

He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace: The Stob Lectures by Richard J. Mouw. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Mich., 2001. Hardcover, 101 pp.
Reviewed By Johan D. Tangelder.

In his 2000 Stob lectures, presented in honour of the late Dr. Henry J. Stob, professor of philosophical and moral theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Mouw discusses the idea of common grace and the battles that have been waged over it, especially in the Dutch Calvinist circles of the 1920s. The arguments were so intense that a split occurred in the Christian Reformed Church that led to the founding in 1925 of the Protestant Reformed Church, where the doctrine of common grace is still criticized.

What do Christians have in common with people who have never experienced the saving grace that draws a sinner to a restored relationship with God? In the past, pietist evangelicals argued for the need to separate themselves from their non-Christian culture. They reinforced this view by a fairly explicit set of rules - don't do this and don't do that - prescribing those behaviours that were taken to be the most visible signs of worldliness. They saw themselves as a remnant in the midst of a world hostile to their faith. But today's evangelicals are of a different mind set. They are now building mega-churches and strategizing about how to win the "culture" wars.

Mouw points out that the common grace doctrine has received little attention in recent years on the part of main stream theologians. He himself is convinced that there is such a thing as common grace. But he believes that with this doctrine we stand before a mystery. He notes that, properly understood, common grace theology is an attempt to preserve an area of mystery regarding God's dealings with humankind. He believes that we must not only learn from past discussions about this doctrine, but also update our understanding of it. Therefore, in his lectures, he discusses the positions of Calvin, Kuyper, Schilder, Van Til, Dooyeweerd., and other key thinkers on the subject.

As a Calvinist Mouw accepts the fundamental classification of humankind into two categories, the elect and the non-elect. And although we are totally depraved, God enables His redeemed people to perform acts of righteousness that would not be possible apart from divine grace. "But," he says, "I also witness regularly, I must emphasize - acts of kindness on the part of the unredeemed that clearly seem to be in conformity to revealed standards of righteousness."

Mouw firmly stands in the common grace and transformationist tradition. But he is concerned about the clear signs of greatly increased worldliness within the Reformed communities. He says that we should take an honest look at the failure of common grace, thought to stem the tide of wickedness so obvious in places like the Netherlands and North America. However, in his striving to find common ground with unbelievers in cultural endeavours, he wonders whether or not all will be saved in the end. He declares, "I do want to make it clear that while I am no universalist, my own inclination is to emphasize the 'wideness in God's mercy' rather than the 'small number of the elect' motif that has often dominated the Calvinist outlook." And he says, "For all I know - and for all any of us can know - much of what we now think of as common grace may in the end time be revealed to be saving grace." I do have serious reservations about Mouw's position.

Reformed theology has generally been very reluctant to connect common grace with the process of salvation. For example, the Canons of Dort reject the view that God wills or intends to save all (CD 1, 6,15). I also believe that we don't need to become pietists in order to be "strangers" and "sojourners" on the way to the New Jerusalem. We have a cultural and mission mandate while we are in the world but not of the world.

Mouw's provocative, clear and concise book is a good resource for all who want to revisit the common grace debate and its relevance for today. Dr. Richard J. Mouw is professor of Christian philosophy and president of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.