

Chapter One

THINKING ABOUT COMMONNESS

Like most people raised in North American Protestantism, I was taught songs in my early childhood about the love of Jesus. I can't remember a time when I did not know the words to "Jesus Loves Me" and "Jesus Loves the Little Children." These songs celebrate a divine love that sounds inclusive:

Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in His sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

But there is another little song I learned at a very early age in the Dutch Reformed Sunday School I attended:

One door and only one, and yet its sides are two.
I'm on the inside, on which side are you?

The love-of-Jesus choruses had their intended effect on me: they assured me that I could be a beneficiary of the Savior's love. But I also understood, even in those early years, the intended teaching of the "One door" song: there are two kinds of people in the world, those who belong to Jesus in a special way and those who do not.

Some are inside the door, others are outside. There is no third group. And the question of which group you belong to is of supreme importance. Again, these basics were clear to me even as a little child. The songs that celebrated the love of Jesus were very important to me, but they never inclined me to become a universalist.

These exclusionary themes were also part of my growing up. I was reared in an evangelical pietist culture, where a premium was placed on being “spiritual.” This was the opposite of being “worldly.” Our sense of the need to separate ourselves from non-Christian culture was reinforced by a fairly explicit set of rules proscribing those behaviors that were taken to be the most visible signs of worldliness.

While I later came to abandon some of the emphases of this pietism in favor of a spirituality wedded to Reformed theology, I still endorse the basic pietist insistence that the Christian community must be very conscious of the significant ways in which God calls us to stand against the prevailing cultures of our fallen world. It was, after all, one of the apostles, writing under the inspiration of the Spirit — and not just a long line of pietist preachers — who admonished us not to “love the world or the things in the world,” since “the love of the Father is not in those who love the world” (I John 2:15-16).

During my college years, I puzzled much over the relationship of Christian commitment to secular thought and the broader patterns of culture. I posed some questions — admittedly in a rather naïve spirit — to a Reformed pastor friend, and he gave me a copy of Cornelius Van Til’s booklet *Common Grace*,¹ which I read and re-read eagerly. As Van Til spelled out his own views on the subject by critically contrasting them with the perspectives of figures I was just getting to know — Abraham Kuyper, Herman Hoeksema and others — I was impressed by the importance of this topic and the Calvinist framework within which the issues were formulated.

1. Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1954).

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In these pages I will reflect on the notion of “common grace,” as it has been debated by thinkers in the Calvinist tradition. What is it that Christians can assume they have in common with people who have not experienced the saving grace that draws a sinner into a restored relationship with God? To some degree this question has been raised throughout the larger Calvinist community, but I will focus here on the discussions among Dutch Calvinists, whose arguments have been especially intense — even to the point of splitting churches.

A Broader Interest in Commonness

Before getting into my discussion of the ways in which Calvinists have argued with each other about these matters, I want to note that the underlying issues here are of broad contemporary Christian concern. The question of “commonness” actually looms fairly large in theological discussion these days, at various points on the theological spectrum. And what makes the present treatments of the topic especially interesting, particularly in the Protestant world, is that a kind of role reversal has been taking place in the way the topic is being treated. Some of those who in the past were strong defenders of difference are now exploring theologies of commonness, and others who in the past were strong defenders of commonness are now exploring theologies of difference.

Consider the evangelical world. The cultural self-understanding of many evangelical Christians has often been shaped in the past by three closely related pietist motifs: a remnant view of the church, in which Christians saw themselves as inevitably a “little flock” in the midst of a world hostile to the faith; an ethic of “over-againstness,” whereby believers were encouraged to establish patterns of living that underscored their separation from the dominant cultural patterns; and a pessimistic, even apocalyptic, assessment of the future course of history. Evangelical groups that have featured these mo-

tifs in the past are now moving in a quite different theological direction. They are building mega-churches and strategizing about how to win the “culture wars.” Some of them, not too long ago, even chose to describe themselves as representing a new “moral majority” in American life. In these and other ways, commonness themes have come to have a new currency among evangelicals over the past few decades.

A very different tendency can be discerned within segments of mainstream Protestantism, where some thinkers are intentionally downplaying commonness. In the recent book *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church*, the authors, each of them a pastor in a mainline denomination, tell of their theological pilgrimages away from the strong emphasis on a continuity between the gospel and culture that they had learned from their liberal Protestant mentors. Martin Copenhaver’s story is a good case in point. The senior pastor of Wellesley Congregational Church in Massachusetts, Copenhaver describes himself as “a child of American liberal Protestantism.” The understanding of the gospel that Copenhaver grew up with is nicely captured, he reports, in a characterization of liberal preaching offered by an atheist friend of his: “You hear what the psychologist says, what the historian says, what *The New York Times* editorial writer says, and then the sermon concludes with, ‘And perhaps Jesus said it best. . . .’” But now Copenhaver preaches a very different message, one that stands over against the “accumulated wisdom of humankind.” Instead of “perhaps Jesus said it best,” he senses an obligation to proclaim, “You have heard it said . . . but Jesus says to you”²

William Willimon, the well-known dean of the chapel at Duke University, presents a similar case. Willimon hammers away at what he sees as the mistaken emphasis on continuity in mainline Protes-

2. Martin B. Copenhaver, Anthony B. Robinson, and William H. Willimon, *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 9-11.

