

Common grace

and the work of The Christian Institute

N. R. NEEDHAM





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What is common grace?

Our topic is “Common grace and the work of The Christian Institute.” Let us first consider what “common grace” is, and what its biblical basis is. Putting it concisely, we could say that common grace is God’s loving and favourable attitude to human beings per se, flowing forth in all those blessings which stop short of actual salvation. The classic text is Matthew 5:44-45: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

We are to love our enemies, Christ says, because God the Father loves His enemies: a love that issues forth in His blessing not only the good and the just, but the evil and the unjust, with the life-sustaining benefits of sunshine and rain. The gifts of providence, in other words, are gracious in nature. They are bestowed without respect of persons, without regard to whether we deserve them. Sinful human beings learn their first lessons about grace in the very air they breathe. The whole of our life is permeated by grace.

John Calvin comments:

“If all prosperity proceeds from the peculiar blessing which God vouchsafes to His servants, whence is it that many of His despisers have children, easy and happy circumstances, abundance of the fruits of the earth, enjoyment and luxury, honours and power? I answer, that the happy condition of life, which He assigns to His servants, does not prevent Him from diffusing His bounty promiscuously over the whole human race. He is truly called in Psalm 36:6, the Preserver of ‘man and beast.’ It is said elsewhere, that His mercy is extended over all His creatures (Psalm 145:17); and justly does Christ exalt

His unbounded goodness, in that ‘He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good’ (Matthew 5:45).

“But equally true is the exclamation of the Prophet: ‘Oh, how great is Your goodness, which You have laid up for those that fear You!’ (Psalm 31:19.) For since all without exception enjoy all the supports of life, God’s goodness, which thus contends with the wickedness of men, shines forth universally even towards the ungodly, so that He does not cease to cherish and preserve those whom He has created, although they are unworthy. He therefore does good to the ungodly, because He is their Creator.” (Commentary on Deuteronomy 28:12)

Other important biblical passages on common grace would include the following.

Psalm 36:5-7: “Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, Your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are like the great deep; man and beast You save, O LORD. How precious is Your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of Your wings.”

Psalm 145:9, 14-17: “The LORD is good to all, and His mercy is over all that He has made... The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open your hand; You satisfy the desire of every living thing. The LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His works.”

Acts 14:15-17: “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations He allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet He did not leave Himself without witness, for He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

Acts 17:24-28: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward Him and find Him. Yet He is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In Him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed His offspring.’”

These passages all testify to a goodwill of God towards all humanity, showing itself in manifold gifts and blessings. When we sin, and when we suffer for our sins, it is in spite of God’s goodness. Perhaps we cannot, with our finite and fallen intellects, see the perfect harmony between God’s universal goodness and His justice in punishing sinners; but both are revealed in Scripture, and we can be sure that God Himself knows their harmony. C. H. Spurgeon said:

“*Never let us doubt the universal benevolence of God. Let us hold it as a fundamental doctrine that ‘the Lord is good to all; and His tender mercies are over all His works;’ and let us firmly believe that, if any man shall be consigned to eternal misery, it will be because it is just that he should so suffer, and he has brought his terrible doom upon his own head; for, as the apostle Peter tells us, God is ‘not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance’*” (God Comforting His People, July 11th 1867).

Two communities

Now, however, let us move on from this to our specific topic of “Common grace and the work of The Christian Institute.” Let me suggest that we can approach this topic in the following way. Common grace has its counterpart in saving grace. God is related to the whole human race, the sons and daughters of Adam, by way of common grace; He is related to the redeemed human race – the new humanity in Jesus Christ the second Adam – by way of saving grace.

Therefore common grace and saving grace correspond to two communities – and by “communities” here, I do not mean abstract idealised things existing only in the mind, but actual concrete communities existing visibly in the world – namely, civil society on the one hand, and on the other, the church. We could call civil society the community of common grace: the church, the community of saving grace.

