

Dr. Abraham Kuyper

Presented to The Academy  
13 May 2008

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### Biography of Abraham Kuyper:

*While at the university: “I discovered that the Holy Scripture does not only cause us to find justification by faith, but also discloses the foundation of all human life, the ordinances which must govern human existence in Society and State.”*

Abraham Kuyper was born in 1837 in Maassluis, a town in the western Netherlands. He was born to his father, Jan Frederik Kuyper, who was a minister of the Reformed state church in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> After completing high school, Abraham Kuyper attended the University of Leiden in the Netherlands where he graduated with highest honors.<sup>2</sup> It was during this time as university student that Kuyper researched and wrote an essay comparing the works of John Calvin and the Polish Reformer John a Lasco. Pouring all of his time and energy into writing this work, Kuyper traveled across the Netherlands doing research and spent hours reviewing the catalogs of the greatest libraries in Europe to find writings by Lasco.<sup>3</sup> Kuyper circumstantially came across a rare series of writings by Lasco in a friend’s personal library, and thus Kuyper went on to write an essay that would win a competition sponsored by the University of Groningen.<sup>4</sup>

This time as a student proved to be a formative time for Kuyper, where he learned much about God through his studies of the Scriptures and through the writings of the great reformers. It was said of him that his work on the Calvin and Lasco paper “reminded him of God” and showed that Kuyper was interested more in knowing God Himself than knowing intellectually about Him. <sup>5</sup> During this time at Leiden Kuyper also earned a Doctorate in Sacred Theology in 1863.

A year following, Kuyper took a parish in the small Dutch province of Beesd. During his time at Beesd, Kuyper interacted with many parishioners who were against the modern theology

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<sup>1</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Lectures on Calvinism, i.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, iv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, v.

that was being taught in state churches at the time<sup>6</sup>. Through many conversations with these simple farmers, Kuyper was taken aback by their staunch Calvinism, love for the Scriptures, and well-organized worldview. Some call his time at this parish his “confessional transformation”, where Kuyper developed much of his thoughts on public theology through these interactions.<sup>7</sup> Kuyper spent much of this time developing his theology that the Word of God can be applied to all spheres of life and should not be contained solely in the realm of the church and personal life.

Immediately following his time as a parishioner, Kuyper jumped headfirst into a life in the political realm, incorporating his public theology into the various groups he became involved in. In 1872 he became Editor-in-chief of *De Standaard (The Standard)*, a public newspaper that served as the voice for the Anti-Revolutionary Party (the formation of which Kuyper was also responsible for), which represented politically Dutch Protestants.<sup>8</sup> Kuyper then became the editor of a Christian paper *De Heraut (The Herald)*, releasing even more of his thoughts and ideas into the general public. In 1874 Kuyper was elected to the lower house of Parliament, where he served until 1877. In the years that followed, Kuyper founded the Free University of Amsterdam and wrote hundreds of treatises and volumes on a vast variety of subjects.<sup>9</sup> In 1898 Kuyper traveled to the United States to give the Stone Lectures at Princeton. Kuyper’s lectures proved to be some of his most concise statements on his public theology to date, and in them one finds Kuyper’s explanation of how Calvinism serves as a basis for public theology. In 1901 Kuyper was asked to serve as Prime Minister by Queen Wilhelmina, a position which he kept for four years.<sup>10</sup> Kuyper continued writing many spiritual works until his death in 1920 and is

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<sup>6</sup> *The Spirit in Public Theology*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures on Calvinism*, i.

The Anti-Revolutionary Party served as the Dutch Protestant Christian democratic party in the Netherlands, and attained considerable influence, promoting especially equalization of payment for public and religious schools. The Anti-Revolutionaries believed that there are “real, divine ordinances built into creation by God that can be discovered through experience”, and that these ordinances are “discovered not merely through biblical exegesis or spiritual reflection but in the process of governance.” (See *The Spirit in Public Theology*, 55-61)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> *The Spirit in Public Theology*, 52.

heralded as a “most important influence on the ecclesiastical and political history of his country.”<sup>11</sup>

### Kuyperian Theology: The Relationship between Sphere Sovereignty and Common Grace

*“Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”*

Through his life experiences and theological training, Kuyper developed a public theology that “sought to articulate a Reformed approach to life outside the church”<sup>12</sup> Kuyper believed that Biblical principles could and must be applied to all of life, and not be confined under the auspices of personal and church life. In his Stone Lectures on Calvinism (“the most comprehensive articulation of Kuyper’s thought”<sup>13</sup>), Kuyper laid a foundation for his political theology in Calvinism. Kuyper argues in his lectures that Calvinism provides a basis for a comprehensive life system, a system that shows a “Christian approach to all areas of life.”<sup>14</sup> Kuyper lays the foundation for his political theory in the Calvinist doctrines of God’s sovereignty, depravity of man, election, and universal grace.