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tantism. For example, he takes on the liberal Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong for asking how any thoughtful person can expect Spong's physicist daughter to believe in a bodily resurrection: "The answer, I suppose," says Willimon, "depends on Spong's daughter. . . . How little imagination does his daughter now have? . . . The text cannot be blamed if modern people . . . live by epistemologies too limited to enable them to hear the text." We cannot expect people to hear the gospel, Willimon argues, when they are "epistemologically enslaved."³

Sometimes Willimon seems to be emphasizing the ways in which entrapment in the particular thought patterns of "modernity" limits people's capacity to understand the gospel. But it is clear that he and his colleagues also sense a more general epistemological problem. When people can't hear the message of Christ, that message "itself shares some of the 'blame' . . . contending, as the gospel does, that the solution to what ails us lies somewhere out beyond ourselves."⁴ It is not enough, they insist, to think about the gospel's "solution" without also thinking about how Christ redefines the problems for which his transforming power is the remedy.

Looking for Commonness

It is encouraging to see within mainline Protestantism this insightful critique of the older liberal optimism about the potentials of an unfettered human spirit. Calvinists who have long insisted on the reality of the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian patterns of life and thought should be especially gratified by the appearance of such antitheticalist motifs. And while I worry that the contrast made by these critics between redeemed and non-redeemed con-

3. Erskine Clarke, ed., *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), pp. 110, 130.

4. Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, p. 134.

sciousness is put too starkly, I do think that we do well to learn from their warnings, even as I believe that we also have much to learn from people within the Calvinist ranks who place a strong and uncompromising emphasis on “difference.”

For all that, however, I am still convinced — and this will be clear in what follows — that we need to search for the proper grounds of commonness. But it is important to search carefully. On what basis do we posit a commonality between those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ and those who have not done so? This question has particular importance as we try to articulate a biblical perspective for Christian involvement in public life in our contemporary context. Our present cultural situation requires some new formulations regarding human commonness. In past eras our Christian theologies of commonness were motivated in part by a desire — indeed, a sense of obligation — to provide alternatives to influential non-Christian systems of thought where an emphasis on human commonness loomed large. Augustine, for example, agreed with the Platonists that a rational “light” illuminates the minds of all human beings; but, he insisted, the Platonist explanations for this phenomenon were inadequate because they did not acknowledge the ministry of the “the true light which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9), the One whose glory we have beheld in the person of Jesus Christ. Similarly, Thomas Aquinas saw himself as building upon, but also as correcting, Aristotle’s account of our shared human potentials. And many Christians in the modern era were eager to provide a biblical basis for acknowledging the universal rationality that featured so prominently in various Enlightenment portrayals of the human condition.

Today, however, Christian discussions of commonness take on a somewhat different tone, because of a widespread emphasis on *uncommonness*. This is all too apparent, not only in the very visible tribal and ethnic conflicts that now disrupt life in so many places in the world, but also in some patterns of intellectual life, where prominent thinkers are attacking the very idea of a “meta-narrative.” They

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insist that there is no legitimate way of articulating a basis for our common humanness, because every such formulation is oppressive. In this line of thinking, the attempt to group all human beings under a common “story” is in fact nothing more than a brutal exercise of power, in which some groups exercise hegemonic control over others. As the self-described “postmodern” thinker Iban Hassan puts the case, we are living in “an antinomian moment” in which we must all recognize the need to “unmake” and “deconstruct” all “totalizing” accounts of the human condition. What this rejection of “the tyranny of wholes” means, he says, is that we must live with “an epistemological obsession with fragments.”⁵

In such a climate, our search for the grounds of commonness must be motivated by a faith that cuts against the grain of much of contemporary life and thought. But it is not enough simply to affirm commonness. This is an important time to explore the underlying Christian foundations for an understanding of what we hold in common with those who reject the biblical message. The Christian tradition offers many significant resources on the topic of commonness, and many of these resources are now being explored anew as Christian thinkers have begun to worry about the cultural impact of the relativism that accompanies the current fascination with deep differences. One obvious place to look is the “natural law” tradition, and it is gratifying to see how Christians from several traditions — particularly Roman Catholics and evangelicals — are engaged in dialogue about how natural law themes can be appropriated for our contemporary context.⁶

5. Quoted in Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), p. 199.

6. See, for example, the essays and dialogues in Michael Cromartie, ed., *Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics and Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). A more systematic treatment is given by the Roman Catholic ethicist Jean Porter, in her book *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), which includes a sympathetic foreword by the Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff.

HE SHINES IN ALL THAT'S FAIR

The discussion that follows here is presented in the conviction that Calvinist discussions of the idea of common grace are an important resource for addressing the contemporary issues of commonness and difference. While I do not think that we need to choose between, say, natural law and common grace, I do see these discussions of common grace as embodying sensitivities — ones that I take seriously as a Calvinist — that are not present in other ways of addressing the issues. I am also convinced that much important content in these Calvinist debates has been hidden too long from the larger Christian theological world. My efforts here, then, are an attempt to give Dutch Reformed deliberations about common grace some broader ecumenical exposure.