Let me try to elaborate. The human race, by a necessity that springs from human nature, is organised into civil societies. Apart perhaps from a few hermits living on Mount Everest, everyone exists within a civil society – everyone is a citizen, with political rights and responsibilities. “Politics” of course derives from the Greek term *polis*, a city – a civil community. Now the most obvious visible manifestation of civil society is its political structure, the state. The state is the central organising principle of civil society.

One caveat, however, before we go any further: we cannot simply equate civil society with the state, as though the two things were synonyms. Why not? Because the family is also a body within civil society, and the family has its own life, its own rights and responsibilities, which it is the duty of the state to protect and

nurture. The family also belongs within the sphere of common grace.

Nonetheless, the state, not the family, remains the most obvious visible manifestation of civil society, and its central organising principle, because without the overarching structure provided by the state, its laws and powers of enforcement, no family could survive for long in a fallen world. To put it at its most brutal, if one family member murders another, that is not merely a sin within that family, it is a sin against the entire social order. Even if the murderer is the sole surviving member of his family, there is still a living body in existence against which he has sinned – namely, civil society at large; and it is the state, not the family, that is responsible for punishing the murderer.

Now civil society, and the state as its visible manifestation, are (as we observed) related to God by way of common grace. This is so in two senses. First of all, civil society and the state are not based in principle on any profession of Christian faith. It is not necessary to the valid existence of any civil society or state that it should be Christian. Non-Christian societies and states can be perfectly valid societies and states. The biblical evidence for this is surely very plain. Consider the apostle Paul’s doctrine of the state in Romans 13:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”

Paul here is not speaking historically about a Christian society or a Christian state. He is speaking in context of a Pagan society and a Pagan state – the Roman Empire under the emperor Nero. Yet Paul says that the political structures and authorities of this society have a God-given validity – “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” – and he exhorts his Christian readers for God’s sake and for conscience’ sake to be subject to these Pagan authorities.

It would seem very clear, then, that a society and a state do not have to be Christian in order to be valid societies and states. God relates to them, not in the saving grace that makes people Christians, but in the common grace that bears on people as human beings. The triune God confers validity on this Pagan state of Nero’s Roman Empire, not as a redemptive act in Jesus Christ the crucified and risen Saviour, but as an act flowing from Himself as Creator and Lawgiver of the universe.

Yet it is still an act of grace, because of course incalculable and undeserved blessings ensue to human beings from the reign of law embodied by the state. Almost any state is preferable to anarchy and civil war. The grace, however, that finds expression in the divine institution of the state is common grace. In short, then, a state does not need to be Christian to have God-given validity, and the character in which God institutes the state is not the Redeemer of sinners, but universal Creator and Lawgiver. We may assume there would have been some kind of state even if mankind had never sinned: perhaps a monarchy under Adam as the father-king.

Second, the actual people who make up civil society and the state are not necessarily Christians themselves – in fact the great majority of them are not; but this does not in principle affect their status as citizens, or their capacity for exercising political authority. Consider again what the apostle Paul says in Romans 13. He in no way suggests that the great majority of non-Christian Roman citizens should be stripped of their civil rights and responsibilities for not being Christians, nor that the emperor Nero should be

deposed for being a Pagan.

In other words, there is a fundamental difference here between civil society and spiritual society, or what we might call natural society and supernatural society: that is, between state and church. God intends the church to be made up of Christians – at least in outward profession. A practising Pagan, Muslim, or Atheist has no place in the community of the church. But he does have a place in civil society. As I have already shown, there is no hint in Romans 13 that the emperor Nero, or his provincial governors or army officers, are unqualified for office merely on the grounds of their not being Christians. Paul applies to these Pagan people – soon indeed to be savagely anti-Christian people, in the first great persecution of the church which occurred under the same emperor Nero in AD 64 – to these people Paul applies the exalted language of Romans 13, that “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God”.

