

# COMMON GRACE AND THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 4, Satan tempted Christ to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, citing that the angels would not allow the Son of God to strike His foot on a stone. Christ rebuked the devil, declaring that one should not put God to the test (Matthew 4:6). The retort did not condemn Satan for misunderstanding God's promise, but for misusing it. The Lord's retort declared that Satan was not alone in misusing God's Word. In quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, Christ implied that Israel had been equally guilty of the same faulty logic as they appealed to God's promise of provision to demand a miracle from Him (Exodus 17:1-7; cf. Deuteronomy 6:16).<sup>2</sup> These examples, from a hermeneutical perspective, illustrate that not every logical inference from revealed truth is valid. Scripture and its doctrines can be misapplied,<sup>3</sup> which is why Scripture does not merely provide a list of doctrines in a vacuum but framed within the author's intent. In such a context, the author not only explained the substance of the doctrine but established the logic of how these truths can and cannot be used. Theology done rightly embraces all that the Scripture says, articulating not only the content of doctrine but also the rationale of that truth.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 166.

<sup>3</sup> An example of such logic concerns the sovereignty of God. Some might contend that God's sovereignty over people's conversion (cf. Eph 1:3-6; 2 Cor 4:6) renders evangelism unnecessary. However, that is not the logic of Scripture which contends that divine election drives perseverance in the work of ministry (cf. Acts 18:9-10).

This is the matter at hand with the topic of common grace. The doctrine itself is a beautiful truth, declaring God's universal goodness and kindness to all people without exception. That God displays in this life patient benevolence upon even those who forever will hate His Son testifies to the wonder of His magnanimity.<sup>4</sup> But like any truth of Scripture, the extent of this generosity and its implications can be taken in the wrong direction. Like with the doctrines of general revelation and knowledge,<sup>5</sup> common grace can be used to undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Because of such misconceptions, it is important to delve into the truth of common grace from an exegetical perspective. From there, a survey of the ecclesiastical discussion on the matter can illustrate the needed epistemological considerations to ensure that common grace does not undermine the sufficiency of Scripture.

## EXEGETICAL DERIVATION

As will be discussed, a tenacious and nuanced discussion swirls around the subject of common grace. Particularly in Reformed circles, there is debate concerning the needed limitations of the doctrine (so as not to contradict total depravity) and the balance of not making the doctrine so limited that it is denied altogether.<sup>6</sup> To assess all the objections, distinctions, and qualifications posed over the years requires great discernment, one that comes from Scripture. Only the Word of God can rightly evaluate what is right or wrong in people's formulation of the doctrine. The need for such biblical discernment already illustrates the absolute sufficiency of Scripture. Man's reasoning did not produce a perfectly circumspect articulation of the doctrine. Rather, it facilitated controversy that can only be resolved by Scripture itself. Scripture does not depend upon man's reasoning, rather man's reasoning depends upon Scripture for answers.

While many passages discuss the doctrine of common grace, one text

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<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 488.

<sup>5</sup> See Abner Chou, "The Queen of the Sciences: Reclaiming the Rightful Place of Theology and Creation," *The Journal of The Math3ma Institute* (March 1, 2022): 5–12.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Vander Kam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (1986): 60.

