

The Political Theology of Abraham Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was both a brilliant theologian and a successful politician. This is why his political theology is unique: it is fully theology, but also a base for a practical Christian influence on society, which he implemented in the Netherlands at the turn of the 19th century. This lecture discusses the main theological themes of his approach, namely the sovereignty of God, worldview, antithesis, common grace, and sphere sovereignty.

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I. Introduction

- A. The goal: to think through our own political theology.
- B. The challenge of Abraham Kuyper's theology: comprehensive, theological and pragmatic.
- C. Whatever our opinion on Abraham Kuyper is, modern evangelicals lack all of those in our approach to the subject.

II. Who Abraham Kuyper was:

- A. Successful church leader
- B. Successful politician
- C. Successful magazine editor
- D. Devoted and conservative Reformed Christian

III. Basic theological categories of Abraham Kuyper's description of political realities

A. Sovereignty of God

1. The definition

- a. Confessional, absolute predestination. “Principled recognition of 'full sovereign grace'”; “they brought me, with their imperfect language, in that absolute form which alone can give rest to my soul: in the worship and adoration of a God, who works all things, both the willing and the working, according to his good pleasure!” (*Confidentially*, Bratt, p. 56).

2. Function

- a. **Ultimate source of life in Calvinism as life-system.** The “mother-principle of its own” which “has developed an independent form both for our life and for our thought” (Lectures, 15). “Lutheranism is nowhere spoken of as the creator of a peculiar life-form (...) while Calvinism [is] the creator of a world of human life entirely of its own” (ibid.). “Kuyper's Archimedes point” (Van der Shee).
- b. **The root of any change and action for all reality.** “...political conceptions sprang from its root principle. [in Calvinism] This dominating principle was not, soteriologically, justification by faith, but, in the widest sense cosmologically, the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible” (ibid., 79).
- c. **The reason and demand for Christian holistic social change.** “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, 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!'” (Opening of the Free University, October 20th, 1880).
- d. **The source of dignity in obedience to human powers and of rightful restraint.** “It [Calvinism] lifts us from an obedience born of dread of the strong arm, into an obedience for conscience sake. It teaches us to look upward from the existing law to the source of the eternal Right in God, and it creates in us the indomitable courage incessantly to protest against the unrighteousness of the law in the name of this highest Right” (Lectures, 90).

3. Practice in politics

- a. “The source of sovereign authority is found in God alone and not in the will of the people nor in human law”; “Even in the realm of politics the Anti-Revolutionary movement confess the eternal principles of God's Word; state authority is bound to the ordinances of God only in the conscience of public officials and not directly so bound, nor through the pronouncements of any church” (AR program, April 3, 1879).¹

¹M.R. Langley, *The Practice of Political Spirituality*, Paideia Press: Jordan Station, 1984, 27.

4. Questions:

- a. Christ is not present in society through church. Who is agent of Christ if not church? Are individual's consciousnesses enough?

B. Worldview

1. The definition and the function of worldview.

- a. The vision of life that became flesh. "Protestantism alone wanders about in the wilderness without aim or direction, moving hither and thither, without making any progress. (...) Why did we, Christians, stand so weak, in the face of this Modernism? Why did we constantly lose ground? Simply because we were devoid of an equal unity of life-conception, such as alone could enable us with irresistible energy to repel the enemy at the frontier. This unity of life-conception, however, is never to be found in a vague conception of Protestantism winding itself as it does in all kind of tortuosities, but you do find it in that mighty historic process, which as Calvinism dug a channel of its own for the powerful stream of its life" (Lectures, 18-19).

2. Characteristic. "Special principle into the three fundamental relations of all human life" (Lectures, 19):

- a. **to God:** "immediate fellowship with the creature, as God the Holy Spirit" (Lectures, 21). Calvin was "the first to seek the Church in the believers themselves" (Ibid. 22).
- b. **to man:** "If Calvinism places our entire human life immediately before God, then it follows that all men or women (...) stand as equals before God, and consequently equal as man to man. Hence we cannot recognize any distinction among men, save such as has been imposed by God Himself, in that He gave one authority over the other, or enriched one with more talents than the other..." (Lectures, 27).
- c. **to the world:** "there is a particular grace which works salvation, and also a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator" (Lectures, 29-30).

3. Questions:

- a. If the relation to God is immediate, what about sacraments and the church itself?
- b. Is the relation to the world inevitably twofold?

