5. Explain the doctrine of common grace relating the doctrine to the ability of secular psychologists to understand true information about the human condition.

Define Terms

• Common grace — “Common grace is the kindness of God that he shows to all people regardless of whether they have experienced the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ alone.” [Lambert, 67.]
  ✓ Common grace refers to God's goodness and kindness to all men universally
  ✓ Through common grace, God orders and sustains life on earth for all men.
  ✓ Through common grace, not all sinners are as bad as they could be.
  ✓ Through common grace, God provides civic order and civic “righteousness” through “good deeds” and government.

• Common grace is distinct from general revelation (Rom. 1:20). Common grace is influenced by the noetic effect of sin while general revelation is authoritative.

• The human condition (anthropology) — Man is created in the image of God — to represent him in the world through our reasoning, morality, relationships with Him and one another, and in our dominion over creation. But sin and the resulting depravity of man destroy that image. [Lambert, 184-91.]
  ✓ “People are made in the image of God. This fact is the most important reality about what it means to be a human being.” [Lambert, 189.]
  ✓ By depravity, we do not mean that every man is as sinful as he could be; but we do mean that every area of every man’s life is touched and marred by sin. There is nothing in him that can commend him to God; he is utterly incapable of attaining the righteousness of God (Rom. 3:10-20; 5:12, 17; 6:16-17, 20).

“[Total depravity] signifies a corruption of our moral and spiritual nature that is total not in degree (for no one is as bad as he or she might be) but in extent. It declares that no part of us is untouched by sin, and therefore no action of ours is as good as it should be, and consequently nothing in us or about us ever appears meritorious in God’s eyes. We cannot earn God’s favor, no matter what we do; unless grace saves us, we are lost….
“Total depravity entails total inability, that is, the state of not having it in oneself to respond to God and his Word in a sincere and wholehearted way (John 6:44; Rom. 8:7-8).” [Packer, *Concise Theology*, 83-4.]

**Key Passages**

- **John 1:14-15** — God has revealed His grace to all men in Christ
- **Matthew 5:45** — God upholds the laws and processes of nature
- **Psalm 104:14; Acts 14:17** — God supplies temporal needs of food, water, and shelter worldwide
- **Acts 17:28** — God sustains all life forms, including humanity
- **Exodus 31:2-11; 35:30-35** — God facilitates and allows the development of all creative works of man — in philosophy, the arts, sciences, and technology
- **Romans 13:3-4** — God maintains social and political order
- **2 Thessalonians 2:6-7** — The Spirit of God restrains the power of sin
- **Romans 2:14-15** — God provides all men with a conscience so they know what is moral and immoral; that conscience can be seared (1 Tim. 4:2-3)
- **Genesis 8:21-22** — God withholds judgment that is earned and merited
- **Romans 2:4** — God gives sinners time to repent
- **Lambert divides common grace into three categories:**
  - Divine moral provision
  - Divine physical provision
  - Divine intellectual provision

**Relationship of Common Grace to Secular Psychology**

- Because of common grace, unbelieving psychologists can contribute *information and observation* about the human condition. [Lambert, 79]
  - They can observe behavior and actions and patterns; much research about the conduct of man *may* be useful to biblical counselors (e.g., how do people with OCD, PTSD act...).
  - But only possessing common grace, they cannot truthfully evaluate why people act the way they do, nor offer genuine solutions. E.g., an unbelieving wife may say to her husband, “You are obsessed about your job, you don’t care about me or the kids, you’re a selfish, arrogant, blankety-blank...” Has she spoken the truth? Yes. And no. She might observe his conduct correctly, but she has not evaluated the true reasons for his conduct and she has not spoken
them in truth (grace). This is the same limitation of the psychologist.

✓ Jay Adams said that psychology could be a “useful adjunct” in two ways —
  ➢ “for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics”
  ➢ “challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to
    restudy the Scriptures.” [Adams, Competent, xxi; cited in Powlison, “Critiquing Modern
    Integrationists.”]

• Through common grace, unbelieving psychologists can encourage and “provoke biblical
  counselors to greater faithfulness in ministering the Scriptures.” [Lambert, 79]

• Without particular (saving) grace, unbelieving psychologists cannot offer eternal hope and
  lasting change for their observations on the nature of humankind.

✓ Marxists believe that the problems in the world are because of an unjust distribution of
  wealth.

✓ Moralists, educators, and politicians believe the problems in the world are because of
  ignorance and a lack of education. If you educate a highschooler about the dangers of drug
  use or unprotected sex they won’t use drugs, or engage in sexual activity prior to marriage,
  or so the thinking goes. Just this week I read that that 15 years ago Elie Wiesel said at an
  event in Dallas, “I believe that if there is anything that could disarm fanaticism, it is learning.
  It’s education. Whatever the essential answer to urgent and dangerous problems is, surely
  education is a major component. Without it, nothing is possible. Without it, there is no
  culture, no civilization, no compassion, no humanity.” He was wrong. Education is no
  solution.

