



Adventures
in Evangelical Civility

A Lifelong Quest for Common Ground

RICHARD J. MOUW

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1

Calvinists in an Edinburgh Pub

DURING THE 1770s, A GROUP OF SCOTTISH PRESBYTERIAN pastors and elders met together regularly in an Edinburgh tavern for dinner discussions about topics of common concern. The conveners of this group were six members of the clergy, leaders in what the historian Richard Sher has labeled, in his major study of the movement,¹ the “moderate literati” of that period in Scottish history.

I wish I could go back and listen in on those tavern conversations as a fly on the wall. What I find intriguing is the fact that the participants were, for the most part, fairly strict Calvinists who were interested in promoting a more positive engagement with things that were happening in Scottish culture. Many of their discussions focused on the literary arts. Indeed, one of the leaders, the pastor John Home, had himself written a play that was intended for stage production—a project that did not sit well with the Presbyterian establishment, who saw theater as a significant force for promoting social decay.

The majority of orthodox Presbyterians of the day were quite negative about the very cultural trends that were being celebrated in those dinner conversations. Shakespeare's writings, for example, were regularly condemned from Presbyterian pulpits, along with other cultural expressions that were seen as contributing to the erosion of the spiritual foundations of Scottish life.

The alarm that many church leaders exhibited regarding societal trends in general was also directed specifically to the group holding its dinner meetings in the taverns. The moderate literati among Presbyterian clergy were seen as serving the devil's cause. And this perception was only reinforced by the knowledge that the philosopher David Hume regularly joined the dinner discussions. Hume was widely viewed (with considerable justification) as a declared enemy of the faith, but he was reported to be drawn to what he saw as the high quality of cultural discourse that took place in those tavern conversations.²

In their efforts to promote a broad cultural dialogue, the leaders of these moderate literati, themselves strong Calvinists, made every effort to ground their positive outreach in their orthodox Reformed theology. While they, like their more negative Presbyterian colleagues, saw much that was happening around them as displeasing to God, they were convinced that the solution was not simply to condemn the trends but rather to promote a wide-reaching program for the cultivation of public virtue and societal well-being. And this project required, as Sher describes their vision, "a religiously inspired commitment to morality that would follow a proper understanding of the ways of Providence."³ For these Calvinists this meant encouraging the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivities, a tolerance toward persons of other religious perspectives, and—more generally—a spirit of public "politeness."⁴

While aware of the perils posed by these efforts, these Calvinists were convinced, as Sher depicts their concerns, that the project of charting the path to becoming "a fully civilized individual" was worth the effort, as long as they could do so within

a carefully articulated Calvinist perspective. Thus their diligence in attempting to clear the way, theologically and spiritually, for a Presbyterianism characterized by “genteel manners, religious moderation and tolerance, and high esteem for scientific and literary accomplishments.”⁵

I said earlier that I wish I could have heard those conversations. But my interest in what the group had to say is not simply a matter of intellectual curiosity: I personally identify with both their Calvinist convictions and their cultural efforts. My enthusiasm for what they were attempting is held in check, however, by my realization that they basically failed in what they hoped to accomplish. Looking back, we can see that they did not in fact stem the tide of the more God-dishonoring aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment. Indeed, it can be argued that they actually helped that tide along by what they were advocating. The overt unbeliever David Hume may have been a decidedly minority voice in their dinner gatherings, but in the long run the religious skepticism that he stood for has now become the status quo in “high” cultural circles.

So I ask myself: What went wrong? Was there some inadequacy in the manner in which they went about their explorations? These questions are urgent ones for me. The moderate literati were engaged in searching for a basis for common cause between Christian believers and representatives of other perspectives in the larger human community. They certainly seemed firm in their basic convictions. They were Calvinists who were sensing a rather strong disagreement with many of their fellow Calvinists about the very legitimacy of their search for commonalities. Like those eighteenth-century literati, I am a Calvinist who has expended much energy on a similar journey for understanding how my Reformed theological perspective can allow for the kinds of commonalities those Scottish clergy were looking for. For me, the search has taken place in several contexts. As a teacher of philosophical and theological topics, I have always seen my pedagogical task as including the need to urge my students to look for ways to learn

