

# EDITORIAL: HYPER-CALVINIST! (4)

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## Introduction

In our last three editorials, our focus was on the first three parts of Phil Johnson’s erroneous definition of hyper-Calvinism. We have demonstrated that a denial of the well-meant, or free, offer of the gospel is *not* hyper-Calvinism. Now, in addressing Johnson’s last two points, we demonstrate that a denial of common grace is also not hyper-Calvinism.

Remember that Johnson’s proposed definition has five parts:

A hyper-Calvinist is someone who either

#1 Denies that the gospel call applies to all who hear OR

#2 Denies that faith is the duty of every sinner OR

#3 Denies that the gospel makes any “offer” of Christ, salvation or mercy to the non-elect (or denies that the offer of divine mercy is free and universal) OR

#4 Denies that there is such a thing as “common grace” OR

#5 Denies that God has any sort of love for the non-elect.<sup>1</sup>

It remains for us to deal with #4 and #5.

One of the weaknesses of Johnson’s argument is that he fails to give a meaningful definition of grace or, indeed, any definition of grace at all. In addition, Johnson does not distinguish between grace, mercy and love, which, although similar, are distinct attributes of God. How can we discuss whether or not grace is common, unless we first define what grace is? Johnson probably assumes that it is self-evident what grace *is*. After all, do not all Christians—and especially Reformed theologians—*know* what grace is? Johnson complains that “type #4 hyper-Calvinists” deny that God has any “true goodwill toward the non elect,” and that, therefore, “type #4 hyper-Calvinists” deny that God

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Johnson, “A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism” ([www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm](http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm)).

shows “favour or grace of any kind” to the reprobate. In addition, Johnson complains that “type #5 hyper-Calvinists” insist that “God’s demeanour toward the non-elect is always and only hatred,” which is, writes Johnson, “a *de facto* denial of common grace.”

Therefore, Johnson seems to equate God’s grace with “goodwill,” “favour” and a certain kind of pleasant “demeanour” of God toward His creatures. God’s elect enjoy saving grace, by which they are delivered from sin and brought to heaven. The reprobate enjoy for a time “common grace,” by which their life in this world is made pleasant, before they are eternally condemned. Moreover, the reprobate often enjoy more “common grace” in this life than God’s children.

### **A Definition of Grace**

Grace signifies three things in Scripture. If we understand what grace *is*, we will see that God’s grace could not possibly be bestowed on the reprobate, that is, it could not be common. Let us turn to what the Scriptures teach.

First, God’s grace is an attribute of God, one of His glorious perfections. I Peter 5:10 calls Him “the God of all grace.” Similarly, we read that there are treasured up in the Triune God “exceeding riches of his grace” (Eph. 2:7). About Jesus, we read that, as the only begotten of the Father, He is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This means that the source of all grace is God Himself and that all grace mediated to the creature comes through Christ alone. Is “common grace,” then, also mediated through Christ? How could that be, since the reprobate are not “in Christ”? Grace has the root idea of beauty, charm or pleasantness. When we speak of God’s grace, therefore, we mean that He is—utterly independent of the creature, to whom He may or may not show grace according to His good pleasure—the sum of all perfections, the God of beauty, charm and pleasantness. The believer delights in this, desiring to “dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of [his] life, to behold the *beauty* of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4). God’s beauty is His grace.

Second, grace is favour. Although it comes to us as *undeserved* favour, grace *itself* is simply favour. We know this because God favoured Jesus Christ, about whom we cannot say that He received God’s *undeserved* favour. “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52). Moreover, we must not confuse the word “favour” with the word “favourite,”

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as if God could only favour some, because having “favourites” supposedly means that He must exclude others from His favour. A teacher might favour everyone in the class, without showing favouritism or having favourites. The teacher’s favour on some or all of the students is his attitude toward them. God’s favour is free. Therefore, He may favour all, many, some, few or even none, according to His good pleasure. If God had favour on none, but cast all sinners into hell, He would still be the gracious God of all grace. However, in that case, He would not have made His grace *known*. That grace of God has “appeared” (Titus 2:11). God’s grace or favour, then, is the beautiful, pleasant attitude of favour that God has for His people who are creatures and sinners. When the Psalmist prays, “And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us” (Ps. 90:17), he has God’s grace in mind. Let God’s favour rest upon us! Does God’s favour rest on the reprobate? Certainly not, for the Bible teaches that God’s *wrath* abides on them (John 3:36).