Kuyper explains God’s sovereignty mainly in God’s work of creation. As He stands as Creator over all, He exercises authority as the only Divine Sovereign. Kuyper cites Colossians 1:16 saying that because God has created all things for His own purposes, all things “exist for the sake of God”, including all peoples and nations.<sup>15</sup> Kuyper explains the concept of “sphere sovereignty” in the world as it relates to God and Christ as thus:

But here is the glorious principle of Freedom! The perfect Sovereignty of the *sinless* Messiah at the same time directly denies and challenges all absolute sovereignty among *sinful* men on earth, and does so by dividing all of life into *separate spheres*, each with its own sovereignty.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lectures on Calvinism, i.

<sup>12</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 63

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 79

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Lectures on Calvinism, 45

<sup>16</sup> Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader, 467.

According to Kuyper, God exists as the One Sovereignty and prohibits men from exercising total sovereignty on the earth. Kuyper cites God's divisiveness as the Tower of Babel as evidence for different "spheres" in earth that serve as a reminder to men that God is the only absolute Sovereign. As God is sovereign over "the whole Cosmos, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible", Kuyper's political theology seeks to explain how God exhibits this sovereignty in three main spheres on earth: the state, society, and the church.

The first aspect of Kuyperian "sphere sovereignty" is God's sovereignty in the realm of the state. As God has all authority over the earth due to His Creatorship, Kuyper asserts that God grants authority to magistrates and government in His working of universal or "common" grace.<sup>17</sup> God gives certain nonredemptive grace to governing authorities "in order that [the governing authority] may preserve the glorious work of God, in the creation of humanity, from total destruction."<sup>18</sup> This tendency towards total destruction comes from man's depravity and the reality of sin in the world. Left to itself with no government, Kuyper believes that sinful humanity, without any sort of restraint in the form of government and ruling authority, would become a "veritable hell on earth."<sup>19</sup> For this reason, God grants this ruling authority to men to preserve His creation, thereby instituting a form of common grace. The fact that God does not leave His creation to total self-destruction shows the work of this common grace – though it does not save, it protects one from experiencing all of the horrors of sin.

As God exhibits His sovereignty over the political sphere by delegating authority to governing authorities, Kuyper also discusses two other spheres where God exhibits His sovereignty, over society and over the church. According to Kuyper, society is understood as a group of other spheres of life that include the family, business, art, science, and more that "do not owe their existence to the state."<sup>20</sup> For this reason the spheres of society do not derive any

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 90.

authority from the state, but from “a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the State does.”<sup>21</sup> Each sphere of society has its own sovereignty, coming down from God alone, and is separate from the state. The state’s purpose is not to rule over the spheres of society but to “umpire the relations among them.”<sup>22</sup> Kuyper explains the duty of the sphere of the state in regards to the sphere of society:

[The State] possesses the threefold right and duty: 1. Wherever different spheres clash, to compel mutual regard for the boundary-lines of each; 2. To defend individuals and weak ones, in those spheres, against the abuse and power of the rest; and 3. To coerce altogether to bear *personal* and *financial* burdens for the maintenance of the natural unity of the State.<sup>23</sup>

Though this outline of the duty of the sphere of the state over the sphere of society is simple, its ambiguity can lead to a clashing of the spheres, as the sphere of society attempts to “shake off” the authority of the state, while the sphere of the state tries to assert itself over the sphere of society.<sup>24</sup>

Within the sphere of the church, Kuyper contends that freedom must be given for a “multiplicity of churches”<sup>25</sup> in the state as opposed to siding with Calvin who “demanded intervention of the government in the matter of religion”, and gave the sphere of government authority to defend against idolatry and false religion.<sup>26</sup> Kuyper maintains that the sphere of the church has a sovereignty separate from the sphere of the state, and therefore their freedom must be acknowledged by the state. In his lecture on Calvinism and religion, Kuyper gives historical background for his position, stating that initially, power was given to the state to abolish false forms of religion originally as a “reaction against...horrible persecutions” of Christians by pagan predecessors before the reign of Constantine.<sup>27</sup> This jurisdiction given to the government came from the conviction that the church visible was the one true Church. (Kuyper rejects the idea of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> [Evangelicals in the Public Square](#), 58.

<sup>23</sup> [Lectures on Calvinism](#), 97.