from non-Christian systems of thought. In the early days of the “evangelical social action” movement that emerged in the 1970s, I sensed a special obligation—as a Dutch Calvinist who was expected, in the words of the Belgic Confession, to “detest” the Anabaptists—to engage in a more positive manner the perspective of present-day Mennonite thinkers. In my years as president of Fuller Seminary, I initiated programs of dialogue with Jews, Muslims, and Mormons. And I have devoted considerable time to friendly give-and-take with Catholics and liberal Protestants. In my own attempts to find “proper bounds” for all of this, I have concentrated on what I have called “convicted civility”—a concept I borrow from Martin Marty, who once remarked that people these days who have strong convictions are often not very civil, and civil people often don’t have very strong convictions.⁶ My own overall quest has been guided by a conscious desire to cultivate a civility that is compatible with Calvinist convictions. So, while I admire and take encouragement from those eighteenth-century Scottish Calvinists, their example does give me pause about all of this.

I am theologically content, on the whole, with the kinds of theological boundaries that I have attempted to respect throughout my pilgrimage thus far. But I have also been reminded regularly, especially in recent years, that there could be unintended consequences for my project—negative ones that encourage the wrong kind of thing in the long run. For all my good intentions and proper Calvinist motives, I have asked myself on occasion whether I am unwittingly giving aid and comfort to the increasing relativism of our own day, encouraging the widespread assumption that being clear about borders is not a matter of great importance. It’s not that I see an alternative to keeping at it. Nor do I wish that the eighteenth-century dinner discussants had simply chosen to stick with the purely negative Calvinism that characterized the Presbyterian establishment of their day. I am convinced that there can be no turning back from a sustained and continuing quest for commonalities. But neither can I give up on paying attention to

my qualms. I have to keep reminding myself about the full scope of the theological tradition to which I claim allegiance, staying attuned to warning signals as well as to words of encouragement.

I'm glad that those eighteenth-century moderate literati saw the need to explore territories beyond the strict boundaries of their confessional identity. And I'm glad that they chose to include David Hume in their pub conversations. In my own way, I also have had my conversations with Hume and others like him—by sustained interaction with their thought—and have received much from those conversations. Indeed, I consider those intellectual encounters to be gifts from God. But I have also made a point of listening carefully to the theological concerns of the kinds of Calvinists who were quite critical of the patterns associated with the moderate literati of Edinburgh. And while I have not been willing simply to heed the critics' warnings, I have intentionally refused to drown out their accusing voices as I have looked for, and have regularly stood upon, the common ground that they saw as enemy territory.

2

A Tale of Two Authors

I HAD TWO FAVORITE AUTHORS DURING MY FINAL TWO YEARS AS an undergraduate: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Cornelius Van Til. To those familiar with the thinking of each of them they will certainly seem like an odd pair to have as favorites: Emerson, the free-spirit shaper of New England transcendentalism, and Van Til, the traditional Calvinist theologian at Westminster Seminary who found even Karl Barth to be a dangerous threat to Reformed orthodoxy. But my admiration for both of them at that stage in my life set the agenda for many of my theological journeys for the next half century, journeys that have been in large part motivated by a search for commonalities among people with whom I have serious disagreements.

A “Quickening Effect”

I still occasionally go back to read Emerson, but his writings no longer loom large on my reading list. My experience with Emerson is much like what his contemporary Matthew Arnold reported. Early

on in his intellectual pilgrimage, Arnold testified, he found Emerson to be “the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit,” and he admired his “hopeful, serene, beautiful temper.” But eventually, Arnold reported, he grew weary of Emerson’s writings, even dismissing him at one point as one of the dislikable “moral desperadoes” in the world of letters. Nonetheless, he later sent a copy of one of his books to Emerson, accompanied by a note in which he told the American writer, “I can never forget the refreshing and quickening effect your writings had upon me at a critical time of my life.”¹

“Refreshing and quickening” captures my own early encounter with Emerson. I read his essays as a student at an evangelical college situated in a rural setting, and I regularly went for long walks. I am not normally given to nature-loving instincts. I seldom find myself longing for a lost Eden; my spiritual reveries are more likely to be anticipations of a Holy City. In my college days, my long walks were typically occasions for thinking about ideas or relationships, or for conversations with a good friend. But for a brief time it was different; reading Emerson made it possible for me to focus directly on nature in memorable—albeit, regrettably, not lasting—ways.

