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## To Have and To Hold: Peculiar Grounds for Cultural Engagements and Civil Disagreements

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**\*Editors Note:** The article below, written by Dr. John Kok, is the expanded and revised version of his response to Dr. Richard Mouw's presentation (on common grace) at a public forum in connection with Pastors' Day, held at Dordt College on September 9, 2002.

## To Have and To Hold: Peculiar Grounds for Cultural Engagements and Civil Disagreements



By John H. Kok

**R**ichard Mouw's *He Shines in All that's Fair* is a delightful, informative, and provocative read. The title is borrowed from a line in the well-known hymn "This Is My Father's World," which focuses on nature singing, the music of the spheres. The hymn suggests that God's hand wrought the wonders of rocks and trees, of skies and seas, and that God speaks to us everywhere. Mouw's focus, however, is more on culture than on "nature": on why Christians should be involved in public life and on how we might understand and celebrate an engaged interest in contemporary culture.

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Mouw acknowledges God's call to Christians "to stand against the prevailing cultures of our fallen world" (2), but with 1 Peter 2:11-17 and Jeremiah 29:7 in hand, he is also convinced that "Christians must actively work for the well-being of the larger societies in which we have been providentially placed" and that "sanctified living should manifest ... attitudes and dispositions ... that will motivate us in our efforts to promote societal growth" (76).

One might think that God's clear commands found in Scripture, for example, to "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed[, d]efend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17), would be grounds enough for Christian involvement in public life. However, Mouw finds that simply appealing to the fact that God commands us, for example, to take up the cause of the poor, is theologically inadequate. Apparently, some understand the rationale for this command to be "that by promoting the cause of the poor in general we are bettering the lot of the elect poor, the ones God *really* cares about" (82), or others believe that the implied focus of the command is only on the poor who are or will be saved. For example, I've heard it said that some take Jesus' instructions in Matthew 5:44 to *mean*, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies [within the church] and pray for those [in your congregation] who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." Mouw, in contrast, is convinced that "we are commanded to care for *all* those in poverty" (82). The case he makes for emphasizing the word "all" is twofold and has everything to do

with “common grace”: “that God has a positive, albeit non-salvific, regard for those who are not elect” and “that in cultivating [a caring disposition, in this case, for all those in poverty] we are imitating God’s concern for all impoverished people” (82).

In what follows I will summarize the two legs of Mouw’s argument and then complement my explanation of what I find to be inadequate about Mouw’s theology of common grace with a possible alternative.

### **Common Grace as Grounds for Engagement**

Mouw is convinced that the mysteries that shroud the operations of God’s grace do not justify a retreat into agnosticism and need not keep one from challenging viewpoints that seem clearly confused. He also firmly believes that there is such a thing as *common grace*—a kind of “non-saving grace that is at work in the broader reaches of human cultural interaction, a grace that expedites a desire on God’s part to bestow certain blessings on all human beings, elect and non-elect alike.” These blessings, Mouw argues, “provide the basis for Christians to co-operate with, and learn from, non-Christians” (14).

Quite obviously, if God is working in different cultures in different ways, Christians have every reason in the world to be diligent in their “efforts to discover, honor, and appreciate any of God’s gifts that might be at work in the larger human community” (28). Arthur Holmes’ well-intended message that “all truth is God’s truth wherever it may be found” was meant to instill that same desire. Christians do not have to be afraid of the academic world: all truth is of God. They are free to discover, honor, and appreciate these truths, these spores of the Spirit, wherever they may be found! Mouw tells the story of a fundamentalist Christian who, though nurtured in the conviction that all “worldly learning” was wicked, “found himself responding in positive ways to elements in the writings of non-Christian thinkers.” Learning about common grace encouraged this evangelical scholar to discern and assess a variety of Christian and non-Christian viewpoints: “Common grace gave him a framework for pursuing his calling as a Christian scholar” (28).

