoritative Scripture, we must understand its relation (as ultimate norm) to the situational and existential perspectives.”

Now Frame is prepared to apply all of this to counseling. Notice how he sees value **both** in the nouthetic/biblical counseling approach, **and** in the integrationist approach.

“Now in counseling theory, the nouthetic/‘biblical’ school focuses on the authority, especially the sufficiency, of Scripture. The ‘integrationists’ focus on the need to correlate Scripture with extra-biblical data. In my terms, they [integrationists] focus on **the balance of the three perspectives.**

In an important sense, **both are right**. Christian counselors must hold firmly to the sufficiency of Scripture. **But** of course if they have **ONLY** Scripture, and refuse to apply Scripture to situations and people, then their counseling can't get off the ground. **So the integrationists are right too**; but they need to be reminded that Scripture is the covenant book: when extra-biblical data seems to point in a different direction, we must adhere to Scripture, even Scriptura SOLA.

For the most part, I would like to see **a less polemical relation between these two schools**. Conceptually there is no need for it. **The sufficiency of Scripture is compatible with the need to integrate Scripture with extrabiblical data**. And the extrabiblical data must be understood in the light of Scripture. Neither can function without the other.

The nouthetic/biblical group has acknowledged the value of triperspectival epistemology. Dave Powlison has written to me about that in a very encouraging fashion. On the other hand, my colleagues here have not questioned my doctrine of sola Scriptura. My old friend Jim Hurley said to me some time ago that 'Jay Adams gave us back the Bible.' So what is left to argue about? Perhaps some of the problem is partisanship, team-rivalry."

Right or wrong, John Frame, the student and interpreter of Van Til, concludes that, "the sufficiency of Scripture is compatible with the need to integrate Scripture with extrabiblical data."

What do *you* think?

Reformed Theologian #7: Charles Hodge

7 Reformed Theologians on Common Grace

Charles Hodge, 19th century Reformed theologian, introduces common grace, with an emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit:

“The Bible therefore teaches that the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth to Him good. In this sphere also He divides ‘to every man severally as He will.’ (1 Cor. xii. 11.) This is what in theology is called common grace” (*Systematic Theology*, II:667).

Hodge further develops his view of common grace and the work of the Spirit:

“All Christians believe that as God is everywhere present in the material world, guiding the operation of second causes so that they secure the results which He designs; so his Spirit is everywhere present with the minds of men, exciting to good and restraining from evil, effectually controlling human character and conduct, consistently with the laws of rational beings” (*Systematic Theology*, 1:69).

What are the effects of common grace?

“There is a sense in which, as all evangelical Christians believe, the Spirit is given to every man. He is present with every human mind exciting to good and restraining from evil. To this the order, and what there is of morality in the world, are due. Without this ‘common grace,’ or general influence of the Spirit, there would be no difference between our world and hell; for hell is a place or state in which men are finally given up of God. In like manner, there is a general providential efficiency of God by which He cooperates with second causes, in the productions of the wonderful phenomena of the external world. Without that cooperation—the continued guidance of mind—the cosmos would become chaos” (*Systematic Theology*, 1:101).

Reformed Theologian #8: John Murray

7 Reformed Theologians on Common Grace

First, Murray introduces the tension that exists between the depravity of sinners and the realities we witness in the world and in the lives of non-Christians. Acknowledging this tension, Murray asks a series of very insistent questions:

“How is it that men who still lie under the wrath and curse of God and are heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God? How is it that men who are not savingly renewed by the Spirit of God nevertheless **exhibit so many qualities, gifts and accomplishments that promote the preservation, temporal happiness, cultural progress, social and economic improvement of themselves and of others?** How is it that races and peoples that have been apparently untouched by the redemptive and regenerative influences of the gospel **contribute so much to what we call human civilization?** To put the question most comprehensively: how is it that this sin-cursed world enjoys so much favor and kindness at the hand of its holy and ever-blessed Creator?” (“Common Grace,” in the *Collected Writings of John Murray*, II:93).