C. Antithesis

1. The reality.

- a. "If the battle is to be fought with honour and with hope of victory, then principle must be arrayed against principle; (...) in Modernism the vast

energy of an all-embracing life-system assails us, then also it must be understood that we have to take our stand in a life-system of equally comprehensive and far-reaching power. (...) I found and confessed, and I still hold, that this manifestation of the Christian principle is given us in Calvinism” (Lectures, 11-12).

2. Reasons behind

- a. **The reality of sin and unbelief**
- b. **The reality of “science”** e.g. “necessary and ever-continued impulse in the human mind to reflect within itself the cosmos” where both the elements of this reflection, their relations and the relation to reality itself (the object), do matter.²
- c. **The reality of regeneration:** “The Christian religion places before us just this supremely important fact. For it speaks of a regeneration (paliggenesia), of a 'being begotten anew' (anagennosis), followed by an enlightening (photismos), which changes man in his very being; and that indeed by a change or transformation which is effected by a supernatural cause” (ibid. 50).
- d. **The reality of two kinds of man:** “This 'regeneration' breaks humanity in two, and repeals unity of the human consciousness” (ibid.). “Both are human, but one is inwardly different from the other” (ibid., 51).
- e. **The reality of two epistemologies and sciences:** “if this change exercises at the same time an influence upon its consciousness, then as far as it has or has not undergone this transformation, there is an abyss in the universal human consciousness across which no bridge can be laid” (ibid. 50).
- f. **Inevitable nature of antithesis:** “The wild tree cannot change from its own kind into the kind of the grafted tree, unless a power which resided outside of the sphere of botany enters and effects the renewal” (ibid.).

3. Questions:

- a. Where is the border between the two kinds and how we are to find it?
- b. How to discover the spiritual reality in historical process, with its complexity and ambiguity?

D. Common Grace

1. The definition.

- a. “Every view that would confine God's work to the small sector we might label 'church life' must be set aside. There is beside the great work of God in special grace also totally other work of God in the realm of common grace. That work encompasses the whole life of the world, the life of Kaffirs in Africa, of Mongols in China (...). All of it was an indispensable part of the great work that God is doing to consummate the world's development” (Common Grace, Bratt, 176).

²A. Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, AP&A: Wilmington, p. 19.

2. Impact on politics

- a. Possibility of cooperation with people out of special grace realm.

3. Questions

- a. How to keep the distinction and uniqueness of special grace? It is very easy to lose special grace (anthitetical identity) in common (creational identity), if goodness can flow from both. “When Kuyper puts disproportionate emphasis on creation at the expense of redemption (...) [he is] gently moving away from what is central in the driving force of the Bible's story line”³

E. Sphere Sovereignty

1. The definition.

- a. “In a Calvinistic sense we understand hereby, that the family, the business, science, art and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the State does” (Lectures, 90).
- b. “In this independent character a special higher authority is of necessity involved and this highest authority we intentionally call – sovereignty in the individual social spheres, in order that it may be sharply and decidedly expressed that these different developments of social life have nothing above themselves but God, and that the State cannot intrude here, and has nothing to command in their domain” (ibid., 91).

2. Impact on politics

- a. The difference between the organic life of society (God-originated by creation) and mechanical character of government (that is to guard among the spheres because of the fall and sin).
- b. Government is to be restricted in its claims of authority over the spheres that do not owe to it anything.
- c. Society is built on the pillarization model instead of social classes (social institutions within the religious/worldview borders).

3. Questions

- a. How is special grace to be present in the spheres?
- b. Who and how is to decide the number and borders of the spheres?

³D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 215.

IV. Summary

“In Kuyper's robust Calvinism I discovered what I had been looking for; a vision of active involvement in public life that would allow me to steer my way between a privatized evangelicalism on the one hand and the liberal Protestant or Catholic approaches to public discipleship on the other hand. I have attempted to walk in this way ever since” (R. Mouw, p. ix).

Suggested Readings:

Bratt J.D. ed., *Abraham Kuyper. A Centennial Reader*, The Paternoster Press: Carlisle, 1998.

Kuyper, A., *Lectures on Calvinism*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1931.

Mouw R.J., *Abraham Kuyper. A Short and Personal Introduction*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2011.

Witten J. Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*, Cambridge Univ. Press: Cambridge 2007.

Wolterstorff N. P. , “Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)” in: *The Teachings of Modern Protestantism on Law, Politics and Human Nature*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2007, pp. 29-98.