

# COMMON GRACE

## *A Hole in our Thinking ?*

There has been a rapid change in popular attitudes to distinctively Christian belief—or perhaps it is truer to say that we have become increasingly aware of the extent to which the popular attitude differs from traditional Christian orthodoxy. Such a situation draws attention simultaneously to various lines of thought and discussion where evangelicals appear ill at ease. The present papers result from the convergence of several such lines which point to what may be described as a ‘hole in our thinking’. At the risk of seeming unduly individualistic, the growing awareness of such a ‘hole’ is described here in the first person. This is how one person at least came to face the question. Readers may find their own experience parallel to this. It will, I hope, provide several leads in to the matter under discussion which will make the papers that follow more meaningful.

### Converging lines

1. One of the first lines in my own arrival at this ‘hole in thinking’ arose out of a growing awareness that much traditional evangelical preaching was irrelevant to the average Briton. He was urged to realise he could not work his way to heaven: he wasn’t even thinking of heaven as a goal. He was told life without Christ was dismal, but did not see he was much worse off than his nominally Christian acquaintances. He was urged to repent—but felt that by general standards his behaviour was good (better than addicts and swindlers and as good as most ‘Christians’). The mechanics of atonement were expounded to him: he felt no need of this celestial book-keeping.

2. What then was he like? Blinded by the god of this world; led captive by the devil at his will; if so, in what sense? Wider mixing with all sorts and conditions of men produced evidence of some in whom the ravages of sin were clear, but many whose behaviour *was* pretty good, who *did* seem to live balanced and comfortable lives, often with modesty and gentleness, but without Christian faith. One soon learned to dismiss the ignorant comparison of bad Christian with good pagan—‘he’s better than many of you Christians’—but still the ‘good pagan’ remained. Men of integrity in business; the cultured colleague; helpful neighbours; dedicated people in medicine, welfare, and politics.

3. Wider reading filled in a little of the picture of the ‘good pagan’. Often haughty to the point of *autarkeia*, but also with considerable intellectual honesty, he was loth to accept a faith he saw as the surrender of reason to emotion or to practice a piety which he interpreted as a grovelling insurance against hell-fire.

4. Along another line, it became increasingly obvious that traditional evangelicalism was not geared to the appreciation of many art forms—partly due to the taboos of the last century, or fear of Roman veneration of religious art. Yet the ‘good pagan’ often showed remarkable sensitivity to drama, music, painting, architecture and literature. Were these all to be dismissed as the works of Jubal or Tubal-cain?

5. The hymn said ‘The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone’, but greater acquaintance with other cultures ancient and modern showed not only depravity and superstition but also good features—nobility of language, architecture and imagery, as well as many individuals of high courage and moral awareness.

6. Much had been written of great evangelical philanthropists of the last two centuries. Perhaps we lived too long on Shaftesbury and Wilberforce as examples of the power of Christ (without enquiring too closely into their political views or biblical interpretation!). Some growing acquaintance with the Welfare State and areas of social concern showed that while Christians often took a lead they were not by any means predominantly evangelicals, and in any case were matched by substantial, if not equal, numbers of non-Christians.

7. In the field of science my initial contact was the examination of a suspected clash with the Bible. In thinking this through, with much help from others, the conviction emerged that the bitterness of the last century was tragically unnecessary. Further reading and slight contact with the world of science brought to light the great contribution of non-Christian workers whose integrity and diligence and search for truth about the universe was beyond question. It was also evident that scientific and technological advance had strengthened enormously man’s capacity to control disease, ignorance and famine, and that it was in fact often used to these ends by Christian and non-Christian alike.

In all these fields of enquiry, of course, Christians of standing, ability and presence were prominent, but it could not be denied that many ‘good pagans’ existed with many features which could bear with praise. And so the ‘hole in thinking’ emerged. How could these ‘good pagans’ be fitted in to the evangelical view of God, man and the world? Undoubtedly they were ‘dead in trespasses and sins’, ‘unable to please God’, ‘condemned already’ etc., but why the appearance of goodness and the favourable comparison with much Christian living and concern? Above all, what had we to say to them that did justice both to their virtue and need?