✓ Psychologists and psychiatrists often believe the problems in the world are the result of
  organic issues: so treat an individual with the right drugs and he won’t be depressed or angry
  or hyperactive or gluttonous or a host of other ills. The problem is our bodies have gone awry
  and we can’t help it.

✓ But Paul says that the reason for the problems in the world is that the world is filled with
  sinners who are under the domination and control of sin. They are “addicted to sin....”
  (Rom. 3:9) —

They are imprisoned under it, unable to free themselves by anything they can do. Knowing
this, then, God has sent to us not a teacher or a politician but a liberator—one who has the power
to set us free from our sins....
When we really see the people all around us—at work, in our neighborhoods, at the store—as helpless captives of sin, we will be better motivated to help them find the true liberator who alone can rescue them from their captivity. Only Jesus Christ, proclaimed in the gospel, can break through the walls of sin that imprison human beings. [Moo, Romans (NIV Application), 86-7.]

Key Resources


6. Explain the doctrine of the noetic effects of sin relating the doctrine to the ability of secular psychologists to understand true information about the human condition.

Define Terms

- The noetic effect of sin — because of the sin nature, man’s mind is incapable of seeing “the facts of reality rightly in relation to God.” [Lyndon Unger, “A Frequently Missed Apologetics Text...”]
- Abraham Kuyper notes 12 effects of sin on the mind:
  - falsehood
  - unintentional mistakes
  - self-delusion and self-deception
  - the intrusion of fantasy into the imagination
  - intentional negative influences of other minds (e.g., in education) upon the mind of the scientist
  - physical weaknesses influencing the total human psychology
  - the disorganized relationships of life
  - the effect of misinformation and inaccuracies learned from one realm of life upon ideas from another domain
  - self-interest
  - the weakening of mental energies and the darkening of consciousness
  - internal disorganization of life–harmonies
  - the loss of the [understanding of one’s place in the world] found only in the revealed knowledge of God, by which one may see the whole

Key Passages

- Romans 1:18-23
  - v. 18 — they *suppress* truth — they restrain its work in their lives; they resist the work of God’s truth in their lives
  - v. 19 — the truth of God is evident to them *internally* (thru conscience and moral law)
  - v. 20 — the truth of the nature of God has always been so evident — even in creation alone — so that everyone who rejects Him has no excuse for that rejection. They choose it.
  - vv. 21-22 — though aware of God, it was their choice not to honor or thank Him.
  - The result is that their lives are futile, their hearts are dark, and they are condemned fools.
- Romans 3:9-20
✓ And the reason they don't think rightly (from the human perspective) is that they have embraced and desired their sin more than anything else. MacArthur says it this way: “Men are not sinful and hardened against God because they are ignorant of Him, but, to the contrary, they are ignorant of Him because of their sinful and hardened disposition.” He is exactly right. Note Eph. 4:19b — they've given themselves over...

✓ This is why unbelievers deny 6-day creation and affirm saving whales and killing babies. This is why it is obvious to us why homosexual marriage is not marriage and the world does not. This is why we can understand why a man saying, “I am a woman,” doesn't make him a woman and the world doesn’t. And this is why education will never change our culture. You can't educate mental invalids. You can't expect someone with a 65 IQ to become a cardiologist — “he just needs to take more classes” won't work. He is incapable of comprehending. And that is exactly the situation in the unbeliever. He is a mental invalid. He may have a doctorate from Harvard or Oxford, she may be the president of a multi-national, multi-billion dollar company, but they both have no ability to comprehend the truth of God without salvation. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:14-16.

✓ And that means we can't expect immoral, uncompprehending people to make moral choices and lead us righteously (whether that leadership is in a family, school, business, or political realm) — no matter how “smart” they are. They are utterly incapable of thinking and knowing the truth.

✓ The joy for the believer is that Christ redeems our minds and enables us to understand (Rom. 15:21)

- Romans 8:6 — their minds are set on the flesh (sin)
- Ephesians 4:17-19
  ✓ His mind is idolatrous (v. 17) — his worldview is against God
    ➢ Paul uses the word futile — his mind is empty, transitory and purposeless. The way the Gentile thinks is empty and void of any meaning (because he has removed God from his thought process and God is the only purpose for living and being...)
    ➢ There may be many ways to sub-divide it, but there are essentially only two worldviews — one world view that accepts and follows the God of Scripture and the Bible and the other worldview that denies God, Christ, and the gospel (this denial may be either in word or deed)
    ➢ The unbeliever's worldview is life without God — by any means and in any form.
  ✓ His thoughts are dark (v. 18) —
➢ The word **understanding** refers to the reasoning processes — their intelligence, emotions, and ability to conduct a reasonable argument.

… This doesn’t mean they don’t understand anything, but that they don’t have an ability to reason Biblically and theologically. They cannot comprehend truth about God and Christ. They have no ability to know and do righteousness. They are slaves to sin and unrighteousness.

… As an example, consider 1 Cor. 2:14-15. The illustration of the blind man (Jn. 9:35-41).

… (Note that this darkness is not irreversible; but because they choose it and persist in it, they continue in that darkness.)