And so the same theological truth emerges again, that it is by way of common grace that God relates to civil society and the state. The people who make up society and state are largely non-Christians, and thus outside the sphere of saving grace; but they are within the sphere of common grace, since that embraces all humanity without exception. We might add that without common grace, it is doubtful that sinners could actually retain their humanity at all, owing to the destructive dynamic of sin. C. S. Lewis somewhere remarks that when sin has finally had its way, what is left in hell is not so much a human being as the remains, the hellish residue, of what was once a human being.

To sum up thus far, common grace and saving grace correspond to two communities – namely, civil society on the one hand, and its visible manifestation in the state; and on the other hand, the church. However, let us now extend the argument: these two communities are not set against each other as alternatives. It isn't that *here* you have civil society and the state, and *here* you have the spiritual society of the church, and they occupy different territory, and to be

in the one means you cannot be in the other.

No, because all Christians – unless they are among those hermits living on Mount Everest – are in fact simultaneously in both communities. I am a member of the church, the community of saving grace, by my credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ. I am also a citizen: a member of civil society, the community of common grace; and therefore I am within the territory of the state, which may or may not be Christian, which indeed may be profoundly non-Christian or anti-Christian in its ideological basis. And so the two spheres, the two communities, are intermeshed. Christians are in both.

Here, I would propose, is the first dimension for thinking about common grace and the work of The Christian Institute. The Institute's work is founded on a recognition from the outset of this profound intermeshing, this inescapable entanglement, of the two communities, the communities of common grace and saving grace. Whether we like it or not, God Himself, our God, the only true and living God, has in His common grace instituted civil society as the larger framework within which the much smaller community of saving grace, the church of Jesus Christ, exists and functions.

And the spheres and the communities overlap in membership. I do not, by becoming a Christian, thereby cease to be a citizen; I do not, by joining the community of saving grace, thereby drop out of the community of common grace – any more than, by becoming a member of the supernatural family of redemption in Christ, I cease to be a member of my natural family. There may now (sadly) be tension, even conflict, between me as a faithful disciple of Christ and my non-Christian family; but I still belong to that family – my parents are still my parents, my children are still my children, and my brothers and sisters are still my brothers and my sisters. The relationships persist; the rights and responsibilities of those relationships endure.

Likewise, being a Christian does not in essence dissolve my relationship with civil society or the state. (In some extreme

circumstances, it may have that effect in practice, but such an outcome would be an anomaly, contrary to the biblical and historical norm.) So it is not that I now belong to the community of saving grace, and therefore I no longer have anything to do with the community of common grace.

But perhaps that is what some of the Roman Christians thought; perhaps they thought that in confessing Jesus as Lord, they were disowning Caesar, owing no further allegiance to him. If so, the apostle Paul in Romans 13 corrects this misapprehension by assuring the Roman Christians that they do still owe allegiance to Caesar. The same God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and saved the Roman Christians from their sins through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – this same God (for there is only one God) has instituted the state, and bestowed validity upon it, even in the Pagan form of the Roman Empire; the emperor Nero is this God’s servant, whether Nero acknowledges God or not. Romans 13:4, “he is God’s servant for your good... he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

Perhaps we are reminded of what God says of another Pagan king, Cyrus of Persia:

“Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides Me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know Me” (Isaiah 45:1-5).

The Pagan king Cyrus is the true God's anointed; God calls him and equips him, though Cyrus has no personal acquaintance with this God. He is objectively the servant of a God he does not know.

Here then, I would suggest, is the first aspect of how we can see common grace relating to the work of The Christian Institute. Civil society and the state are the community of common grace; the church is the community of saving grace; the two communities are intermeshed – they overlap; the Christian, belonging as he does to the community of saving grace, also belongs to the community of common grace; churchmanship and citizenship are not, or should not be, incompatible; and the work and witness of The Christian Institute are a living embodiment of that important truth.