### **Suggested answers**

All this may show merely the superficiality of the writer’s earlier thinking, and reading,—a shallowness, he found, shared with many of his contemporaries. True, certain answers sprang easily to mind, but one disturbing feature of the whole process was the growing awareness that

these answers came to seem glib even to the user and were completely blunt against the 'good pagan'. Answers which sounded powerful among the faithful, seemed poor and question-begging in real life situations. For example:—

(a) The 'virtues' of the good pagan are not really good. They're all spoilt by pride—but some seemed genuine and humble. Must I postulate deeper and deeper levels of double-dealing and self-deception?

(b) Not really 'good' but inspired by utilitarian motives, fear of consequences, desire to stand well with contemporaries. Again if this was so, it was astonishingly well-concealed, and the last phrase in particular posed the question where the 'good' standards they wished to be judged by arose.

(c) 'God is sovereign'; the Curies who did not believe made their contribution to medicine as surely as Lister who did believe, but this is only a modern version of God using Cyrus and the Assyrians. Maybe, but was the Curies' devotion to their experiment 'good'?

(d) 'Cain's world'—all is vitiated by sinful context. Granted that whatever is not of faith is sin (for Christians as well!) viewed as before God, may we not acknowledge our feelings that some of the work of 'good pagans' is good and beautiful? Must there always be some criticism—like the prickly schoolmaster who always finds some reason to avoid giving full marks—'Could do better!'

(e) 'Living on Christian capital'—this seems very true. Many (but possibly not all) good pagans gained their ideals from Christian heritage and western Society leans heavily on Christian presuppositions. But: (i) so what?—what if the good pagan says he can now 'drop the pilot' and 'go it alone'? (ii) is the fruit he picks from the inherited tree *good*? Must we say nothing is 100 per cent?

### **How good are 'good pagans'?**

There appeared a reluctance to accept the good works of unbelievers as 'good'. This was prompted no doubt by a fear that they would trust in their good works rather than God. Comparable actions by believers were hailed as 'good', though one might often have to dig very deep to find any devotion to God as their spring. The whole attitude towards the good pagan was thus coloured both as to evangelism and association. The most pressing need was repentance, but of what should they repent? At every point, it seemed, they were open to conviction. Their fancied goodness must be stripped away—not merely as being unable to work the righteousness of God, but as needing renunciation as evil in itself. Association in any work with such people was also suspect (except in a way of business that did not amount to partnership). Any contact one might otherwise have with them ought to have direct evangelism in view. Hence any association in social enterprise (such as local government) or entertainment was to be deplored as neglecting primary concerns and giving them

false hope in common pursuit of activity that should spring truly only from love to God.

### **How good is the world?**

Parallel to this reluctance or embarrassment to accept any feature of the 'good pagan' as good, there seemed a reluctance to rejoice in the world or to be concerned in its exploitation for the service of man. 'This world is a wilderness wide' where nothing can be found to sustain the pilgrim. He survives on the heavenly manna until he enters the promised land. The good pagan enjoyed the world—and this seemed perhaps even an added reason why the faithful shouldn't!

### **Ill at ease**

All these strands were involved. Much of the traditional was good, well expressed and piously lived. It would be churlish not to acknowledge immense debt. But the conclusion seemed inevitable that evangelicals have been well at home in some areas of thought and experience but ill at ease in others. Ill at ease particularly in those areas from which custom, or social habit, has largely insulated them for a century. The insulation is now disappearing and we find ourselves well armed against foes that no longer abound, and naked to new enemies. We are experts in atonement doctrine, typology and 'church truth' but ill-equipped to advise young believers on industrial relations, involvement in society or the ethical problems of modern medicine. Ill-equipped, too, to make the gospel meaningful to those who see our expertise as a commendable but rather odd hobby.

One solution is, of course, mapped by the rigidity of exclusivism. With enormous social strain for some people involved we *can* maintain the insulation, mortify all contrary thought, and find some exegetical expedient for every scripture that suggests we venture out into the outside world.

The following papers suggest we might with profit examine the doctrines of God's wider relation with mankind as expressed in the doctrines of Creation and Common Grace.

