NEW FOCUS

Is Grace Common?

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Do you believe in common grace?

To answer this question one needs to be able to define what common grace is. Unfortunately, the term means different things to different people. For some common grace describes God's good gifts or common provisions in nature such as sunshine and rain. Some see it in terms of talents or gifts that lead to human distinction in art, sport or music. Others discern the restraining hand of God holding back human wickedness by conscience and the structures of law, order and civil government; keeping society from deteriorating into anarchy.

All things to all men

If this was the extent of common grace teaching we could be content, but it does not stop there. Recently, common grace has taken on two new functions. It seems its flexibility knows no bounds. First, it is preached from pulpits in support of universal offers of saving grace and to exemplify how God cares for everyone and wants everyone to be saved. Second, it is used by some para-church organisations to justify their existence and defend joint campaigning on moral issues with non-evangelicals.

At its heart common grace means goodness shown by God to saved and unsaved alike. It is distinguished from particular grace or saving grace, which is only given to certain individuals – the elect. It is usually divided into two parts. First, God's grace restrains man from being as bad as he could be, given total depravity. Second, God's grace enables men to perform worthy deeds. These 'good works' fall short of works meriting salvation.

Common grace is explicitly not saving grace but some say it impinges on the doctrine of salvation. Though sin deserves punishment, we are told, God is patient and longsuffering with mankind, not willing that any should perish. Consequently, though common grace does not actually save anyone, it demonstrates God's desire and willingness to save everyone.

Common grace teachers believe God has two great works going on in the history of the world. First, the work of saving the church by special grace, second the work of improving society by common grace.

Rejecting common grace

However, we do not accept that these two works are a valid representation of God's dealings with men. Rather we believe that God's great purpose is singular and particular – the work of redeeming chosen sinners by the blood of Jesus Christ. God is saving His people from their sins, from death and from hell. This is the special work of the Lord Jesus and outside of Christ there is no salvation, no redemption and no grace, common or otherwise.

Common providence

Clearly people enjoy many pleasures in life, acts of charity are performed and great works accomplished. It is also true that sun and rain nurture crops without reference to election and reprobation. We are better off with government than without. Such things cannot be denied, yet we find the term 'common grace' unhelpful.

We do not know as God knows, and what some call 'grace' may be no more than the means of man's destruction. Nations and individuals can appear, in human terms, to prosper but we should not ascribe this to God's goodness (see Psalm 73). Worldly wealth often indicates God's judgment as it tends to greater self-reliance, self-indulgence and despising Christ (Luke 12:20). God may raise a man high, not as a mark of grace but to glorify His own name (Romans 9:17).

The dangers of common grace teaching

But our rejection of the teaching of common grace is not merely a matter of words. If the phrase dealt simply with matters of climate we might question the term but agree with the principle. If it were only that God grants moral rule, civil authority, intermittent peace and prosperity, we might adapt the language and take time to define what we mean. But increasingly, common grace is being used to teach universal love, offers of grace and a desire by God to save everyone. It is on this matter we believe common grace to be a dangerous error dragging in its wake a host of unwelcome consequences.

Here are five consequences of current common grace teaching:

1. It misrepresents God

Those who hold common grace find it hard to limit other attributes of God. Having settled upon common grace their theology readily flows into other common or universal blessings such as universal love; universal desire to save; universal atonement; universal salvation. Yet God's blessings are always definate and particular.

2. It misrepresents God's saving purpose

Common grace misrepresents God's purpose by implying that God is saving society in the world as well as saving His elect out of the world. God's purpose in Jesus Christ is to redeem His church out of this guilty, condemned world. Everything that happens in the world is conducive to that end. Nations rise and fall for the saving of the elect. Men prosper and perish for the saving of the elect. Peace on earth is reconciliation between God and man, otherwise, outside of this, Christ came to bring a sword (Matthew 10:34).

3. It teaches grace outside of Christ

In the eternal covenant the church is placed in Christ. In and from Jesus Christ they obtain forgiveness, mercy, goodness, and love. Outside of Christ there is judgment, wrath and holy hatred. Outside of Christ God does not bestow mercy, grant forgiveness or dispense grace. God's grace is always special, always saving, always sure. It is founded on Jesus Christ, given by Jesus Christ and received in Jesus Christ.

Divine holiness demands retribution for sin. The broken law cries out for justice. Grace itself is constrained until holiness and justice are satisfied. This is why blood was shed in Eden, foreshadowing the coming of God's perfect lamb. To speak of grace that is non-saving, grace that is common and outside of Christ simply misrepresents the Saviour's work.

4. It distracts from preaching Christ

Common grace is used to urge public action, political involvement and militant Christianity within society. Of course, Christians are called to do good works such as love our neighbours and stand for truth. Yet the first duty of the church is to preach the gospel. The day is fast approaching when Christian lawyers are more highly valued than Christian preachers.

Today, evangelical organisations spend millions of pounds on social work, overseas aid, political lobbying and public protests. Nurses and water engineers have replaced gospel preachers on the mission field. Instead of ministering to the souls of men we are ministering to their bodies. The energies, resources and finances that the church should be directing towards preaching Christ are spent for that which is not bread.

5. It brings confusion into the church

Common grace will never produce a more righteous society. God's provisions to the reprobate, be they perceived as good or bad, never lead to their ultimate good but serve to leave them without excuse. Common providences increase the unbeliever's condemnation and are ultimately an expression of God's sovereign displeasure.

By contrast, the goodness and love of God to His elect is demonstrated in the common providences of life. Christians learn to know by faith that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). If for the present some things are perceived as hard to bear, we take God at His word (Hebrews 12:11). Consider: If all things work together for good to those who love God what do all things work together for to those who do not love God?

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