The one Emersonian experience that stands out in my memory was not unlike one that Martin Buber describes in his *Between Man and Man*. Buber tells about a time when, as an eleven-year-old, he experienced a “deeply stirring happening” while taking care of a horse on his grandparents’ estate. Stroking the horse’s mane and feeling its “life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of *Thou* and *Thou* with me.” But in another, equally mysterious moment, Buber suddenly became aware of his own hand—and “something had changed; it was no longer the same thing.” He never recovered the “I-Thou-ness” of the earlier moment.²

That was what happened to me once on a long walk during that time in my late teens when I was reading Emerson—it is a vivid memory of a kind of “Thou to Thou” experience with nature. I remember it, but have never been able to recapture it. I do have moments in my life—quite regularly, actually—that I would describe as “mystical.” But these typically come to me in worship settings, or during times of private devotion; they happen when my focus is on God or matters relating to how God relates to human beings. My Emersonian experience was different. It came from an intense attention to nature itself—more specifically, to grassy hillsides, flowers, trees, leaves lying on a woodland path. Not only have I not had that kind of experience since; I do not even know how to prepare the way for its retrieval. The fact that it occurred at one time in my life I see as a gift. And while Emerson was not himself the Giver, taking him seriously was certainly the occasion for receiving the gift.

Reading Van Til

It has been different for me with Van Til. His writings—their actual substance—have been a more permanent gift than what I received from Emerson. When I went off to the Houghton College campus for my junior year of undergraduate study, a friend of mine, a pastor with strong Calvinist convictions, gave me a ninety-four-page booklet titled *Common Grace*,³ authored by Van Til, a longtime professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. I had recently become a Calvinist enthusiast by reading Charles Spurgeon’s sermons, and I enjoyed my long conversations with my pastor friend about the riches of Reformed theology. My friend was convinced that I was now ready for meatier stuff, so he introduced me to Van Til’s thought.

Common Grace was the first serious piece of theological writing that I ever read, and it had a profound impact on me. Here I discovered an ongoing theological conversation about topics pointed to by

the booklet's title: the theme of commonness. Given the realities of sin and grace, what can we assume that believers and nonbelievers have in common in their quest for truth? Can we expect to gain important insights into the nature of reality from the deliverances of the unregenerate mind? Is there an attitude of divine favor—one that can even be labeled as “grace”—that is directed toward all human beings, regardless of their final salvific status?

In my youthful enthusiasm I wrote to Van Til, asking him for clarification about his views on these matters. He not only responded graciously to my amateurish inquiries, but he sent me copies of several of his books and course syllabi—all of which I eagerly read. In reading Van Til, I also became interested in the writings of several of his conversation partners: the theologians of the “Old Princeton” school, especially Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield, as well as nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representatives of Dutch Calvinist orthodoxy—particularly Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Klaas Schilder, and Herman Hoeksema. These thinkers, especially the Dutch theologians, came to loom large in my own continuing focus on issues of commonness. My first philosophy teacher at Houghton College was Ronald Nash, whose approach to philosophical questions was shaped by interests similar to Van Til's. But the actual substance of Nash's philosophical perspective was heavily influenced by the views of Edward John Carnell, then the president of Fuller Theological Seminary. Nash encouraged me to read Carnell's apologetics writings. Carnell had come under the influence of Van Til during his studies at Westminster but had later modified his views on issues of commonness, while pursuing a pair of doctorates at Harvard and Boston University. Van Til did not take kindly toward the changes in his former student's thinking on the subject, with the result that Van Til regularly singled out Carnell's views for special criticism. This made for interesting exchanges between Nash and myself. In a major paper I wrote for one of Nash's courses, I supported Van Til's critique of Carnell.