Murray answers his own questions by explaining that in goodness and as an expression of His kindness toward the material creation, God holds in check the destructive tendencies that are part of the curse of sin upon nature—fallen human nature as well as fallen creation.

“Sin introduces disintegration and disorganization in every realm. While it is true that only in the sphere of rationality does sin have meaning—it originates in mind, it develops in mind, it resides in mind—yet sin works out disastrous effects outside the sphere of the rational and moral as well as within it. God places restraint upon these effects, he prevents the full development of this disintegration. He brings to bear upon this world in all its spheres correcting and preserving influences so that the ravages of sin might not be allowed to work out the full measure of their destructive power” (“Common Grace,” II:101).

This work of God is common grace, which Murray defines as:

“Every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God” (“Common Grace,” in the *Collected Writings of John Murray*, II:96).

Murray then develops common grace further, noting that through it, God endows men and women with gifts, talents, and opportunities they don’t deserve. God grants them:

“**Gifts, talents, and aptitudes;** he stimulates them with interest and purpose to the practice of virtues, the pursuance of worthy tasks, and **the cultivation of arts and sciences** that occupy the time, activity and energy of men and **that make for the benefit and civilization of the human race.** He ordains institutions for the

protection and promotion of right, the preservation of liberty, **the advance of knowledge and the improvement of physical and moral conditions**. We may regard these interests, pursuits and institutions as exercising both an expulsive and impulsive influence. Occupying the energy, activity and time of men they prevent the indulgence of less noble and ignoble pursuits and **they exercise an ameliorating, moralizing, stabilizing and civilizing influence upon the social organism** (“Common Grace,” in the *Collected Writings of John Murray*, II:102–03).

Importantly, common grace provides the sphere for special grace. Murray explains:

“Without common grace special grace would not be possible because special grace would have no material out of which to erect its structure. It is common grace that provides not only the sphere in which, but also the material out of which, the building fitly framed together may grow up into a holy temple in the Lord. It is the human race preserved by God, **endowed with various gifts by God**, in a world upheld and enriched by God, subsisting through the means of various pursuits and fields of labor, that provides the subjects for redemptive and regenerative grace” (Murray, “Common Grace,” 113).

Reformed Theologian #9: Tim Keller

7 Reformed Theologians on Common Grace

The Apostle James wrote, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). Referring to this passage, Tim Keller writes in his book *The Reason for God*:

“This means that no matter who performs it, **every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty is empowered by God.** God gives out good gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill “graciously”— that is, in a completely unmerited way. **He casts them across all humanity, regardless of religious conviction, race, gender, or any other attribute to enrich, brighten, and preserve the world**” (Keller, *The Reason for God*, 53).

In 2003, Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church published a four-page document entitled, *What Is Common Grace?* In it, Keller introduces common grace with these words:

“The doctrine of common grace helps us to acknowledge God’s goodness in all of creation and enables us to pursue mission with love in a fallen world.”

“The Bible consistently teaches what theologians have come to call ‘common grace,’ a non-saving grace that is at work in the broader reaches of human cultural interaction. This gift of God’s grace to humanity in general demonstrates a desire on God’s part to bestow certain blessings on all human beings, believer and non-believer alike. Understanding common grace provides the basis for Christians to cooperate with and learn from non-Christians.”

In this document, Keller emphasizes the Old and New Testament basis for the doctrine of common grace, including these words:

“God also shows common grace by revealing knowledge of himself through human culture, for human culture is simply a wise recognition and cultivation of nature. Isaiah 28:23–29 states, ‘When a farmer plows for planting . . . when he has leveled the surface . . . does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way . . . Grain must be ground to make bread . . . all this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.’ This is remarkable. Isaiah tells us that anyone who becomes a skillful farmer or excels in agricultural science is being taught by God. One commentator writes about this text: ‘What appears as a discovery (the proper season and conditions for sowing, farm management, rotation of crops, etc.) is actually the Creator opening his book of creation and revealing his truth’” (quoting here: J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, 235).