### **Common grace**

As Mr. Barlow's paper remarks, Common Grace is not a biblical term. It is rather, as Dr. Hanson says, a 'useful dogmatic construct for the integration of our understanding of Scripture'. It figures in the Reformers' apologetic where it stands for that continuing activity of God by which he gives to all men, just and unjust alike. Such a doctrine would go far to fill the 'hole in thinking'. It would enable us to accept unreservedly the contribution of the non-Christian scientist as God-given; perhaps even to accept his kindness to us as God's goodness through him. It would give

us, along with a renewed doctrine of creation, fresh enjoyment of the world and some common ground for association and action. They, too, receive something from God even if they do not acknowledge it as such.

The difficulties are obvious:

(a) Is there to be a discontinuity between 'common' and 'special' (saving) grace? Or can one be viewed as superimposed upon the other? The understanding of the world through touch is valuable and often true. The added richness of sight is not discontinuous but confirms some knowledge and adds immeasurably more.

(b) How is such a concept related to the biblical teaching of the Fall? Has sin not warped man's mind and will and cut him off from God? Even if God should choose to use such men, in what way can they lay any claim to altruistic action? Also, is the creation not involved in the Fall (Rom. 8)? In what sense, then can it be welcomed as good?

### Three lines of approach

The present papers approach the matter in three ways:

1. Mr. Barlow presents the biblical material. This faces us with the use of 'good' and 'goodness'. Job may plead his righteous deeds before his fellows but not before God. Although the Psalmist gives the God's eye-view 'There is none that does good', yet man may 'do what the law requires'. Mr. Barlow concludes that 'we need not fear to recognise such goodness in non-Christians, or to ally ourselves with them in good works'.

2. The Reformers held no light view of sin—indeed much of Calvin's writing about Common Grace comes in Book II, ch. 2 'Man now deprived of freedom of will, and miserably enslaved'!—yet they found the motif of Common Grace useful in their understanding of scripture. Dr. Hanson's paper not only summarises their thought but shows how this was developed and applied in the Dutch version under Kuyper. In this outworking in an historical setting both the weaknesses and strengths may be seen writ large.

If, for example, 'The Reformation under Calvin must be granted the honour of having ended the long attempt to wed an Aristotelean conception of human nature to the Biblical ground-motif of creation, fall, and redemption in Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit' then we may well find the ideas useful in our own day in the struggle to see God's work as *one*, and avoid any fresh dichotomy between nature and grace. In both biblical and historical sections the name of Karl Barth will be already in the mind of some readers. Dr. Hanson politely declines encounter and without extending both articles impossibly, adequate comment could not be given. A complete veto cannot be usefully considered when the object in view is to *understand* the argument vetoed. Barth's alternative system requires study and appraisal separately from the present enquiry into common grace. It may then be possible to make judgment or reconciliation between them.

3. If, following Calvin, we regard the 'light of intelligence' as a divine grace, we may then move on to the third paper. This attempts an investigation of the place of the light of intelligence in the attainment of scientific and moral knowledge. Has God ensured that even those who deny the Giver, may still use the gift of intelligence to arrive at 'what the law requires'? If so, how does the renewal of the mind at conversion affect the Christian participation in moral discussion?

To the papers, then. An unfamiliar country it may be, but one in which we may find fresh cause to magnify God for his mercy, fresh ways in which to follow His works, and some help to make our own thinking more complete.

A conclusion will attempt to apply points under discussion to several current problems—not in any sense completely but rather to stimulate local study.

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“The origin of the doctrine of common grace was occasioned by the fact that there is in the world, alongside of the course of the Christian life with all its blessings, a natural course of life, which is not redemptive and yet exhibits many traces of the true, the good, and the beautiful. . . . What explanations can be given of the special gifts and talents with which the natural man is endowed, and of the development of science and art by those who are entirely devoid of the new life that is in Christ Jesus? How can we explain the religious aspirations of men everywhere, even of those who did not come in touch with the Christian religion? How can the unregenerate still speak the truth, do good to others, and lead outwardly virtuous lives? These are some of the questions to which the doctrine of common grace seeks to supply the answer”.

Louis Berkhof *Systematic Theology*

(Banner of Truth) p. 432