Not that I was totally negative about Carnell's approach. For one thing, Van Til himself did not see Carnell as having gone completely in a wrong direction. He conceded that Carnell "frequently argues as we would expect a Reformed apologist to argue."⁴ What disturbed Van Til, however, was Carnell's willingness to engage in dialogue with unbelievers about the claims of Christianity prior to any direct appeal to Scripture. In one of his discussions of Carnell's approach, Van Til pointed to the line of argument that Carnell had set forth in the magazine *Moody Monthly*, in which Carnell gave advice to Christians about how they can defend the faith to unbelievers. When witnessing to someone who happens to be of "a philosophic turn," Carnell wrote, "you can point to the remarkable way in which Christianity fits in with the moral sense inherent in every human being, or the influence of Christ on our ethics, customs, literature, art and music." From there, Carnell went on, the believer can begin to speak personally about an experience with Christ; then, if the person continues to show an interest, the believer can discuss biblical passages in a way that will "permit the Spirit to work on the inner recesses of the heart."⁵

For Van Til, this was the wrong way to go. The only way to start engaging the unbeliever is with a direct appeal to the Bible. To be sure, he observed, unbelievers will see this as "circular reasoning," a Christian attempt to "prove that the Bible is true by an appeal to the Bible itself." But so be it. What they refuse to see is that they too inevitably engage in circular reasoning. Suppose a person insists, Van Til observed, that we can accept the Bible's authority only if that authority is first shown to be logically defensible. In that case, what is the basis for the appeal to logic? Is the appeal to logic itself logically demonstrable?⁶

This insistence on the need to begin with the Bible was correlated closely, in Van Til's approach, with his understanding of common grace. All human beings, Christian and non-Christian alike, live in God's world, where they are presented with God's

revelation of his being and power in the created order, as well as in the internal witness of their own God-created consciences. This accounts for the commonalities that we all exhibit in the areas of thought and action. At the same time, though, since believers and unbelievers operate from two fundamentally different life directions—a desire to be in covenant-keeping relationship to God versus one of a rebellious covenant-breaking spirit—Christians are guided by presuppositions that are antithetical to those of our non-Christian neighbors. This means that we do not even operate with the same “facts” to which they claim access; for the believer, a tree is created by the Triune God of the Scriptures, while unbelievers, as those who “hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18 KJV), see that tree from their God-denying point of view. Thus, while there is a common grace by which God keeps the unbelieving world from being as bad as it should be, given its rebellious presuppositions, the seeming agreement between Christian and non-Christian is “proximate.” It does not go deep.⁷

At the time I found Van Til convincing on such matters on a theological level. But on a practical level my admiration for Emerson and other unbelieving thinkers made me uneasy with Van Til’s perspective. When I went on to seminary and then to graduate studies in philosophy, I shifted decidedly in Carnell’s general direction. Especially in my years of studying and teaching alongside unbelievers at secular universities, I found myself quite naturally drawn into the very kinds of discussions that Van Til had condemned: considering arguments for and against basic tenets of a theistic worldview, affirming a common moral sense with those who professed no belief in a divine lawgiver, exploring the ways in which the Christian faith had influenced culture in positive and negative ways, and so on. In engaging in those “commonness” explorations, though, I have never seen Van Til’s warnings against such things as simply wrongheaded. As serious warnings, they are legitimate. Even as I deliberately act against them, I still feel their force.

What pulled me in the other direction, though, was that the Carnell-type approach has helped me to account for the fact that I have actually *learned* from non-Christian thinkers—thus my aforementioned sense of gratitude for the benefits I gained early on from reading the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson. And on such matters I also came to take my inspiration from John Calvin himself. Before he gained his reputation as a great Protestant Reformer, Calvin had engaged in legal studies, and he learned much from some ancient Roman writers, particularly Seneca. Nor did Calvin repent of his earlier appreciation for such thinkers when he began to develop a theological perspective that placed much emphasis on the depravity of the fallen human mind. In spite of sin’s pervasive influence in human affairs, Calvin argued, we can still witness in rebellious humanity an “admirable light of truth,” so that the human mind, “though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” This means, he says, that when we reject something simply because it comes from a non-Christian source, we “dishonor the Spirit of God.”⁸