organizes the entire concept: the Noahic covenant as presented in Genesis 8-9. The biblical theological context and design of the Noahic covenant establishes it as a framework for common grace. The Noahic covenant is the first official covenant to appear in Scripture (cf. Genesis 8:20-9:19) and is established in the context of not only the flood but thereby a renewed creation. While God's intention with the global flood most certainly included His wrath against sin (Genesis 6:7), He also used the flood to renew a world where sin was restrained. Such an idea was already introduced with Noah, whose name means "rest," alluding back to the rest found in the Garden of Eden (cf. Genesis 2:15).<sup>7</sup> Noah's father Lamech had prayed for God to grant mankind rest from the toils against the cursed ground, and the flood was in part God's answer to that request.<sup>8</sup> Moses' narration of the flood affirms this, as the progression of the flood parallels the original creation account in numerous ways. At one point, God caused a wind (*ruach*, רוּחַ) to pass over the earth (Genesis 8:1) just as the Spirit (*ruach*, רוּחַ) hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:2). At that moment, the water had risen above the mountains such that there was sky and sea (Genesis 7:19), just like on the second day of creation (Genesis 1:6). Afterwards, dry land appeared (Genesis 8:13) just as it did on the third day of creation (Gen 1:9). Following this, God commanded that Noah, his family, animals, creeping things, and swarming things to come out of the ark onto the land just as these creatures were formed on the sixth day (Genesis 1:24-28). God also blessed Noah with the command to be fruitful and multiply just as He did with Adam originally (Genesis 1:26-28). The entire progression of the flood narrative mirrors God's original creation, demonstrating that while the flood judged the world, it also worked to reset the world. In this context, the Noahic covenant was put in place to govern the very operation of this restored creation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the covenant was designed to be the framework of *common* grace, for it regulates God's goodness throughout the entire created order to all humanity.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In setting man in the garden (Gen 2:15), God actually caused Him to rest there (יָהָרַץ). The root word is the same as the term Noah.

<sup>8</sup> K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 317.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that God's mercy and grace did not exist prior to the Flood. Instead, what is formally known as common grace, the articulation of a certain exercise of God's grace, is what is in view here.

The structure of Genesis 8:20-9:17 is chiasmic, breaking down into three parts. While the beginning (Genesis 8:20-22) and end (Genesis 9:8-16) of the text discuss God's restraint of the destruction of the world, its center deals with the continuation of certain blessings for man (Genesis 9:1-7). With such structure, the passage presents two major ideas, curbing judgment and continuing goodness, which are in fact two major pillars of common grace.<sup>11</sup> The Noahic covenant truly provides the conceptual outline for the doctrine.

In the first section of the passage (Genesis 8:20-22), God declared to Himself that He would never repeat the global flood again.<sup>12</sup> Part of common grace is restraining the onslaught of God's total judgment, providing time for God's redemptive historical plan and the accomplishment and preaching of the gospel. At the same time, within these verses, the Lord also expressed that common grace does not transform man's heart since "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). Only special grace can work within a man and affect such change. Instead, common grace holds back the severity of the situation by external means. Genesis 8:22 articulates that God restrains global judgment not by some improvement to man's intellect or righteousness but by ensuring means outside of man, the seasons, are put in place so that there is mitigation of sin's consequences.

In the second section of the passage (Genesis 9:1-7), God declared that in spite of the Fall, man can still experience certain benefits. God blessed Noah, giving him the command "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). While such a blessing mirrors what was given at creation, it is not identical to what was originally stated. In the original mandate, God also commissioned man to subdue and have dominion over the creatures of the earth (Genesis 1:28). These commands are absent from what God commanded Noah.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> William D Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (1993): 228.

<sup>12</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 136-17.

<sup>13</sup> P. J. Harland and James McKeown, *Genesis*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 64. Though some may argue that the text assumed the inclusion of the command for dominion, several arguments counter such an idea. First, qualifications on all the mandates of creation are present in this chapter (cf. Gen 9:2-6) so it is consistent to see this happening in this case. Second, Gen 9:2 repeats the language of Gen 1:28b concerning the beast, birds, creeping things, and fish without repeating the language of Gen 1:28 concerning having dominion. That is not merely an omission but a deliberate modification

Just as sin persisted past the Flood in the hearts of man (see above), so sin did not allow man to enjoy the fullness of what was originally promised. This not only anticipated the final Adam who would have such promised dominion (cf. Hebrews 2:8-9) but also limits the extent of what common grace recovers. Common grace does not allow one to experience all that was intended in creation. Man can reproduce and experience the wonder of the world as he fills the earth, but his ability to grasp, manipulate, and control creation is curtailed. This observation will play an important role in resolving the tensions that arise as the doctrine of common grace was discussed in church history.