In looking to the idea of *common grace* for the

“proper grounds” for a posited commonality between Christians and nonchristians, between the elect and the reprobate, Mouw knows that some Christians—and the Protestant Reformed Church, in particular—reject such a notion without exception. With that in mind, in Chapter 2 Mouw goes back to some of Herman Hoeksema’s writings and the debates of the 1920s that gave rise to this denomination in North America, “to see what relevance they might have ... to understand the church’s relationship to the broader culture” (10) and, more specifically, “to pay close attention to the concerns expressed by the dissenters” (14).

Without wanting to give up on “the antithesis,” Mouw feels that the antithetical contrast drawn by Protestant Reformed people between redeemed and nonredeemed can be put too starkly. At the same time, he acknowledges that much can be learned from church leaders like Hoeksema who place an uncompromising emphasis on “difference.” The main lesson Mouw draws from Hoeksema et al is that they “are urging us to be clear about our primary identity ... [and to] ground ourselves in the life and thought of that community where the Spirit is openly at work, regenerating sinners and sanctifying their inner selves.” Mouw believes that Christians should heed this warning, “lest our sensitivities be dulled to the seductive power of depraved habits of thought and action” (28). But of Hoeksema’s rejection of common grace, he will have nothing.

### **A Nondisinterested “A-team”**

In the third chapter, Mouw has the reader ponder common-grace theology as the best way to take seriously the antithesis “between those who live within the boundaries of saving grace and those who do not, while at the same time maintaining an openness to—even an active appreciation for—all that is good and beautiful and true that takes place outside of those boundaries” (32-33). His resolve, briefly put, is that Christians should attend to God’s dispositions toward human beings (above and beyond his favorable disposition toward the elect) and bring their likes and dislikes—what they regard with interest or abhor—into conformity with what God approves and disapproves.

Mouw’s challenge in this chapter is to discover and honor what God’s dispositions are regarding the reprobate. The case he has to make is that God,

when assessing what people think and feel and do, not only thinks about a person's ultimate destiny but also cares "about the actions and achievements of non-elect persons in a way that is not linked directly to issues of individual salvation" (33). Mouw moves from nature and Scripture to culture and plausibility:

(a) God takes delight and rejoices in—is gratified and glorified by—*nonhuman* creation (Ps 104:31).

(b) Therefore, it is "plausible to assume that God takes delight in various *human* states of affairs, even when they are displayed in the lives of [the reprobate]" (35).

Herman Hoeksema would surely agree with (a) but disagree decidedly with (b) because "All the things of the present life are but means to an eternal end": blue bin recycling, colorful sunsets enjoyed with a loved one, and the coo of their newborn grandchildren all contribute to their ultimate and eternal damnation!

Mouw does not shy in the first place from acknowledging that the reality of common grace, so defined, is quite simply a matter of personal conviction: "Let me be concrete: I think God takes [aesthetic] delight in Benjamin Franklin's wit and in Tiger Woods's putts and in some well-crafted narrative paragraphs in a Salman Rushdie novel, even if these accomplishments are in fact achieved by non-Christian people.... I think God enjoys these things for their *own* sakes" (36). But Mouw also tries to build an argument for God's moral interest in the reprobate by drawing an implication from a statement found in the Westminster Confession (XVI, 7): "[Given the origin, manner, and intent of the 'good works'—things God commands us to do—done by unregenerate people, their 'good works' are] sinful, and cannot please God ... yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God." From this "more displeasing," Mouw infers that there must be "a category of moral acts performed by the unregenerate that are [morally] *more pleasing* to God than their *non-performance* would be" (39).

A good part of the remainder of the chapter is devoted to illustrations meant to support the plausibility of divine empathy of God caring or being grieved. For example, Mouw argues that God is pleased when an adulterous husband acknowledges the pain that he has caused and asks his wife to forgive him and when she reaches out with a newfound tenderness toward him; he also argues "that God

judges the inner states of the unbelieving couple who have experienced marital reconciliation to be better than the inner states associated with their former alienation" (43). The case is made that just as divine empathy is evoked "when marital reconciliation takes place between two thoroughgoing secularists[, so too] ... God also takes a positive interest in how unbelievers use God-given talents to produce works of beauty and goodness" (49).