➢ To live in darkness is to be blind and incapable mentally

… It is impossible to be “partially dark” if one lives in any pan of darkness, then he lives in full darkness and that darkness is overwhelming! (Mt. 6:23).

… To live in darkness is to live in the land of death (Lk. 1:79)

… It is possible to wrongly assume one lives in light and truth when actually his life is darkness and lies (Lk. 11:35)

… The natural man loves darkness because he loves his evil deeds (Jn. 3:19).

… The domain of darkness is ruled by Satan (Acts 26:18a; Eph. 6:12)

… The power of God is able to remove one from that Satanic domain (Acts 26:18b; 1 Pt. 2:9)

… Those living in darkness live lives that are characterized by blindness, foolishness (i.e., sinfulness), and immaturity (Rom. 2:19-20).

… It is foolish and contrary to God’s direction to find intimacy with those who are “dark dwellers” because sin and purity are incompatible and mutually exclusive (2 Cor. 6:14).

… To pursue darkness and dark deeds is to pursue a life of futility (Eph. 5:11).

… Those in darkness face an eternal doom separated from God (2 Pt. 2:17; Jude 13).

✓ His ignorance is willful (v. 18)

➢ There are several kinds of ignorance —

… a lack of information; we have not been taught something

… a lack of understanding

… a bad memory — we have forgotten something we have previously known.

… intentionally pushing it out of our minds — we “ignore” it (note the relationship between
“ignore” and “ignorance”). This is what Paul has in mind — intentional ignorance.

➢ This **ignorance is in them** — that is, it is there because of an internal desire, not an external action. They are ignorant of God because they desire and choose to be ignorant. They have access to the truth of God, but they do not want it.

➢ Notice the progression of the slippage of their minds in these two verses —
  ... Their mindset and outlook on life is futile and worthless
  ... Their ability to reason and think about life issues is dark/incapable
  ... They are ignorant about God because they have chosen not to know God. They are culpable

✓ His heart is hard (v. 18)

➢ The word **hardness** is a medical term that refers to callousness — there is a dullness and insensitivity to touch and feel because of hardened skin. These unbelievers are “petrified.” When that happens spiritually, there is no responsiveness to the HS and Scripture (1 Tim 4:2).

➢ How does this happen? By constantly saying “no” to God, the unbeliever becomes hardened to the point that he cannot respond to God. (This is why engaging in willful sin with the intent of confessing later is so dangerous — because of a hardened will, you may not want to repent!)

➢ But just like a woman can soften her hands and feet, so a believer can soften his mind and heart (his volition and will — the center of moral decision-making).

➢ This principle is a prelude of what is to come in 4:30 — do not grieve the HS. We grieve the Holy Spirit by not submitting to His work and will in our lives.

➢ When you are counseling an unbeliever or a believer trapped in sin, they are there because that is what they want. No matter their protestations, that sin is their choice; in their greedy hearts — at the moment of decision — that’s what they want. You must address them from that perspective.

➢ When you see an unbeliever ensnared in a worldly lifestyle, have the same kind of pity on him that Christ had on you — they need to hear the truth of grace and hope just as we all did. GOSPEL.

➢ If you see believers living like unbelievers, they need the gospel. If they are trapped in the culture, they need that same gospel applied to their hearts on a daily basis.
• Colossians 2:8 — the mind under the noetic effect of sin is captivated by the world; there is no freedom in the unredeemed mind.

• 1 Corinthians 2:11-15 — without the Spirit of God:
  ✓ the unbeliever cannot know the thoughts of God (v. 11)
  ✓ the unbeliever is bound by the spirit of the world (v. 12)
  ✓ the unbeliever does not accept the things of the Spirit (v. 14a)
  ✓ the unbeliever cannot understand the things of the Spirit (v. 14b)

• Jeremiah 17:9 — the heart (the emotional and desire center of the mind) is deceitful, sick, and incomprehensible. This is what leads us to ask about the world, “why do they do that...?”

Relationship of the Noetic Effect of Sin to Secular Psychologists and the Human Condition

• “Common grace makes it possible for unbelievers to know facts, but the noetic effects of sin make it impossible for them to embrace the most important facts. The closer unbelievers get in counseling to issues having to do with God, the ultimate meaning of life, and the problems that plague humanity, the greater will be the impact of the noetic effects of sin on their thinking and the more cautious Christians must be in accepting the information they produce.” [Lambert, 71]

• See chart in Forrey (74)

• A key component of salvation is the redemption of the mind (1 Cor. 2:15; Rom. 12:1-2); the believer has been made a new creature with a new mind (2 Cor. 5:16-17) and because of remaining flesh, he is to constantly renew his mind (Eph. 4:23) in his battle against sin.

• The renewed mind of a mature and growing believer is capable to help people in their battle with sin in ways that a secular psychologist never can.

Key Resources

Jay Adams, A Theology of Christian Counseling, ch. 11 (165-173).


Jeff Forrey, “Where Do We Find Truth?” in Scripture and Counseling, 72-75.

Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 497.

Martin Murphy, "Total Depravity" in After Darkness, Light (R.C. Sproul, Jr., ed.), 18-19.