Just like God restrained sin through means external to man, so He allowed man to enjoy certain benefits of creation also through external means. Animals would fear man (Genesis 9:2), become food for him (Genesis 9:3), and there would be government to help maintain the preservation of life (Genesis 9:4-6). However, government would preserve life by sometimes taking life (Genesis 9:6). To accentuate the tragic irony of this reality, right after instituting capital punishment, the Lord reiterated that Noah and his family should be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 9:7). The ability of man to be productive and procreate was now in a context of sin and death. It underscores that any notion of man's continued enjoyment of creation was tainted due to sin.

In the final section of the passage (Genesis 9:8-19), the Lord took the declaration He made to Himself at the beginning of the passage (cf. Genesis 8:20-22) and made it known to all creation. In doing so, God defined the commonness of common grace. The covenant is with Noah and his sons, all mankind (Genesis 9:8) for all generations (Genesis 9:9), and all animals (Genesis 9:10).<sup>14</sup> All creation experiences God's restraint of their destruction (9:11) as well as the sign of God's covenant (Genesis 9:12-17). Common grace, like general revelation, is intrinsically accessible to all.

In establishing the Noahic covenant as a regulator over the renewed post-Flood creation, the treaty became the foundation for all subsequent

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of the quotation. Third, such a deliberate modification is affirmed by the rest of Scripture as the term מָלָאךְ is predominantly reserved not for mankind in general but the Messiah and those in Him (Num 24:19; 1 Kgs 4:24; Ps 72:8; 110:2).

<sup>14</sup>Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 408–9.

discussions of common grace in Scripture. Just as God revealed His restraint of global judgment so that redemptive history could continue (Genesis 8:20-22), so Paul called this era God's kindness which should lead to repentance (Romans 2:4). Peter labeled it God's patience which allowed the elect to come to Christ (2 Peter 3:9, 15). Just as God allowed man to continue to experience a certain joy in this world (Genesis 9:1-7), so Scripture frequently comments on the goodness of God to all (Psalms 104:14-15; 106:1; Mark 10:18; Acts 14:15-17; 17:25; 1 Timothy 4:4). Just as God controls the weather to ensure balance in this world (Genesis 8:22) so the rain falls on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). Just as God restrained evil and judgment for all creation via external means (Genesis 9:8-19), so Scripture expounds upon the topics of government (Romans 13:1-5) and family (Proverbs 2:1-5; 19:18). Scripture adds that conscience is found in every man, restraining the intensity of their wickedness (Romans 2:15).

Five major observations can be made based upon this brief exegetical and biblical theological presentation of common grace. First, common grace deals with the restraint of evil and delay of final judgment, opportunity for God's plan of redemption to progress, and continuation of man's access to the benefits of creation. Second, common grace primarily works externally to man through fear of animals, providential control of the weather, sun rising or setting, or government and parenting. Conscience is the sole exception to this mechanism, but even that does not enhance man's intellectual capabilities but only curtails the degree of the effects of his total depravity (Romans 2:15). Third, as such, common grace works pragmatically and limitedly on the physical level as opposed to the spiritual or immaterial level.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, consistently, common grace does not transform the heart of a man, which remains totally wicked post-Flood (Genesis 8:21), but exposes that sin has marred man's existence, particularly in the workings of his inner man (Genesis 8:21). Finally, common grace is for all as all are exposed to sunrise and sunset, rain, conscience, and even societal authority structure. Thus, specialized discoveries about creation are not inherently common grace. Based upon the above observations, common grace at best facilitates these discoveries by

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd Ed.) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 402-3. See also John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Reprint edition. (Banner of Truth, 1991), 2:113. Murray states that "common grace provides the sphere of operation of special grace" (2:116).

providing a world where discovery can take place. But common grace does not empower man internally to make these discoveries much less verify their discoveries whether that be on a natural or spiritual level.