In fact, the Institute has a possibly unique opportunity and privilege in its work to live out, in a rich and meaningful way, the overlap between the two communities, and to express a constructive relationship between the two spheres of common and saving grace. The Institute has a vocation to demonstrate to a state, increasingly drifting from Christian philosophical and ethical moorings, that those who belong to the community of saving grace can be intelligent, morally concerned, politically aware citizens, and personally wholesome people; and perhaps an equal vocation to show fellow Christians that the community of common grace is not alien to their Christian life, but a proper matter of interest, prayer, and action – that a Christian is still a citizen, and can endeavour to be a good citizen.

Christians and the state

This then leads on to the second dimension I wish to put before you for thinking about common grace and the work of The Christian Institute. This does build on my first point, but goes somewhat beyond it. I can express it like this: There is a positive role for Christians in upholding the community of common grace in its right functioning.

In other words, it is not only an unavoidable fact that the community of saving grace is intertwined with that of common grace, so that Christians are inevitably citizens (my first point – which can itself be hard to grasp effectively); but on top of that, Christians can take a very positive attitude to their relationship with civil society and the state. The community of common grace is meant to be a blessing, not a curse, to the community of saving grace; and the natural society of created humanity will itself benefit enormously from the presence and activity within it of the supernatural society of redeemed humanity. Let us try to tease this out.

When it functions rightly, the state is a blessing to the church, and is intended to be so in the providence of God. Think again of the apostle Paul and the Roman Empire. Without the Roman Empire, it is very hard to imagine how the Gospel could have spread so rapidly within so short a compass of time in the 1st Century AD. It was the structures provided by the Roman state – its roads, its framework of peace and law, its armies guarding the frontiers, and so forth – which facilitated the missionary activities of Paul, stretching from Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) in the East, to Spain in the West. (For Paul's presence in Spain see Romans 15. Verse 24, "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be

helped on my journey there by you.” Verse 28, “I will leave for Spain by way of you”.)

The Roman conquest of the remnants of Alexander the Great’s Greek empire in the East also contributed to the success of Paul’s activities, since it made Greek into the universal language of education throughout the Empire, in East and West. How much easier it is to communicate the Gospel when there is only one language to consider! Paul could write his letters in Greek, and expect all educated people throughout the whole vast extent of the Roman Empire to be able to understand what he was saying. And then finally, when Paul was persecuted through the hostility of unbelieving Jews, it was Roman justice and his rights of Roman citizenship that saved him. He appealed successfully to his legal status as a Roman citizen, exploiting his political privileges.

We can see in the life of the apostle Paul, then, how the community of common grace was a blessing to the community of saving grace, and smoothed the progress of its mission. What, though, when the state is hostile to the church, and persecutes it, as would be the case throughout much of early church history, and at other times in the history of God’s people? Clearly we cannot then speak of the state as an unequivocal blessing; to the extent that it persecutes the church, the state is not functioning rightly. But even then, the church can and should affirm the essential goodness of the state. Civil society never entirely loses its character as an expression of God’s common grace, except arguably at the very close of history when the Antichrist, the eschatological Man of Sin, is manifested.

The early church fathers, during the times of persecution under the Roman Empire, taught that despite the persecution, the Empire was still essentially good – essentially an embodiment of God’s good providence – because its framework of law, order, and civilisation still acted as a check on sin, thus preventing – holding back – the coming of Antichrist, the Man of Sin. This was how they interpreted the apostle Paul’s enigmatic statement

in 2 Thessalonians 2:7-8: “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed.”