<sup>24</sup> [Evangelicals in the Public Square](#), 59.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> [Lectures on Calvinism](#), 99.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 100.

the visible church, however, because the very introduction of Calvinism into the world “ruptured the unity of the Church” by parting with the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>28</sup>) Kuyper therefore believes that “Calvinism, by praising aloud liberty of conscience, has in principle abandoned every absolute characteristic of the visible church.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the spheres of the state and the church have separate sovereignty, and magistrates though they rule according to God’s ordinances, they have the freedom to make decisions “apart from the direct influence of the church” and vice versa.<sup>30</sup>

Kuyper, taking the understanding of “sphere sovereignty”, calls the believer to action in these various spheres because of the acknowledgement that common grace is given to each sphere. In his first lecture on Calvinism, Kuyper asserts that the believer “must, in every domain, discover the treasures and develop the potencies hidden by God in nature and in human life” as he/she recognizes that in the whole world “the curse is restrained by grace.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that God gives this grace to the world should compel Christians to “serve God in every facet of life” where this grace is made available.<sup>32</sup> Kuyper states that “the manifestation of grace served ultimately not to save us but to bring out the glory of the Divine Being” - that the manifestation of common grace along with special grace (salvific grace) in the world serves to bring utmost glory to God.<sup>33</sup> According to Kuyper, common grace, because of its preservative nature, “makes progress possible” in the world.<sup>34</sup> The spheres in the world can develop, as common grace preserves them from total destruction:

Common grace opens a history, unlocks an enormous space of time, triggers a vast and long-lasting stream of events,...precipitates a series of successive centuries. If that series of centuries is not directed toward an endless, unvarying repetition of the same things, then over the course of those centuries there has to be constant change, modification, transformation of human life.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>30</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Lectures on Calvinism, 31.

<sup>32</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader, 167.

<sup>34</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 101.

<sup>35</sup> Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader, 174-175.

How then can a believer, with the knowledge of this common grace, seek to help society develop? According to Kuyper, the development of society occurs by having Christians present in every area of life who “promote religious liberty, oppose the introduction or propagation of pagan concepts and ideas into the legal and sociopolitical fabric of the country, and expand the dominance of more noble and pure ideas in society.”<sup>36</sup> As believers are out in the various spheres of life, seeking to progress the world by submitting to God’s authority and living by the ordinances of God, “the recipients of special grace cultivate the terrain of common grace.”<sup>37</sup> When Christians become active in all of the different spheres that exist in the world, God’s “divine wisdom...shine[s] forth” as humanity is guided to “walk after His ordinances” and in that end, glorify Him.

#### The Influence of Abraham Kuyper’s Work

*“One desire has been the ruling passion of my life. One high motive has acted like a spur upon my mind and my soul. And sooner than that I should seek escape from the sacred necessity that is laid upon me, let the breath of life fail me. It is this: That in spite of all worldly opposition, God’s holy ordinances shall be established again in the home, in the school and in the State for the good of the people; to carve as it were into the conscience of the nation the ordinances of the Lord, to which Bible and Creation bear witness, until the nation pays homage again to God.”*

One does not have to strain to find areas where Abraham Kuyper’s ideas were influential. Kuyper’s public theology affected much of the political arena in the Netherlands in the second half of the 1800s and early 1900s. His contributions to Christian and political newspapers served as a vessel for his voice among the populace. His establishment of *De Standaard* in 1872 gave Kuyper a place to write editorials that argued for “the use of divine ordinances in public affairs.”<sup>38</sup> Politically, Kuyper was a major factor in creating the Anti-Revolutionary Party, which gave the Reformed Protestant population representation in Parliament. Contributions to this

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<sup>36</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 106.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 55.

party and the ideals held therein led Kuyper to establish the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880, a public institution whose objective was to “provide an approach to higher education that was rooted in a Reformed worldview” and taught theology along with science, philosophy, literature, and medicine.<sup>39</sup> Through this university, Kuyperian social theology came to life as individuals and students themselves came to know and understand the founding purpose of their university: to glorify God and encourage that His ordinances be extended to all spheres of life including education.

Kuyper’s service as Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905 gave Kuyper yet another outlet for his social theology to come alive. Chosen by Queen Wilhelmina to serve as Prime Minister already hints at Kuyper’s good relations and favor among the politically powerful people in his country. In matters of legislation as Prime Minister, Kuyper sought to help the exploited peoples of the Netherlands (the poor, ill, and elderly populations), promote greater morality among the peoples, and to promote a plurality of education (that religious schools may receive the same funding as public schools).<sup>40</sup> In May of 1905, Kuyper passed the Higher Education Act, a law that granted “equal status” of Christian higher education and humanist higher education in state universities.<sup>41</sup> This law “enabled churches and private organizations to create special professorial chairs at state universities,” thereby enabling more Christian influence in the secular world.<sup>42</sup> Kuyper’s travels to the United States resulted in the well-known Stone Lectures on Calvinism, a series which affected political thought and theory in America now along with in the Netherlands. It is obvious that Kuyper’s actions were consistent with his social theology as he sought, out of obedience and reverence to the One who gave him life and breath, to bring glory to God in all spheres of the world where he had influence. Now even posthumously, Kuyper’s goal of magnifying the sovereignty of God in all of His creation and the

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<sup>39</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 61.

<sup>40</sup> The Spirit in Public Theology, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

influence of his public theology certainly has been felt among believers and continues to stand as a summons to take the Word of God out to the peoples.

## References

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