That being said, the commonness of common grace highlights the expansive and wondrous nature of the doctrine. Its universality is a reminder that God's grace is working in every part of human existence, restraining evil and allowing man, in God's great patience, to experience a taste of His goodness even in a fallen world.

## ECCLESIASTICAL DISCUSSION

The ecclesiastical discussion on common grace highlights the need for the fine exegetical nuancing discussed above. In surveying the discussion of common grace in church history and particularly in Reformed theology, it is important to note that the prominent formulation of the doctrine came about relatively recently.<sup>16</sup> Though Calvin commented on the topic,<sup>17</sup> it was only in the 19th century that theologians like Bavinck and Kuyper continued the development of the doctrine, which further ensued with individuals like Van Til.<sup>18</sup> This does not illegitimatize the concept since, as Vander Kam rightly points out, there is the progress of doctrine, where certain truths receive attention at certain times after the working out of their theological prerequisites.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the recent nature of the focused development of common grace points out that the doctrine is not a monolithic concept but still under discussion. As Van Vliet observes,

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What Cornelius Van Til calls the “common grace problem” has

<sup>16</sup> Vander Kam, “Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace,” 53–55.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” Calvin Theological Journal 24, no. 1 (April 1989): 36; *Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), sec. 2.2.12-17. Calvin commented on common grace as a manifestation of God's providence by which He sustains the created order so that man can experience some level of goodness. Because such experience comes from God's intervention, such goodness comes not from human achievement or ability but God's mercy.

<sup>18</sup> Vander Kam, “Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace,” 55; Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd edition. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Vander Kam, “Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace,” 55.

received considerable attention in the theological discussions of, especially, the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning with an exhaustive (three volume) attempt by Abraham Kuyper to interpret all the implications of this doctrine for the individual and for society and through the various refinements of the Amsterdam School to the suggested overhaul by Cornelius Van Til, the doctrine remains an unsettled one upon which there is no mutual agreement.<sup>20</sup>

Three historical discussions illustrate the tensions theologians faced in articulating the doctrine, not only showing the need for exegetical precision but also informing the discussion of common grace and the sufficiency of Scripture.

## CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

The first historical illustration deals with the discussion of common grace, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), and the advent of the Protestant Reformed Church of America (PRCA). In 1924, facing controversy about the articulation of common grace, the CRC adopted three points concerning common grace. First, God had a favorable attitude towards all men in general, sending rain on the just and the unjust. Second, God restrains the breaking out of total depravity by the general operation of the Spirit. Third, those who are unregenerate have the ability to do civic works that are good.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, these three assertions generally correspond to the exegetical analysis above, and for this reason, were not objectionable in and of themselves to the denomination.

On the other hand, the issue was what was missing from the CRC's three points. Some in the denomination, including Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof, were concerned that the statement omitted certain qualifications emphasized in Scripture. In discussing the first point, these men, while

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Van Vliet, "From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 1 (1999): 73.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 75–76.

acknowledging that God's benevolence was certainly upon the just and unjust, argued that such mercy did not indicate His favor. This accords with the presentation of the Noahic covenant which emphasized God's displeasure with man and that his heart was still perpetually evil (Genesis 8:21). Regarding the second point of CRC's statement, while recognizing God's restraint on sin, they argued that God not only restrains by His intervention but specifically by placing external means which force conditions that hold back sin and disaster. This too harmonizes with the stress of the Noahic covenant which speaks of the external means of regular seasons (Genesis 8:22), fear of man in creation (Genesis 9:2-3), and government (Genesis 9:6-7). Concerning the final point of the denominational statement, the objectors contended that while people can make practically useful products, that is not the same as pleasing God. This too is found in Genesis where the emphasis is upon man's physical activity which does not relate to spiritual teleology. In fact, since subjugating and having dominion over the earth are removed from man's purview, common grace only supports a limited kind of activity for man, and it is impossible for him to obey the original divine mandate. Such truth maintains the reality that every intent of man's heart is wicked (Genesis 8:21).