The divine interest thus illustrated—the power of God's spirit, who alone can bring about the healing, wholeness, and reconciliation at work in these situations—deserves to be thought of as a kind of "grace," Mouw argues, that Christians must seek to

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*"To what degree has the commonness that we have embraced in the culture . . . compromised our commitment to the gospel?"*

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discover, engage, and celebrate. Aware of God's interest in these matters, Christians are then called to image their creator in this regard: to be interested and engaged in the good, the true, and the beautiful found among people of every ilk and, in turn, to be a-blessing-to-all in our own "common grace ministries" of outreach and involvement.

### **Fuzzy Logic and Mental Quotation Marks**

Early on in his book, Mouw raises a profound question: "To what degree has the commonness that we have embraced in the culture that we share with our non-Christian neighbors compromised our commitment to the gospel?" (11). I could not help repeating the same question when Mouw seems to equate, as cited above, (the common grace of) all that is good and true and beautiful—the BIG THREE in Plato's REALLY REAL world of ideas—with what God wants, with what pleases God, with what God clearly tells us will set us and keep us on The Way. Would not justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom or faith, hope, and love serve as better gauges to aid the effort of discovering and honoring gifts

from God at work in contemporary culture? It seems to me that Jesus Christ reforms the problems and redefines the commonly held virtues for which his transforming presence is the remedy: “You have heard that it was said; but I tell you . . .”—something similar but clearly different.

Although the eyes of some minds have no reservations about the notion of a thing in and of itself—a *ding an sich*—I question whether any such ever exists or obtains *per se*. Mouw claims that God delighted in (all of?) Benjamin Franklin’s wit and more recently enjoys (some of) Tiger Woods’s putts and some well-crafted paragraphs in a Salman Rushdie novel—taking pleasure in these things for their *own* sakes. However, Mouw’s reference to the Westminster Confession, mentioned above, actually undercuts the possibility of specific deeds or events ever being *per se* devoid of context, origin, spin, and intent. Besides that, the move from “x is less displeasing to God than y” to “x is therefore more pleasing to God than y” has as much warmth of conviction and assurance, it seems to me, as a husband who, returning from some exotic conference spot, blushing insists, “No, I’ve not been unfaithful to my spouse!” The logic of it all does not convince me in the least that God delights in a Tiger Woods putt or hole-in-one sunk by, let’s say, some political tyrant or that he smiles at an apt metaphor used by some pulp fiction writer or at a promise well-kept by members of a mafia family. “Do not even the pagans do that?”

Mouw does not claim to have a bead on how or where God works among his human creatures. His desire, quite simply, is to open the eyes of all God’s children to “this admittedly mysterious aspect of the Spirit’s work” and to get Christians involved in public life and contemporary culture in a way that reflects God’s glory and is open to traces of God’s spirit working in those places. These are laudable goals, but I am not convinced that a theology of common grace helps matters. I think that Mouw’s own advice to his readers, as well as his reference to Henry Van Til’s reservations, needs to be underscored: “we cheapen grace when we claim its presence in acts of mere justice unaccompanied by pleas of mercy before the throne of the One who alone issues decrees that are perfectly true and just. We do well, then, to heed Van Til’s misgivings about any talk of common grace that does not put at least men-

tal quotation marks around the word ‘grace’” (49). Mental quotation marks might work within the confines of one’s head, but they are difficult to hear; and besides, there are other established “theological” terms that refer clearly to the fact that God continues to provide for and uphold all of his creatures—both the wheat and the tares.

### “Providence” Will Do Just Fine

Mouw wants his readers to wrestle with the question as to what believers and unbelievers have in common. After reading his book and considering his arguments, I’m inclined to answer that what they have in common is shining sun and falling rain, a thinning ozone layer, human sexuality and desire for intimacy, a need to congregate socially and politically, an eventual sense of allegiance to someone or something. Well, these are some of the things we have in common. And God continues to see to it that this common ground is maintained, that order prevails, and that life is sustained, day-by-day. God has provided, does provide, and will provide by sustaining people, at least for the moment, even in their silliness or when they go a whoring.