The restrainer here was understood by the fathers to be the Roman Empire as the repository of law, justice, and basic moral values. These she continued to possess and exercise in spite of her persecution of the church, and therefore kept lawlessness and the manifestation of the Lawless One in check. Hence the fathers of the church were able to maintain a positive attitude to the state as the community of common grace, even during times of persecution, and to pray for the preservation and well-being of the Roman Empire. The great preacher of the early church, John Chrysostom, comments:

“‘Only there is one that restrains now, until it is taken out of the way’: that is, when the Roman empire is taken out of the way, then he [the Antichrist] shall come. And naturally. For as long as the fear of this empire lasts, no one will willingly exalt himself, but when that is dissolved, Antichrist will attack the anarchy, and endeavour to seize upon the government both of man and of God. For as the kingdoms before this were destroyed, for example, that of the Medes by the Babylonians, that of the Babylonians by the Persians, that of the Persians by the Macedonians, that of the Macedonians by the Romans: so will this also be by the Antichrist... and it will no longer withhold.”

Here was one of the arguments of the early persecuted Christians against persecution: we are on your side, O Roman Empire, and pray for your preservation and prosperity, because we see your justice and civilisation as the restraining force that holds back the Man of Sin. So why persecute us who are your supporters and friends?

It seems to me that we can apply the same principle to our own relationship with the state in our own time and place. The Roman Empire has of course long ceased to exist, but we can take the

restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2 to be a more general reference to law, justice, and civilisation, regardless of the Roman Empire. As long as these things exist, the state continues to check and restrain sin, and thus to hold back the final eschatological manifestation of sin. When however these qualities are overthrown within societies by increasing wickedness – when human law ceases to reflect God’s law, when government becomes an instrument for injustice, and when the values that make civilisation really civilised are destroyed, then the restraints are gone, and the Man of Sin will be able to step forth.

The community of saving grace therefore has a positive role in seeking to uphold the community of common grace. We do everything we can to help the state to be its true self – to be the guarantor of a just social order. In that way, we are the best friends and supporters a state could have. We affirm every remnant of goodness possessed by the state, and we encourage the state by every means to improve on this. To the degree that the state falls short, and fosters evil instead of good, we are like people with a friend whose mind has become unbalanced. We want to restore the balance of his mind, so that he can be his true self. We desire the state to fulfil the mandate given it by God in Romans 13, to be a terror not to good conduct, but to bad. In so relating ourselves to the state, we are seeking to help it recover and live out its real identity.

I am sure you can see how all of this applies to the work of The Christian Institute. It is not anti the state, but its firmest friend and supporter. The state as such is good; it is a creation of common grace and an instrument of common grace in society. The Institute seeks to help it fulfil that role. When particular laws and proposals invite criticism, it is a case of Proverbs 27:6 – “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” But the Institute should never lose that sense of being a friend. Saving grace is not the enemy of common grace; the supernatural community is not the foe of the natural community; the church is not the adversary of the state; and the Institute’s activities are aimed at calling the state to be its real self, to be

true to the identity God has bestowed on it. A rightly functioning state is an inestimable blessing; even a wrongly functioning state, through its residue of justice, is still a blessing, and better than anarchy, better than the lawlessness which is the precursor of the Lawless One.

The conscience of the non-believer

That brings us to the third dimension I wish to suggest for thinking about common grace and the work of The Christian Institute. It is simply this: the non-Christian people it deals with (whether MPs, civil servants, magistrates, or representatives of some other body) are themselves within the kingdom of common grace. Therefore, however indifferent or opposed to Christianity they may be, what the apostle Paul says in Romans 2:14-15 is true of them as human beings: “when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.”

This phenomenon of conscience is the common grace of God. In one sense it is grace that goes back even beyond the fall of man to his creation: Adam and Eve in paradise had the moral law engraved on their hearts. They did not yet know good and evil experimentally, but they knew the difference between good and evil in their unfallen consciences. They knew it was right to obey their Creator and wrong to disobey Him. That knowledge was a gracious gift of creation. It has survived the ravages of the fall, through another act of common grace, by which God has not permitted sin to have its way fully with apostate humanity. He has mercifully preserved the inner witness of conscience – not that it is perfect, but it is sufficient to give all people a basic awareness that there is a difference between right and wrong, and to have some

knowledge of that difference in practice.