In sum, the opposition acknowledged the observations found in the CRC's three points but were highly concerned over what the statement did not properly limit, omissions which could lead to a denial of total depravity, undermine the doctrine of predestination, and erode the antithesis between the depraved world and God and the truth.<sup>22</sup> These concerns were grounded by Scripture itself, a reminder of the need for precise formulation not only to the content of what Scripture claims but the bounds and purpose it establishes by context. To be clear, those who espoused the doctrine of common grace did not desire to undermine the other truths listed above. Nonetheless, as will be soon discussed, those in opposition were troubled by not only where this lack of precision *could* take one's theology but where historically it *already had*. It illustrates that careful formulation of common grace was so necessary that even new denominations (PRCA) began because of it.

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<sup>22</sup> Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," 75-77.

The second illustration pertains to Van Til's interaction with Bavinck and Kuyper on common grace. As noted, though Calvin had commented on the matter, it was Bavinck and Kuyper who gave the doctrine a full articulation, the latter writing a massive three volume tome on the matter.<sup>23</sup> What compelled these Dutch theologians to contemplate this issue was their zeal for the sovereignty of God. Because they so thoroughly believed in God's reign over every aspect of creation, they sought to relate why man was not as bad as he could be with the exercise of God's power over the world.<sup>24</sup>

However, Bavinck's and Kuyper's articulation of the doctrine received some pushback from several individuals, including Kuyper's protege, Van Til. The main contention revolved around the relationship between common grace and total depravity in two ways.<sup>25</sup> First, opponents argued that any notion of common good diluted the depth of human depravity. If man could do something "good," that lessened the definition of true "goodness," which is what pleases God. While advocates of common grace qualified such goodness as civic as opposed to that which proceeds from true faith, an additional problem occurred as such good was attributed to the Spirit's work, which made it seem that these works actually had a component of true goodness.<sup>26</sup> If man can do anything remotely "good," that diminishes the depth of total depravity and man's inability.

Second, Van Til contended that his mentor's viewpoint on common grace limited the breadth of total depravity. Kuyper accounted for why believer and unbeliever could make the exact same observation by contending that common grace preserved their metaphysical state even if their epistemology is fallen.<sup>27</sup> For Van Til, such a distinction compromised the full extent of the fall

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<sup>23</sup> John Bolt, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: The Temptations of Calvinist Politics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 2 (November 2000): 217. Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, ed. Jordon J. Ballor and Melvin Flikkema, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, 3 vols. (Lexham Press, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Vander Kam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," 55–57.

<sup>25</sup> Bolt, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good," 217.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Nathan D Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts: The Theology of a Common Grace Misstep," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11, no. 4 (2017): 404; John Frame, "Van Til on

and thereby a consistently Reformed formulation of common grace. After all, Kuyper's argument was strikingly similar to Roman Catholic and Arminian theologies, which believe that common grace allows man to correctly use reason and observation.<sup>28</sup> But Van Til contended that the Reformed tradition did not start with same foundation as Roman Catholic and Arminian systems. Catholic and Arminian conceived of common grace based upon a denial of total depravity, arguing that common grace to a degree preserved man's goodness. However, the Reformed thought about common grace began with the affirmation of the doctrine of total depravity. This meant a Reformed articulation of common grace required its own formulation, distinct from those other theologies.<sup>29</sup>

In resolving the supposed discrepancy between common grace and depravity, Van Til made the following observations. He began his discussion with the proposition that scientific investigation is either conducted on Christian or non-Christian presuppositions.<sup>30</sup> Returning back to the question of why believers and unbelievers can seemingly make the same observation, Van Til retorted that they in fact do not. While Kuyper thought the unbeliever can make an observation without rejecting God per se, Van Til argued that the unregenerate always rejected God (even if unconsciously). The unbeliever sees scientific data as purely isolated fact with no ground or purpose in God and the supernatural. But the believer must see such scientific data as an inherent part of the work of the triune God, with its grounding and purpose inseparable from that reality. So while in form believer and unbeliever may appear to say the same things, in substance the entirety of their claim is utterly different. This is why even "good" deeds are filthy rags and rebellion (cf. Isaiah 64:6), and why unbeliever's observation will be skewed in the end.