In other words, I tend to agree with what Mouw conveys concerning Herman Hoeksema, namely, his claim that what the common grace doctrine attributes to divine favor can be seen as wholly explainable in terms of God’s providence. There are indeed ways in which depraved people fit into God’s good purposes for the creation, but it does not necessarily follow from this acknowledgement that in so doing the non-elect are receiving some sort of focused blessing from God or that God is working within them to make them less depraved. Hoeksema writes concerning “the natural man” (and Mouw quotes): “God in his providence and by the Word of His power sustains his nature as man, and sustains his relation to the universe, thus providing him with means to develop and realize his life in the organism of all things” (19).

These words about common means, available to all, remind me of what one of Hoeksema’s contemporaries wrote, the Dutch philosopher Dirk Vollenhoven. (Mouw doesn’t refer to Vollenhoven in this book, but he does refer to one his colleagues, the Dutch theologian Klaas Schilder, who makes the point somewhere, that “the righteous and the unrighteous go to the same place to get the clay for

their bricks.”) Vollenhoven wrote the following:

The truth has tremendous power at its disposal. Certainly, we have another point of departure than our opponents, and that is why we first see the whole and then that which is apparently separate as a part of the whole. But after all is said and done, we investigate the same thing. And in that lies the possibility of contact, and hence of blessing. If we neglect patient analysis or, worse still, adopt the results of the investigation of the other group with little or no criticism, so as to incorporate them in a speculative construction, with the result that the opponents can pride themselves in having made us rich, we will certainly not be a blessing to them. But those who carefully continue to work, always investigating by the light of God’s word what the creator has made, will in the long run find more than those who scorn this word and may perhaps presently be a blessing to those others. (*Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte*, Amsterdam, 1933: 319)

I do not know the Protestant Reformed tradition well enough to say whether adherents would embrace Vollenhoven’s desire to be a blessing to those with opposing viewpoints, but his call for the patient analysis of creation (and culture) and his caution regarding the uncritical appropriation of insights across-the-board fits well with the call for discernment and a “theology of difference” that both Mouw and Hoeksema hold dear.

I share Mouw’s sense that Christians today need to be challenged and urged to get involved and to make a difference for Christ’s sake, to work with devoted dedication by addressing and by beginning to meet key challenges in present-day culture. I also agree that the very continuation of the creation as such is due to the sustaining power of God. Without this sustaining and maintaining activity, creation would self-destruct. The created order is held together at each moment by the sovereign decree of God. But I do not see why we should attribute to common grace “the power that holds molecules together, that superintends the cycles of the seasons, that plants in unredeemed hearts the capacity for composing pleasant melodies, and that fosters in unredeemed people a disposition to live peaceably with their neighbors” (49). Divine providence seems to me to cover quite well all these things.

I also don’t think that a common grace theology is a prerequisite for us to know how to live, or to answer the question of culture and Christianity

today. Mouw’s theology of common grace, which pivots on God’s empathy, on a divine attitude of favor that is extended to humankind in general, is not necessary to translate what the Christian walk requires of us as disciples of Christ. Mouw’s argument hinges on establishing the plausibility of an attitude of divine favor for *all* humankind. If he can show and convince us that God is pleased with a no-hitter or a hole-in-one and that God is pleased with the efforts of firemen that run into buildings that collapse on them and if he can make the case that these things are pleasing in *God’s* eyes, then certainly they ought to be pleasing to every one of us. Rather than speculating on the plausibility of God’s

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dispositions, we should, it seems to me, consider God’s command that we love others as he loves us and that we forgive others as we have been forgiven as a mandate that requires no argument and tolerates no exception. In other words, I don’t think we need the theology of common grace to give grounds for our seeking to be a blessing to all who cross our path and for loving as we are loved.