Third, grace is a power by which God works in His people to conform them to the image of Jesus Christ. This third aspect is not the focus in the “common grace” debate, so we can be more brief. Grace is the power by which we live as Christians. Paul writes, “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: *yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me*” (I Cor. 15:10). God’s grace laboured in Paul—it was a power active in him. That same grace works in us, enabling us to live as Christians, to fulfil the calling God has given to us and to endure the trials that He has placed upon us. Elsewhere, Paul writes that God’s grace teaches us and enables us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, that we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world (Titus 2:12). Does common grace do that? Do the reprobate live in a godly manner by the power of God’s (common) grace? Only a fool would suggest it! Without God’s grace we can do nothing. That is why we pray for grace, for “God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 116). When God assures Paul, “My grace is sufficient for thee” (II Cor. 12:9), He does not mean, “It is enough for thee that I am the sum of all perfections or it is enough for thee that I am favourable to thee” but “the power of My grace, which works in thee, is sufficient for thee to serve Me, even if I do not remove the thorn from thy flesh.”

## **God's Grace Is Particular**

God's grace is particular, that is, not all men are recipients of it. Common grace, which Johnson says is "extended to everyone," does not exist. That makes the BRF, "type #4 hyper-Calvinists" in Johnson's mind, a charge we vehemently deny.

In addition, God's grace is one. Johnson complains that the "type #4 hyper-Calvinist" teaches that God shows "no favour or grace of *any kind*" to the reprobate, but Johnson must demonstrate different "kinds" of grace in God. And Johnson must demonstrate the source of this "secondary kind" of grace of God. Is it rooted in election and the cross, the source of grace according to sacred Scripture? How could it be when, by definition, the reprobate are *excluded* from election and the cross?

The first time the word "grace" is used in Scripture is Genesis 6:8, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD." While God's wrath was directed against the whole of mankind and while He determined to destroy them, God favoured Noah and his family. There is in Genesis 6 no hint of common grace. The "but" of verse 8 contrasts sharply God's attitude toward Noah with His attitude toward the wicked antediluvians. When God caused His sun to rise upon the antediluvian world and when those wicked people "were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" (Matt. 24:38), they did so *without* God's favour upon them. God's elect eat, drink and enjoy His sunshine and rain with His blessing upon them; but the reprobate wicked eat, drink and use God's creation under His wrath and with His curse upon them. Proverbs 3:33 teaches, "The *curse* of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just." God does not curse those upon whom He is gracious; and God does not bless those whom He curses. Blessing and cursing are mutually exclusive: "For such as be blessed of him shall inherit the earth; and they that be cursed of him shall be cut off" (Ps. 37:22). On the Last Day, Christ will declare that His elect sheep are blessed (both in time and into eternity), while the reprobate goats are cursed (both in time and into eternity) (Matt. 25:34, 41, 46).

Something that all advocates of common grace miss is that God's grace is not in things but in His disposition behind the things that He gives (Ecc. 9:1-2).

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God's *providence* is universal, not particular. God upholds and governs even the wicked by His hand. God supplies even the wicked with the good gifts of this creation. Often, the reprobate wicked enjoy more of God's creation and for a longer time than do His often beleaguered children. But those good things are not in themselves grace. God can give rain, sunshine, food and clothing graciously *or in His wrath* (Num. 11:33). If God has a benevolent disposition of good will toward a creature, in which He desires to bless that creature, we call that good will "grace." But God might also have a disposition of wrath against a creature, in which He desires to curse that creature. Never can we call such a disposition "grace."