Again, that kind of encouragement from Calvin himself has inspired me actively to learn from folks with whom I disagree on important issues, both in studying non-Christian writers and in engaging in direct dialogue with persons representing other theological and religious systems. In doing so, however, I have continued to struggle with the questions about “commonness”—questions about how, particularly from a Reformed theological perspective, we are to understand what it is that we share with people whose views of reality are different from our own. The Reformed tradition does point us to a number of resources upon which we can draw. Calvin himself talked about both a *semen religionis* and a *sensus divinitatis*—a “seed of religion” and a “sense of divinity”—that reside in the deep places of every human heart. In addition, Reformed thinkers (and others) have also on occasion drawn on the ideas of natural law, natural theology, general revelation, the shared *imago Dei*, and common grace. My own explorations have

drawn heavily on the last of these conceptions, common grace. Here too I take my lead from Calvin, who describes the continuing capacity in every human being for a rational grasp of God's truth—even when the source goes unacknowledged—as resulting from a “peculiar grace of God.”⁹

To be sure, Calvin could also speak very negatively about the products of the unregenerate mind. When Calvin credits the unredeemed with some grasp of the principles of civic fairness, for example, he quickly adds that even when the fallen human mind follows after truth, “it limps and staggers” in doing so.¹⁰ In the lives of unbelievers, he says, the civic “virtues are so sullied that before God they lose all favor,” so that anything in them “that appears praiseworthy must be considered worthless.”¹¹ And while he acknowledges that “some sparks still gleam” in the unredeemed mind, that light is nonetheless “choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively.”¹²

In my early struggles with the issues of commonness, I clearly heard both of those voices: those who followed Calvin in praising the “natural mind” for being “ornamented” with wonderful gifts, as well as those who followed the Calvin who pointed to the ways in which the unregenerate thinker “limps and staggers.”

Reconciling the “Two Calvins”?

This seeming ambivalence in Calvin is what led one of the Reformer's mostly sympathetic biographers, William Bouwsma, to posit a tension deep within Calvin's own psyche—so deep in fact that Bouwsma resorts to positing “two Calvins, coexisting uncomfortably within the same historical personage.” Bouwsma labels one of those Calvins “the philosophical Calvin,” who, “as a rationalist and a schoolman of the high Scholastic tradition,” favored a “static orthodoxy” and “craved desperately for intelligibility, order, certainty. Distrusting freedom, he struggled to control both himself and the world.” The second John Calvin,

though, “was a rhetorician and a humanist” who “was flexible to the point of opportunism, and a revolutionary in spite of himself.” This was a Calvin who “was inclined to celebrate the paradoxes and mystery at the heart of existence.”¹³

While I was attracted early on to both Calvins, I was never content simply to listen to both of his voices without finding some way to bring the two together theologically. This is where I found much help from Abraham Kuyper, who went beyond Calvin to see the two seemingly diverse strands in the light of a larger theological framework. Kuyper’s doctrine of the antithesis recognized that unredeemed cultural activity is directed by a spirit of rebellion, which stands in contrast to those God-honoring patterns to which the redeemed are called. But his doctrine of common grace spelled out the ways in which the rebellious motives of the unredeemed are curbed, and even on occasion guided in a direction that serves God’s cultural goals. Thus he can acknowledge the Spirit’s workings in the broad human community “wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life.”¹⁴

In endorsing Bouwsma’s “two Calvins” portrayal while implying that there was only one Kuyper, am I giving too little credit to Calvin and too much to Kuyper? Perhaps. Calvin was highly intelligent and seemed to be quite self-aware. It is likely that he thought more than meets the eye about integrating what seem like conflicting tendencies in his writings. And Kuyper did seem in his practice to be a little less clear than he was in his theological pronouncements about how to hold to the antithesis and common grace in a coherent manner. For all of that, however, I do think that what Kuyper did was an improvement on Calvin. For one thing, Kuyper made a point of explicitly acknowledging the tension that needs to be faced by a healthy Calvinism. The only way to give honest recognition to the positive contributions of unbelievers to our shared human life, he argued, is to acknowledge that there are

“internal” gracious dealings with all human beings. These dealings are not salvific in nature, but they are clearly on display where, as Kuyper rightly observes, we see such things as integrity, loyalty, and commitment to the common good. These phenomena are so obvious, Kuyper argues, that Calvinists must choose between two options: we must “either surrender our confession of the deadly character of sin, or hold on to that confession with all our might, but then also confess along with it that there is a common grace at work that in many cases restrains the full, deadly effect of sin.”¹⁵