It is very easy at this juncture, I would suggest, to misunderstand the doctrine of total depravity. Although everything that Lutheran and Reformed theology has said about fallen man's utter deadness in sin is biblically true, it does not mean that every unconverted person is some kind of moral monster in his manner of life.

We must distinguish carefully between man's spiritual condition and his moral condition. Spiritual death in the soul does not necessarily carry with it moral death in the conscience, the feelings, or the conduct. I can be spiritually severed from God in my soul, cut off from the one source of spiritual life, and therefore spiritually dead, totally incapable of any saving response to God apart from His supernatural gift of renewing grace: and yet in the very midst of such a dreadful condition, I can still have an active conscience, knowing the essential difference between right and wrong, and I can have humane feelings towards my neighbour, and a decent moral life in the eyes of society.

All of that is quite consistent with my being spiritually dead. For the Bible recognises that there is a sense in which the spiritual is one thing, and the moral is another. While therefore some spiritually dead men are also morally atrocious in their conscience, feelings, and conduct, yet many are not. Not that anyone is morally perfect, even in the purely earthly realm of human relationships, and leaving out of account our relationship with God. But despite moral imperfection, most people show some qualities to which it would be unwise to deny the name "good". The Scriptures clearly acknowledge this, as we shall see. However, despite the good moral qualities of unregenerate men, they are still spiritually dead towards God; they are still by nature incapable of any true response to the King of heaven, by way of saving faith in His Son, and the repentance that leads to eternal life.

Let us look for a moment at what the Bible tells us about the moral possibilities of the spiritually dead. We take conscience first. We have the apostle Paul's testimony about conscience in the

unregenerate in Romans 2:14-15. This passage is so important that I may be forgiven for quoting it again:

“ when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.”

The work of the law, that is, the ethical requirements of God’s law, are written in the human heart, says Paul. Therefore those who are outside of Christ still have a conscience. And their conscience, Paul asserts, not only accuses them; it also sometimes excuses them – sometimes testifies in their favour – sometimes pronounces that they have done something morally right. So the apostle plainly says. Spiritual death does not normally obliterate the activity of conscience. Here is John Calvin’s comment on this passage. It is a lengthy passage but I think worth quoting in full, to show that at the very fountain of Reformed theology there is this recognition of the universal reality of conscience. Calvin says:

“ Paul indeed shows that ignorance is in vain pretended as an excuse by the Gentiles, since they prove by their own deeds that they have some rule of righteousness: for there is no nation so lost to everything human, that it does not keep within the limits of some laws. Since then all nations, of themselves and without an overseer, are disposed to make laws for themselves, it is beyond all question evident that they have some notions of justice and rectitude, which the Greeks call ‘preconceptions’, and which are implanted by nature in the human heart.

“ They have then a law, though they are without law: for though they have not a written law [as Israel had], they are yet by no means wholly destitute of the knowledge of what is right and just, as they could not otherwise distinguish between vice

and virtue; the first of which they restrain by punishment, and the latter they commend, and manifest their approval of it by honouring it with rewards. Paul sets nature in opposition to a written law, meaning that the Gentiles had the natural light of righteousness, which supplied the place of that law by which the Jews were instructed, so that the Gentiles were a law to themselves.

“ Who show the work of the law written, etc.; that is, they prove that there is imprinted on their hearts a discrimination and judgment by which they distinguish between what is just and unjust, between what is honest and dishonest. He means not that it was so engraven on their will, that they sought and diligently pursued it, but that they were so mastered by the power of truth, that they could not disapprove of it. For why did they institute religious rites, except that they were convinced that God ought to be worshipped? Why were they ashamed of adultery and theft, except that they deemed them evils?...