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Antithesis," *Westminster Theological Journal*, no. 57 (1995): 88–89.

<sup>28</sup> Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," 226.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 227. Unlike Hoeksema and Danhof, he did not reject common grace, but he recognized that Kuyper's and Bavinck's formulation required some modification. As such, he recognized that his mentor certainly did not deny total depravity but that his discussions of common grace assumed this. See Vander Kam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," 58. So what was required was a greater consistency in how the doctrine of common grace was articulated and applied in light of reformed hamartiology. This is why Shannon argues that Van Til did not disagree with Kuyper on the topic itself but only on its application. Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts," 402.

<sup>30</sup> Van Vliet, "From Condition to State," 76.

For Van Til, this was the problem of Kuyper's distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological. Kuyper made that distinction in order to argue that "at the beginning of the road, the tree of science is common to all."<sup>31</sup> But Van Til countered that this was Kuyper's problem. Science can only be done either from believing or unbelieving presuppositions, and Kuyper, by using common grace to grant man innate ability, shifted what was merely "common" to all people to that which was morally neutral.<sup>32</sup> This legitimized human observation, which in turn was why, in the formulation of common grace, human observations seemed to encroach on the true good that pleased God and why there was confusion about the nature of "good" in the first place. Van Til argued that his mentor, in making these shifts, had made common grace inadvertently undermine the noetic effect of the fall.

Instead, Van Til argued that there should be no division between the metaphysical and the epistemological as they are all part of the interpretative act and affected by the Fall.<sup>33</sup> Man may share *common* rational faculties because they are all made in the image of God, but that does not mean that these faculties are *neutral* much less correct. Van Til used the analogy of a buzz saw cutting in the wrong direction to illustrate this idea. In cutting in the wrong direction, the buzz saw still operates but with wrong purpose and result. In the same way, people have reason and can make observations, but fallen reason and observation will operate with the wrong purpose and result. Depraved man will take their reason and observations and utilize them for purposes that suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Human depravity can even distort what they see as they are selective with the data of their observations (cf. Isaiah 6:9; 29:1-10). Even observations and interpretations that are legitimate are only that way because people borrowed from the truth, and thus, these ideas are not valid because man-made science or reason declares it so, but because they agree with the truth of divine revelation.<sup>34</sup>

So it may appear that people may share the same observation, but in the full

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 77; Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie Der Heiligt Godgeleerdhe* (Kampen, The Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1909), 2:116.

<sup>32</sup> Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts," 404.

<sup>33</sup> Frame, "Van Til on Antithesis," 88–89.

<sup>34</sup> Such borrowing of Christian presupposition happens often in western science due to its history of development. Such borrowing though is not common grace for it is not *common* to all.

context they are worlds apart. To be sure, the reasoning of the unregenerate and the regenerate are operating but in completely different ways. This is especially the case since creation is not neutral but general revelation, which declares not merely isolated data but the glory of God (cf. Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:20-21). If man is merely making physical observations to the exclusion of God's glory, he is actively rejecting part of what should be truly observed. That is why unbelief is not merely poor observation of data but the repudiation of God.<sup>35</sup>