By acknowledging the “deadly character of sin”—the reality of the antithesis—while also acknowledging the genuine gifts that we receive from non-Christian thought and practice, Kuyper was giving us some handles to better wrestle with the theological issues that Calvin only pointed to. Specifically, Kuyper not only gave us two helpful theological labels—antithesis and common grace—but he went on to discuss in considerable detail the related theological issues associated with the handles. My good friend David Tiede, a gifted Lutheran theologian, once made a memorable observation in a devotional he gave to a group of theological administrators. The crude and even blasphemous language of the streets, Tiede said, often contains theological meanings that the speakers are oblivious to. His two examples were “What *in the hell* is going on?!” and “What *in heaven’s name* is happening?!” These two expressions, Tiede said, get at important spiritual realities—namely, that there is a lot of hellish stuff going on in the world but that we can also on occasion discern things that draw, even if unwittingly, upon heavenly resources. Tiede was giving a practical and insightful expression of Kuyper’s distinction between antithesis and common grace. And, like Kuyper, he was not providing clear and unimpeachable criteria for deciding between the heavenly and the hellish. Common grace and antithesis are theological tools of discernment. The antithesis idea helps us to see that the differences between belief and unbelief are real and pervasive. But the common grace idea tells us that the God whom Calvinists worship

and serve has not abandoned the unbelieving world. We know that both the hellish and the heavenly are realities in the world. We know that we can fully expect to catch glimpses—sometimes even glorious ones—of truth, goodness, and beauty in the lives of those who do not profess Christ, even while we must be on guard not to be taken in by hellish deceptions. Both ideas encourage us to keep our spiritual eyes open—always with an awareness that we need to work hard at cultivating a God-honoring discernment.

Clarifying Mysteries

The Catholic theologian Thomas Weinandy has observed that we should not see the doing of theology primarily as a “problem solving” activity. Rather, it functions at its best as “a mystery discerning enterprise.” To solve a problem, Weinandy notes, is to make our puzzles go away, and that is not the kind of resolution that we ought to expect as a matter of course in theological exploration. But we can hope to succeed in knowing “more precisely and clearly what the mystery is.”¹⁶

One key element in my own attempts to clarify theological mysteries is the need to see how antithesis and common grace stand in relation to each other, and to find the proper tension point between the two, so that each is properly acknowledged in both theology and practice. In my estimation, Kuyper did well in this regard. He serves as a fine example of a Calvinist who was eager to find commonalities while being clearly aware of the deep differences.

In following Kuyper’s example, I have been inspired by a term that loomed large in Edward John Carnell’s thought: “common ground.” As I reported earlier, I started off as a college student endorsing Van Til’s refusal to concede to Edward John Carnell the legitimacy of looking for areas of agreement with non-Christians in our apologetic efforts. My attraction to Van Til’s perspective would soon give way to much sympathy for Carnell’s side of the argument. And it wasn’t just because I came to see

the attractiveness of Carnell's approach as a plausible apologetic methodology—although it certainly was that. More importantly, his way of viewing things gripped me experientially. I kept sensing, in various encounters with people beyond the boundaries of evangelical Calvinism, that my theological feet were actually finding real *patches* of common ground. I wasn't always sure how exactly I came upon those patches—thus the ongoing effort to develop appropriate tools for discerning the mysteries. Common ground has been for me an experiential reality. I have regularly experienced a profound sense—in reading a non-Christian philosopher, in engaging in debates on questions of public policy, in debating theological topics with persons of other Christian traditions—that I am standing together on a patch of common ground with someone whose views on serious matters are quite different from my own. The historian David Cannadine recently published an insightful apologia for the importance of holding on to the idea of human solidarity in spite of the attention given these days to human differences—religious, national, racial, ethnic, gender, lifestyle, and the like.¹⁷ I especially like the subtitle chosen for his book: *Humanity beyond Our Differences*. It is that “beyond” or “beneath” that I often experience.

It is important, though, to assess that experience in the light of careful theological exploration. What *explains* the experience of standing on a patch of common ground? How do we tell that the experience is not deceptive? Fortunately, multiple theological resources are available to help in the search for explanatory insight. I have called upon several of them at various points in my journey, finding that one or another best addresses a specific experience of commonness. Among these, the notion that all human beings, redeemed or unredeemed, bear the marks of being created in the image of God is certainly a primary resource. I turn now to a report on my journey with this theological concept.



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