“ We cannot conclude from this passage, that there is in men a full knowledge of the law, but that there are only some seeds of what is right implanted in their nature, evidenced by such acts as these — all the Gentiles alike instituted religious rites, they made laws to punish adultery, and theft, and murder, they commended good faith in bargains and contracts. They have thus indeed proved, that God ought to be worshipped, that adultery, and theft, and murder are evils, that honesty is commendable.”

Thus Calvin on the natural testimony of conscience in the unconverted sinner. It is perfectly biblical to affirm that a spiritually dead man can have a morally alive conscience.

Next, and more briefly, let us take the feelings of the unregenerate. What does the Lord Jesus Christ say?

“ What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he

give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! ”
(Matthew 7:9-11)

Christ acknowledges frankly here that men are evil: “if you then, being evil”. That is what we are by nature in relation to God: destitute of any faith, repentance, or love towards Him.

But on the human level, Christ also fully accepts that men know how to give good gifts to their children. Natural affection usually survives despite spiritual death. A good father, a good mother, kind and caring: a person may be all this, while yet being spiritually devoid of life. I can be utterly dead towards my Creator, yet have good feelings towards my fellow man.

Finally let us take the conduct of the unregenerate. I remind you again of what the Bible says about king Cyrus of Persia in the prophecy of Isaiah. God worked in Cyrus’s heart to make him well-disposed towards His Old Testament people Israel. Cyrus decreed that they could return from their exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem. It was a remarkable reversal of fortunes for Israel. Cyrus is even called the Lord’s shepherd and the Lord’s anointed. Yet Isaiah is equally clear that Cyrus is not a converted man; he is not godly, he is not a believer. We recollect what God says to Cyrus in Isaiah 45:4-5 “For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know Me.”

King Cyrus, then, the embodiment of the Pagan state of his day, was a friend and a protector to the people of God, and gave them justice and freedom, even though Cyrus did not know God personally. Our moral conduct towards our fellow men may in that sense be good, while yet we are spiritually dead towards our Creator.

Let me suggest two important lessons from these considerations. First, let us not think the doctrine of total depravity means that all

people are as wicked as they could be – that humans are devils incarnate. Although the tendency of spiritual death is to undermine and destroy morality in the end, yet in the present life it is not generally so. By the common grace of God, despite the moral frailty and perversity of human nature, there is still much that is good in the conscience, feelings, and conduct of unregenerate people. If we fail to recognise this, we are not only putting ourselves at odds with the Bible; we are also gravely misunderstanding the nature of sin, as though sin meant nothing more than human immorality.

And if that is our serious misconception of sin, and we then experience human kindness or fairness at the hands of unconverted people, we will fast lose any real sense that they are sinners, and so lose any effective sense that they need Christ or salvation. Whatever their conscience, whatever their humane feelings, whatever their good conduct to others, the unconverted are spiritually dead in their hearts toward the one true and living God. That is why they need salvation; that is why they need Christ. Apart from the saving mercy of God in His Son, the unconverted will remain spiritual corpses, who must finally be buried forever in the spiritual graveyard which the Bible calls “hell”.

Second, and more directly relevant to the Institute’s work, we have a secret ally within the minds and hearts of the non-Christian people with whom we interact. They have the inner witness of conscience as described by the apostle Paul in Romans 2. When we reason with them on the basis of universal human values – justice, honesty, fidelity, purity, and so forth – their consciences will generally echo what we say, even though they may wish it did not. There is this God-given point of contact between the Institute’s work and their lives. Although many stifle the voice of conscience, yet many are affected by it despite their unease with its testimony, and will come halfway towards us, if not the whole way, modifying their original stance. And we may be pleasantly surprised to see many openly agreeing with us, as conscience witnesses irrepressibly to moral truth. Calvin offers an illustration of this from the history

of the Pagan Greeks:

“God teaches us that some sparks of His majesty shine forth in aged people, whereby they deserve something like the honour due to parents. It is not my purpose to gather quotations from non-Christian authors in reference to the honour due to the aged; let it suffice that what God here commands is dictated by nature itself. This was once made plain at Athens, when an old man had come into the theatre, and found no place among his fellow-citizens; but, when at length he was admitted with honour by the Spartan ambassador (because old age is greatly revered among the Spartans), applause broke out on all sides; and then the Spartans exclaimed, that ‘the Athenians knew what was right, but would not do it.’ It was surely manifested by this universal consent of the people that it is a natural law in the hearts of all to reverence and honour aged people” (commentary on Leviticus 19:32).

