

# Common Grace RW: Exploring Relationships with Non-Christians

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Both my father and my mother were highly relational people. They were great listeners, remarkably empathetic, and had a marvelous ability to connect with and encourage others. As you might expect, they had many friends who enjoyed their company.

There was one big difference between them, however. My mother was a devote Christian from her earliest years. She loved the Lord, the Bible, and her church. My father did not trust in Jesus until two hours before he died.

So where did he get his relational intuitions and skills? For that matter, how do millions of non-Christians all around the world learn how to get along with one another, establish lasting marriages, nurture their children, and develop peaceful and thriving communities?

The Bible tells us that these relational insights and abilities come from God himself, who has graciously gifted them to all people in varying degrees, even if they do not believe in or worship him. God dispenses these gifts through a combination of **general revelation** and **common grace**.

## General Revelation

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*General revelation* is a knowledge of God's existence, character, and moral and physical laws that he gives to all humanity generally. This knowledge comes through studying nature, through seeing God's influence throughout history, and through an inner sense of God's existence and laws that he has written onto every human heart because we are made in his image (Gen. 1:27; Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:20; Rom. 2:14-15; Acts 17:26-29).

Every insight into how people behave and can form healthy relationships and stable societies (psychology, emotional intelligence, sociology, law, economics, etc.), as well as every insight into the laws of nature (physics, chemistry, aerodynamics, etc.) is a gift that God gives to us as a form of general revelation.

General revelation is distinct from *special revelation*, which refers to God's words addressed to specific people, such as the words of Holy Scripture, the words of the prophets and the apostles, and the words of God spoken personally, such as at Mount Sinai or at the baptism of Jesus.

## Common Grace

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Common grace is the grace that God pours out on all people to give them innumerable blessings that are not necessarily part of salvation. This grace includes temporal life, wisdom,

knowledge, health, prosperity, happiness, and peace. It is called common because it is something he gives to all people in various degrees whether they believe in him or not (Matt. 5:45).

Common grace is essential to our gaining knowledge through general revelation, for it is common grace that inhibits our sinful hostility toward God and our inclination to suppress his truth. It is this inhibiting quality of common grace that gives us the ability to comprehend and respond (although imperfectly) to what God discloses through general revelation.

Common grace does not save people from God's judgment (Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:6). The only way to be saved is through God's *special grace*, which enables us to understand the good news of the gospel and trust that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was resurrected to give us new life (Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:9-10).

## Blessings for Everyone

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Although general revelation and common grace do not save us, they are a means of countless blessings to all people, both saved and unsaved. Day after day, God pours out his knowledge and grace to demonstrate his goodness and mercy (Ps. 145:9), to preserve those who will one day believe in him (2 Pet. 3:9), to restrain evil and enable even unsaved people to do what is morally right (Luke 6:33; see also this [moving video clip](#)), and to bless his children with peace, justice, and prosperity (Acts. 22:29). Thus it is common grace that moves unsaved people to do something as mundane as obeying traffic signals or something as noble as [The Great Boat Lift of 9/11](#).

Since non-Christians have not yet trusted in Christ or been transformed by his indwelling Spirit, they are unable to understand and obey biblical truths the same way that a Christian can (1 Cor. 2:14; Phil. 2:13). Even so, through general revelation and common grace, non-Christians are able to learn, value, and follow many of the relational principles that God has written on their hearts and woven into cultures around the world.

Therefore, just as it is beneficial to teach and encourage all people, Christian and non-Christian alike, to obey civil laws, respect traffic signals, conduct business ethically, and treat employees fairly, it is equally beneficial to teach the basic principles of relational wisdom to all people who are willing to learn them.

Of course, non-Christians who study relational wisdom will not have the same inspiration, motivation, understanding, or empowerment that God grants to sincere Christians. Even so, through general revelation and common grace, a non-Christian can still learn, grasp and apply a great deal of God's wisdom—sometimes more than many Christians do.

## Learning from Non-Christians

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This is why it is appropriate not only to *teach* relational insights and skills to non-Christians as opportunities arise, but also to *learn* relational insights and skills from them (running everything we hear through a biblical analysis; Acts 17:11) ... just as we would seek to learn

about medicine, physics, or diplomacy from non-Christians who know more about these fields than we do.

This is particularly true when it comes to studying emotional intelligence (also known as EI or EQ), which is a secular version of relational wisdom. Granted, EI teaching has the major deficiency of ignoring God and the implications of sin, redemption, and sanctification. Even so, it can provide valuable insights into elements of neurology, hormonology, and psychology (which are built into us by God's design), all of which have a bearing on our thinking, emotions, and human interactions.

## Back to My Dad

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This beneficial, two-way learning dynamic was definitely true of my father (and many other non-Christians I've known). Although he did not trust in Christ until two hours before he died, my father was far more forgiving, kind, and generous than many Christians I've known. Long before he was born again, he taught me countless relational skills that have stayed with me to this day.

While such behavior could not save him or me, it certainly made him a better husband, father, friend, attorney, and district judge ... who was known throughout our community as a just, reasonable, and compassionate man whose example was worth following in many respects.

Teaching relational wisdom to non-believers like my father can, by God's grace, produce similar results in them, improving relational skills, strengthening families, making employees more productive, and contributing to a more civil and respectful society. In the same way, Christians can often learn from the relational insights and skills God has given to non-Christians through common grace.

But the most important benefit of discussing relational wisdom with the unsaved is to present them with a model for relationships that all people long to experience. And when they realize their utter inability to achieve it in their own strength, we will sometimes have the opportunity to hold out to them the gospel of Christ as the key not only to better human relationships but also, and more importantly, to reconciliation with God himself.

– Ken Sande

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