By giving fuller expression to Paul's declaration of man's constant act of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (cf. Romans 1:18), Van Til guarded against common grace undermining total depravity. Though his explanation was sorely missing Scripture,<sup>36</sup> it actually abides by the exegetical data that common grace is God's intervention of the physical creation outside of man as opposed to preserving or enhancing man's internal abilities. Because of this, while common grace preserves the world and restrains sin such that man can experience the bounties of creation,<sup>37</sup> the unregenerate cannot contribute to or discover the actual truth of this creation. He may be a great artist, scientist, or teacher (from the world's standpoint) but the nature and effect of that are confined. This affirms man "filling the earth" per the Noahic covenant. Man may experience the goodness of physical creation but without the ability to fulfil his role to truly subjugate it to God's glory. Man does not discover truth, but only at best learns to better enjoy and manipulate that which pertains to physical pragmatics, benefits, effects, or operations.<sup>38</sup>

A great deal of attention has been given to Van Til for good reason as he provides helpful qualifications on the discussions of common grace. In sum, historically, common grace has always been in tension with total depravity.<sup>39</sup> Though exegetically common grace primarily concerned what occurred in the physical realm outside of man, theologians had extrapolated beyond those bounds to include man's internal or metaphysical constitution. Van Til

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<sup>35</sup> Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts," 406.

<sup>36</sup> Van Vliet, "From Condition to State," 89.

<sup>37</sup> This may be what Berkhof means when he states that common grace "promotes the development of science and art." See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1941), 434.

<sup>38</sup> Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," 236.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

reinforced that since creation is not merely just a series of facts but general revelation declaring God's glory, science can only be done in unbelief or belief. Common grace does not enable the unbeliever to do science like a believer for it does not transform the unbeliever (cf. Genesis 8:22). Rather, common grace preserves the world, restraining the consequences of sin, so that both believers and unbelievers can engage in it.<sup>40</sup> While what they discover may be reasoned, it does not mean it is right (since the unbeliever suppresses truth in unrighteousness) and is far from revelatory. Such discoveries facilitated<sup>41</sup> by common grace can only pertain to the natural and not supernatural/spiritual effects for that is the realm common grace operates in. As Genesis originally established, common grace is external to man, restrains sin, and pertains only to physical creation.

## THE JANSSEN CASE

A major impetus behind these Reformed discussions about common grace was the third historical illustration of the Janssen case. In 1920, Dr. Ralph Janssen, professor of Old Testament at Calvin Seminary, raised issues concerning the relationship between reason and revelation. In essence, Janssen's position was that scientific reason and discoveries should influence the interpretation of revelation.<sup>42</sup> His opponents claimed he had bought into higher criticism, especially as he tended toward naturalistic explanations of the supernatural.<sup>43</sup> Janssen argued that based upon common grace, man should appreciate the sciences such that their discoveries should inform Scripture.<sup>44</sup> This of course is why the entire discussion about common grace occurred.

Several points are of note. First, that incomplete formulations of common grace can lead to problems is not merely a theoretical possibility but a historical actuality. Second, it is fascinating that both Janssen's opponents and

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<sup>40</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:113.

<sup>41</sup> Notice the wording is not empower for common grace does not give people the ability to make proper discoveries as Van Til discussed.

<sup>42</sup> David E Holwerda, "Hermeneutical Issues Then and Now: The Janssen Case Revisited," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (April 1989): 11.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–27.

supporters cite Bavinck and Kuyper. The latter cite their view on common grace while the former cite their view on revelation and total depravity.<sup>45</sup> In the end, the problem was not with Bavinck's and Kuyper's view on common grace (though some disagreed and others, like Van Til, modified it), but with the blatant contradiction of Janssen's view to Bavinck's and Kuyper's view on revelation and total depravity. Third, the fault in Janssen's logic was that he used common grace and reason in the wrong direction. He believed science, supported by common grace, flowed into and informed revelation whereas Bavinck viewed science as the translation of God's grace with special revelation directing general revelation and knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Fourth, that Janssen's teachings were struck down provides historical precedent that the Reformed tradition did not support common grace to prop human knowledge and reason to be on such a level with Scripture or to have such bearing on life and godliness.