#### **True, Correct, or Just Accurate?**

Early on in his book Mouw correctly points out that “it is not enough simply to affirm commonness,” in other words, just to state what we *have* in common; we must, he explains, also “explore the underlying Christian foundations for an understanding of what we hold in common with those who reject the biblical message” (7). Although I have taken exception to Mouw’s thesis that the idea of common grace is “an important resource for addressing the contemporary issues of commonness and difference” (8), I think that there is merit in highlighting the difference between “to have in common” and “to hold in common.”

The shining sun and falling rain, a thinning ozone

layer, human sexuality and a desire for intimacy, a need to congregate socially and politically, an eventual sense of allegiance to someone or something—these are some of the “things” we *have* in common with those who reject the biblical message. What I want to say next, however, is that they are the givens of creation, the products of our times and culture, the dimensions of the corporate nature of the human condition, none of which exist *per se*, or for their own sakes, and all of which God continues, at least for now, to uphold and sustain. However, that statement is a claim that Christians do not *hold* in common with everyone. Indeed, different groups of Christians might themselves hold different views (make different cognitive claims, have different beliefs) about the ozone layer or the corporate nature of our being human.

Distinguishing the difference between *to have* and *to hold* helps one discern more precisely what it is that shines in all that is fair. Mouw wants us to believe that it is God’s glory, but he also warns that the uncritical appropriation of what is not sound—what is not of God—could result from a failure to discern with clarity what is pleasing to the Lord. In another context, Richard Mouw decisively states that Buddhism is not true and cannot provide the way to salvation; and yet he adds that there are Buddhists who have some true things to say—that there is some truth in Buddhism (that Buddhism includes sedimental evidence of common grace). To the extent that he is correct about this, how can we best distill these “moments of truth” from the nexus of the lie in which they are couched? “Cautiously” or “critically” could be good answers, assuming that one is working with criteria that have more of an edge to them than “does this (or that) please God?” As Arthur Holmes is wont to admit, too many people with this credo in mind have grasped blindly, convinced that “this is truth,” or “this is truth,” and in so doing have uncritically and eclectically incorporated too many things into what they hold to be the case. I have found, at least when it comes to knowledge, to cognitive claims, that a rubric of sorts helps me hone my analysis and forces me to work with greater nuance.

I borrow here from an essay by Calvin Seerveld, where he distinguishes among knowledge that is true, correct, or just accurate (“The Relation of the

Arts to the Presentation of Truth,” in *Truth and Reality: Philosophical perspectives on reality dedicated to Professor Stoker*, Braamfontein, South Africa, 1971):

- Knowledge obtained is accurate if the knowing agrees with the structural laws concerning a particular feature or function of a knowable object.

These laws or standards, of course, need to be more-or-less correctly articulated by the appropriate community (and ultimately in the light of the Truth), but knowing that the temperature outside my window right now is zero degrees Fahrenheit is an obvious example of accuracy. I also have no reason to question the accuracy of Darwin’s claim that the barbarians of Tierra del Feugo valued their dogs more than they did their old women. And there is also an accuracy—moving to the realm of ethics and morality—to this line of Buddhist scripture: “Self-applause, belittling others, or encouragement to sin, some such evil’s sure to happen where one fool another meets.” So too, I think that it is possible for the nonchristian to perform acts of civic good: helping the proverbial little old lady across the street, using honest weights and measures, and restocking grocery shelves promptly and neatly. Pitching a no-hitter, well and with precision—even though the context might be defined by money and pretended fame—fits in here as well.

- Knowledge gained is correct if the relative states of affairs known are kept relative, limited, related to the rest of the world in its proper place.

A medical doctor who not only can read the thermometer correctly but also understands how temperature, white blood cells, and viral infections all are related knows the connectedness of this or that case correctly. Likewise, it is certainly possible for some who are unregenerate to write a good line of poetry, sing an intriguing song, develop a quite sound investment strategy, or show sensitivity to the environmental degradation that is part of our times. In each case, we can say that the person’s knowledge is correct.

I agree with John Calvin that “natural men” are “sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things” but disagree with his claim that the “admirable light of truth” shines in “secular writers” (16). What they know is sometimes accurate, or even correct, but never true in the sense that I’m suggesting.