Keller then elaborates:

“It is important to note that all human culture ultimately follows the same pattern as farming. Every advancement in human learning, every work of art, and every scientific discovery is simply God ‘opening his book of creation and revealing his truth’ to us. Of course, the vast majority of farmers in the history of the world did not know that God was doing this, but Isaiah says that God was at work. This is general revelation, or as theologians call it ‘the doctrine of common grace.’ All artistic expressions, skillful farming, scientific discoveries, medical and technological advances are expressions of God’s grace. An example from Scripture is found in Exodus 31, where we read how Bezalel was ‘filled with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts to make artistic designs.’ Here we see that artistic skill is something that comes from God.”

“In Isaiah 45:1 we read of Cyrus, a pagan king that God anointed with his Spirit and chose for world leadership. In Genesis 20:6ff we read how God prevents another pagan king from falling into sin. This is an indication of how God’s Spirit does not only function as a non-saving ennobling force in the world, but also as a non-saving restraining force in the world. This is not the Spirit working as a converting or sanctifying agent but rather **working to give wisdom, courage, creativity and insight—another facet of common grace.**”

Reformed Theologian #10: R .C. Sproul

7 Reformed Theologians on Common Grace

R. C. Sproul and Ligonier Ministries has addressed the doctrine of common grace in many places, including:

- [*A Loving Provision*](#).
- [Common Grace](#) (Article).
- [Common Grace](#) (Audio).

In [*A Loving Provision*](#), Sproul distinguishes common grace from special grace.

“Common grace is distinguished not so much from what we might call uncommon grace, but rather from what we call ‘special grace.’ Common grace refers to several concepts or experiences that we observe as Christians. On the one hand, we realize that in God’s divine providence He pours out benefits that are enjoyed not simply by believers, but by believers and non-believers alike.”

In the [Common Grace](#) article, Sproul defines common grace as:

“The doctrine of common grace encompasses the biblical teaching about the *universal* and *undeserved* goodness of God toward sinners. By common grace, God restrains sin, evil, misery, and wrath in this fallen world, while conferring general, nonredemptive blessings on all mankind. As distinguished from special (saving) grace, common grace is a necessary aspect of the continuance of life in this fallen world. It restrains evil and confers goodness on mankind as a whole, reflecting God’s attributes of goodness, mercy, and justice. God confers common grace on mankind to encourage sinners to repent and trust in Christ. On judgment day, the common grace experienced by the unrepentant and their failure to thank God for it will factor into their punishment.”

Sproul goes on to explain:

“The Reformed doctrine of common grace is implicitly taught throughout the Scriptures. In short, common grace includes every undeserved providential act of God’s restraint, goodness, and mercy toward the sinful inhabitants of this fallen world. The general principles of common grace are evident throughout Scripture (e.g., [Ps. 145:9](#); [Ezek. 18:23](#); [33:11](#); [Rom. 2:4](#); [Acts 14:16–17](#); 1 Tim. 4:10). The Lord Jesus taught one aspect of this doctrine when He appealed to God’s goodness in sending rain and making the sun shine on the righteous and the wicked alike ([Matt. 5:44–45](#); [Luke 6:35–36](#)). The restraint of sin and evil is a particular work of God’s common grace. God reveals that He has kept men from sinning against Him (e.g., [Gen. 20:6](#)), but this restraint has limits, for there are times when the Lord ceases to continue His former restraint of sinners (e.g., [Gen. 6:3](#); [Ps. 81:11–12](#); [Acts 7:42](#); [Rom. 1:24–28](#);

2 Thess. 2:6–7). Common grace also enables the unregenerate to pursue virtue in their external and civic relations ([Luke 6:33](#); [Rom. 2:14](#)). The Holy Spirit is the agent of God’s [common grace](#) operations in the world and on humanity, as well as of the [general operations](#) in members of the covenant community ([Heb. 6:4–5](#)).”