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL DELIBERATION

The Janssen case illustrates that common grace, incompletely defined, can be used to undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Four important observations, exegetically derived and brought forth in ecclesiological discussion, can help prevent such misapplication:

1. Common grace does not inherently deal with the category of knowledge. In Scripture, common grace pertains to the restraint of sin and judgment in physical creation (cf. Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-19). This may allow for a world of discovery but cannot be equated with the discoveries themselves.
2. Common grace does not empower the obtaining of knowledge. The primary framework of common grace found in the Noahic covenant dealt with factors outside of man including weather (Genesis 8:22; cf. Matthew 5:45), government (Genesis 9:6; cf. Romans 13:4), and fear of man in animals (Genesis 9:2-3). Such external elements do not sharpen the heart or mind of man, which the Noahic covenant established to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 32.

be completely bent upon evil continuously (Genesis 8:21). At most, conscience can be considered a common grace that affects man internally, but even then it is a restraint and not an empowerment.

3. Common grace does allow one to experience this world. Just as the Noahic covenant still commissions man to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1), so man experiences God's goodness in this creation. However, such experience must be carefully defined. For both regenerate and unregenerate, such experience is confined to physical creation and is further qualified in two ways. First, he cannot experience such benefit to its full degree quantitatively as the original creation mandate was abridged. Man can still experience creation but does not have true mastery over it. Second, because of this and the noetic effect of sin, the quality of such experience is warped as man suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. Thus, while common grace facilitates man to experience physical benefits in creation, it acknowledges that man cannot have true grasp of these blessings and will skew their nature.
4. The realm of common grace should be contrasted with the reach of Scripture. Common grace pertains to the physical realm of this world whereas Scripture reveals the totality of human nature and experience, natural and supernatural. Because of this, common grace is inadequate to handle problems that are non-material, and the observations facilitated by it, while having potentially pragmatic benefits, cannot either resolve the matter of glorifying God. Only Scripture has jurisdiction to genuinely define and deal with issues that are non-material from their origins to their ends of pleasing God.

Scripture establishes three categories of information: special revelation, general revelation, and knowledge with special revelation having the greatest specificity and influence over the rest.<sup>47</sup> There is a proclivity to equate one's knowledge with general revelation, and then in turn elevate this to the level of special revelation. This confuses what man derives versus what God discloses, what specialties observe versus what creation collectively reveals, and what man partially thinks versus what God has authoritatively established. The

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<sup>47</sup> Chou, "The Queen of the Sciences," 4-11.

above observations attempt to prevent such misapplication of common grace by reminding one of the limits of common grace in contrast with the total reach of Scripture.

## CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not merely compel people to consult the Scripture on matters of life and godliness. That is a legitimate practical consequence, but not its point. Rather, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is the function of sola Scriptura in epistemology. Scripture is the clear divine revelation of the total reality of this world, both natural and supernatural, and so is not defined by the created order but is the definition of it. Because Scripture is the expression of how God designed the world, the framework of all reality, it dictates how this world should be seen, not the other way around. Observations about this world serve as an illustration of what Scripture declares and not its interpretation.

The point then of the sufficiency of Scripture is to keep the Scripture in its proper place as the pinnacle of human epistemology, and the above considerations ensure that common grace never subverts that. After all, common grace is a beautiful doctrine, a demonstration of God's lavish goodness. Common grace is the reminder that God is immensely good to the unbeliever, pouring out His mercy to him every second of his earthly existence. Even more, for the believer, common grace is a reminder that all the saints will ever know is God's grace, having common grace in this life and special grace that extends to the life that is to come. No one can question God's goodness because of common grace, and the same Scripture that presents the splendor of this doctrine establishes its proper place. The qualifications made above are not manmade but established by the Scripture itself. Common grace has never been in competition with Scripture. For Scripture is the very epistemic grounds of common grace, making it entirely self-defeating for common grace to erode Scripture's sufficiency. Thus, it is incumbent upon believers to apply doctrine the way the Scripture has dictated so that the beauty of that doctrine may shine the way it was intended.