Calvin elsewhere insists that the natural law engraved on the human conscience is identical in substance with the Ten Commandments. So the fundamental moral standard acknowledged by Christian and non-Christian alike is one and the same, despite the distorting effects of sin and culture.

In evangelism, the Christian appeals to the irreducible God-consciousness of the human heart, seeking (as it were) to fish it up from the murky waters of man’s sinful aversion to God. The Christian Institute’s work is analogous; it seeks to dredge up the irreducible moral consciousness of the human heart from the cloudy waters of man’s unwillingness to practise it. “The Athenians knew what was right but would not do it.” That moral consciousness is a product of common grace. It is an indispensable point of contact for the Institute’s work. And there may be times when the Athenians will applaud, as in Calvin’s illustration.

Indeed, we should not think that all moral wisdom and ethical insight are necessarily within the camp. Sometimes on some

issues, people outside the camp can have a higher and better insight. The community of common grace on occasion outshines the community of saving grace in this respect. I think of 19th century America, where some non-Christians had a healthier sense of human equality between black and white than many Christians had. It is deeply embarrassing to read secular philosophers of that era defending the human rights of ‘the Negro’, while orthodox and godly Christian theologians were denying it. The supernatural society in that connection fell below the highest moral insights of the natural society. So, do not be afraid to find moral wisdom outside the camp. As a Christian poet once put it:

*Seize upon truth where'er 'tis found –
Among your friends, among your foes –
On Christian or on heathen ground;
The flower's divine where'er it grows:
Neglect the prickles, and assume the rose.*

Conclusion

Here then are three aspects to the relationship between common grace and the work of the Institute. Let me sum them up by way of conclusion:

First, it is an unavoidable fact that the community of saving grace (the church) is intertwined with the community of common grace (civil society), so that Christians are inevitably citizens – and the Institute’s work and witness are a living embodiment of that important truth.

Second, the community of saving grace has a positive role in seeking to uphold the community of common grace. We do everything we can to help the state to be its real self – to be the guarantor of a just moral order in civil society. The Institute’s activities are aimed at calling the state to be true to the identity God has bestowed on it.

Third, we have a secret ally within the minds and hearts of the non-Christian people with whom we interact: namely, common grace in the form of conscience, which – however corrupt – never entirely loses its capacity for recognising and responding to the claims of the moral law.

Appendix

John Calvin on natural law and the Ten Commandments: “Now that inward law, which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables [of the Ten Commandments]. For our conscience does not allow us to sleep a perpetual insensible sleep without being an inner witness and monitor of what we owe God, without holding before us the difference between good and evil and thus accusing us when we fail in our duty.

“But man is so shrouded in the darkness of errors that he hardly begins to grasp through this natural law what worship is acceptable to God. Surely he is very far removed from a true estimate of it. Besides this, he is so puffed up with haughtiness and ambition, and so blinded by self-love, that he is as yet unable to look upon himself and, as it were, to descend within himself, that he may humble and abase himself and confess his own miserable condition. Accordingly (because it is necessary both for our dullness and for our arrogance), the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law, shake off our listlessness, and strike more vigorously our mind and memory” (Institutes of the Christian Religion 2:8:1.)

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N. R. Needham is a Baptist minister from London. He holds the degrees of BD and PhD from the University of Edinburgh. He has published several books on church history and an introduction to Augustine's theology of salvation, entitled *The Triumph of Grace*. Dr Needham is part-time lecturer in church history at the Highland Theological College.

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