- Achieved knowledge is *true* if one's grasp or understanding of things develops Christ's lordship of the world (rather than the devil's) and pleases Him.

This test or criterion for knowledge clearly angles in on the antithesis and, though basic, is no more profound than the realization that everyone's insights into facts and various more-or-less complex states of affairs is ultimately defined by the overarching context of and battle between the kingdom of light or the kingdom of darkness. Mouw rightly cautions against equating this battle with the difference between church and world, but by giving us not much more to hang on to than the difference between (saving) grace and (common) "grace," he does, ultimately, seem to downplay the reality of this deep division between obedience and disobedience, between righteousness and unrighteousness.

Some of Calvin's phrases in this regard, like "glimmerings of natural light" and "some sparks still gleam," invite confusion. I agree with Hoeksema that the non-elect *can* have an (accurate, or possibly even correct) grasp of the principles necessary for proper societal living, but that because such a person "does not seek after God, nor aim at Him and His glory," the actual result of all this is that he uses his social efforts to rebel against God, leading also—at least at times—to "evil effects upon himself and his fellow creatures" (19).

I am confident that owing to God's providence, Christians and nonchristians have very much in common. I am also convinced that Christians are obliged to discover and honor what we hold in common with those who reject the biblical message. We all live in the same cosmos. The unregenerate mind cannot help but stumblingly grasp things about this ordered whole that are correct, or at least accurate. By working hard to investigate what we have in common and by embracing what we *hold in common*, we sustain a context by God's grace within which we can meaningfully engage contemporary culture in ways that may help some come to know what every Christian knows to be true.

I am suggesting that the distinction between (saving) grace and (common) "grace" does not give Christians the nuance necessary to get better at discerning what it is that shines in all that is fair. A second instance, I would suggest, of Mouw's not going far enough in this little book is his discussion of the

infra- and supralapsarian debate. (Respectively: Did God first decide to create the world, then decide to permit the fall, and only then decide regarding election and reprobation, *or* Did God first decree that this group of human beings would be the elect and that group the reprobate, and only then decide to make that happen by creating the world and permitting the fall into sin? [54]) He indicates that some—and I include myself among them—take this debate to be a pseudo-puzzle. My hunch is that Mouw would agree as well, but that is not his focus. Instead, he devotes an entire chapter to this debate in order to illustrate that the more popular "infralapsarian view insists on more complexity in its treat-

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ment of the content of God's self-glorifying designs" than does the supralapsarian position (e.g., of Herman Hoeksema), which equates God's desire to be glorified with the project of "bringing elect and reprobate human beings to their respective destinies" (60).

If Mouw had to choose, he clearly prefers the infralapsarian view because it allows "for an ultimate multiplicity in the divine purposes" (61), that is, it acknowledges a "psychic complexity" in the godhead that allows for the manyness of (saving) grace and (common) "grace"—which, of course, is what Mouw is out to defend. If I would ever write a chapter on this debate, I would want to clarify why I am convinced that it is a pseudo-puzzle. In so doing, I would also want to take issue with teachings it presupposes concerning divine simplicity and the completely self-absorbed, self-centered, self-contained, self-interested nature of God's being—"divine" attributes that have more to do with what Parmenides and Aristotle held in common about



“god” than what all the passages in Scripture taken together tell us about who God is and how God is in his many-faceted relationship with what-all he loved in sending his son. Parmenides and Aristotle might well have gotten a few things right (accurate, or even maybe correct) about the origin and end of all things, but I am convinced that their theologies provide poor illustrations of—quoting John Calvin—“a perspective in which lightning flashes provide giddy travelers in the night with occasional

glimpses of long-forgotten pathways” (68) to the God of Scripture.

Christians hold so very many things in common about what the elect in Christ have in common that I would hope that our disagreements about what might be inaccurate or incorrect in each other’s views on more specific questions will not keep us from embracing each other in dialogue and will urge us on to remain civil in our disagreements.