“The Reformed tradition understands this doctrine as a supplement to the doctrine of [total depravity](#). Since man is pervasively depraved, no continuance of human history, development of culture, or growth in common virtue can occur without some operation of God’s common grace. Despite the fact that all people are ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ by nature ([Eph. 2:1–4](#)), God has not removed the general operations of His Spirit from among them. He is constantly restraining evil and manifesting His goodness in this fallen world and among sin-cursed individuals.”

“The common grace purposes of both restraint and goodness are at work in the [institution of civil government](#) and the [nuclear family](#). These two aspects of common grace help explain why there is [good in a pervasively fallen world](#).”

In [Luther, Calvin, and Copernicus: A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture](#), Sproul addresses the question of whether believers can learn from non-believers. After stating that the church’s interpretation of special revelation passages had been corrected by students of natural revelation, Sproul illustrates his point with a reference to the introduction of new astronomical ideas in the sixteenth century.

“Both Calvin and Luther rejected Copernicus as a heretic in the 16th century. I don’t know anybody in orthodox Christianity today who’s pleading for geocentricity. Do you? Do you know anybody? In that case the church has said, ‘Look, we misinterpreted the teaching of the Bible with respect to the solar system, and thank you scientists for correcting our misunderstanding.’ And so **I think that we can learn from *nonbelieving* scientists who are studying natural revelation. They may get a better sense of the truth from their study of natural revelation than I get from ignoring natural revelation. So I have a high view of natural revelation is what I’m saying**” ([Luther, Calvin, and Copernicus: A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture](#)). (Note: This quote is technically less specifically related to “common grace” and more specifically related to “natural revelation”—which is able to be studied *because of* common grace.)

Conclusion: Being a “Berean” Christian

In Acts 17:11, Paul affirms the Berean believers for doing their own biblical research.

“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

I’ve taken a great deal of time over the past two years to study what the Scriptures have to say about common grace, and to study what Reformed theologians have to say about it. I’ve collated this document for you so you could be “a good Berean.” If you’re a biblical counselor, then you know that common grace has been the proverbial “hot topic” for us.

You can believe what you read—typically second-hand sources. Or, you can read first-hand, primary sources on common grace. This document identifies primary biblical passages that you can study regarding common grace. This document links you to scores and scores of primary Reformed documents that you can study regarding common grace. This document provides over 34,500 words of primary source quotes from Reformed theologians so you can come to your own theologically-saturated convictions about the wise application of common grace resources to biblical counseling.

My hope and prayer is that we all will be “good Bereans”—studying Scripture and church history to discern how common grace relates to biblical counseling. As I’ve noted more than once in this document, we can word our question like this:

How have Reformed theologians applied the doctrine of common grace in relationship to the use of extra-biblical resources from non-Christians?

Based on Acts 17:11, we can re-word our question like this:

What does the Bible (and church history) teach us about the use of extra-biblical resources as biblical counselors?

How do we apply the biblical doctrine of common grace to our calling as biblical counselors?

Notes

¹For example, Francine Tan, in her article in the *Journal of Biblical Soul Care*, Fall 2024, Vol 8 #2, "[Common Grace in Debate](#)," suggested a major reworking and significant minimizing of the historic Reformed doctrine of common grace. Tan states, "Thus, I propose that biblical counselors ought to revisit how we define CG and make **a few qualifications to the traditional Reformed view of CG**. When CG is defined as God's non-salvific yet kind posture towards all mankind, displayed in the delay of final judgment, the restraint of sin's full impact on the earth, and the bestowal of temporal gifts for the providential preservation of the world, the doctrine distinctly remains an expression of God's communicable attributes of kindness and goodness. **CG should not be understood as the positive contributions made by unregenerate men through discoveries, insights, or 'good deeds'**" (83). This significant limiting of the Reformed doctrine of common grace is in opposition to Calvin ([here](#) and [here](#)), Bavinck ([here](#) and [here](#)), Kuyper ([here](#) and [here](#)), Van Til ([here](#) and [here](#)), Frame ([here](#)) and Powlison ([here](#) and [here](#)), to name just a few leading Reformed theologians and one leading Reformed biblical counselor.