### **Good Gifts to the Reprobate**

It is absolutely true that the reprobate wicked live in a world full of God's gifts. Asaph writes about that in Psalm 73. Looking around, he witnesses the prosperity of the wicked: "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches" (v. 12). Worse than the prosperity of the wicked is the adversity of the righteous: "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning" (vv. 13-14). It seemed to Asaph that God favoured the wicked and that their prosperity was "grace" to them. Such a thought drove Asaph almost to despair: "But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (vv. 2-3). How did Asaph retain his spiritual sanity? Not by subscribing to "The Three Points of Common Grace"—that might have driven him over the edge!—but by considering the purpose of God in the prosperity of the wicked: "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction" (vv. 17-18). The prosperity of the wicked is God's sovereign, inscrutable way of placing the ungodly on a slippery slide by which He brings them down into hell. Good gifts—certainly! Abundant prosperity—absolutely! Common grace—by no means! Asaph's conclusion is clear: "Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart" (v. 1). Asaph knows that God is good *only* to Israel, that is, *only* to those who are of a clean heart. The child of God needs to know that for his own comfort. Common grace advocates rob the child of God of that vital consolation. If God's

favour is found in prosperity and the child of God suffers adversity, the child of God's feet will slip when he hears of "common grace."

Psalm 73 is not the only witness. Psalm 37 show that the prosperity of the wicked is illusory; they only *seem* to be favoured by God. In reality, God is cursing them even in their prosperity. We quote some texts so that the reader might get a flavour of the Psalm. "Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb" (vv. 1-2). "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him that prospereth in his way ..." (v. 7). "For evildoers shall be cut off ... For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be ..." (vv. 9-10). "But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the LORD shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away" (v. 20). "I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found" (vv. 35-36). Notice the temptations to which we are exposed by the seeming prosperity of the wicked: envy and fretting oneself to do evil. A Christian who believes that God is blessing the wicked with "common grace" will be tempted to leave the path of obedience and to walk with the wicked, so that he might enjoy more of God's "common grace" also. That is exactly why Psalm 37 and 73 were written—that we might not fret ourselves to do evil!

In Psalm 92, the Psalmist contrasts two plants. One is the wicked man: "When the wicked spring as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do flourish; it is that they shall be destroyed for ever" (v. 7). The word "that" indicates purpose: "it is *so that* they shall be destroyed forever." God's purpose in the temporary springing up and flourishing of the wicked is their destruction. That is *not* common grace. The second is the righteous man: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing" (vv. 12-14). A brutish man does not know this, and a fool does not understand this (v. 6). The modern advocate of common grace does not understand it either. Asaph confessed his brutishness and folly in Psalm 73, when he was temporarily bewitched by the prosperity of the wicked: "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee" (v. 22).

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If Johnson desires to prove common grace, he needs to prove that, when God gives good gifts to the wicked, this is evidence of His favour upon them, which favour then ends at death, when He casts the same wicked, whom He supposedly favoured in time, into everlasting destruction. However, this creates other problems, for how can God's grace, mercy or love be temporary, especially when Psalm 136 declares twenty-six times that "his mercy endureth for ever"? Johnson, like many others, confuses God's providence, which is common, with God's grace, which is not common.

Johnson writes, "The idea of common grace is implicit throughout Scripture." To label Reformed Christians with the dishonourable epithet of "hyper-Calvinist," one surely requires more evidence than something that is supposedly "implicit" in Scripture! We need a text, properly exegeted in its context, which proves that God is gracious or shows favour to the reprobate wicked. This Johnson does not supply. Such a text does not exist.

However, Johnson does trot out the standard "common grace texts," although without exegeting them. Presumably, he believes that they speak for themselves. Does the theory of "common grace" pass exegetical scrutiny? Even when Johnson brings forth his "big guns"?

We shall see.

*... to be continued (DV)*