



# The worldview of Abraham Kuyper

## Introduction

A few common criticisms of Kuyper's position need to be considered. Not only during his lifetime, but also in terms of his influence within the Reformed community subsequent to his death, Kuyper has been a controversial figure. Reactions to his views range from uncritical praise and loyalty to vigorous and general dissent. To some, Kuyper is a heroic figure whose legacy is an unmixed blessing. To others, Kuyper is an ignoble figure whose legacy is a source of unhappy controversy and compromise among the Reformed churches. To still others, Kuyper is a mixed blessing whose legacy is neither wholly beneficial nor detrimental to the challenges facing the Christian community today.

In my consideration of these common criticisms of Kuyper's worldview, I will not attempt to identify all of Kuyper's critics or give a complete statement of their arguments. Nor will I attempt to provide a complete response to their criticisms of his position. To do so would risk needlessly extending this series of articles on Kuyper's life and legacy. Rather, I will only provide a kind of broad-stroked description of these criticisms together with some preliminary observations regarding their merits or demerits. The fact that I have entitled this part of my consideration of Kuyper's life and legacy, "*answering* criticisms of his worldview," should be enough to indicate that my sympathies lie finally more with Kuyper than with his critics.

## Criticisms of Kuyper's doctrine of the church

This doctrine has been among the most strongly criticized areas of Kuyper's thought. On each of the key elements of Kuyper's doctrine – the church's freedom, the distinction between the church as institute and as organism, and the "pluriformity" of the church – critics of Kuyper have raised serious objections. In order to address these criticisms, I will phrase them in the form of questions and then evaluate their validity.

### ***Was Kuyper a congregationalist?***

One of the distinctive features of Kuyper's doctrine of the church was his vigorous opposition to every illegitimate abuse of church authority, particularly on the part of the "broader" assemblies of the church. In Kuyper's understanding of authority and its exercise in the churches of Jesus Christ, a clear demarcation needs to be made between the authority of the state and of the church. The church stands *alongside* the state as an institution of God with a particular task and calling. The state, therefore, has no right to interfere directly in the affairs of the church or attempt to govern its activities. Within the circle of the church itself, Kuyper was equally insistent upon the *relative autonomy of each local church under the authority of Christ, as this authority is exercised through the officebearers*. The only universal bishop of Christ's church on earth is Christ Himself. All other officebearers owe their calling and authority to Christ Himself, who calls them to their respective offices within the local congregation and directly grants them the responsibility to oversee the congregation's life and worship.

In Kuyper's doctrine of the church, therefore, the authority exercised by the broader assemblies (classis and synod) is a *delegated* authority. Whereas the authority of the local church council is *original*, the authority of the broader assemblies is *delegated to them and is to be exercised according to the requirements and limitations spelled out in the church order to which the churches commonly consent*. The authority of broader assemblies must be carefully bounded so that the original authority of the local church council is not compromised. For Kuyper, this understanding of the original authority of the local church councils was enshrined in the confessions of the

Reformation and the original church order of the Dutch Reformed churches. It also constituted a necessary hedge against the tendency of the church assemblies (and their officers) to exceed their legitimate authority. The only way to preserve the blessing of Christ's rule in His churches over against the tyranny of church hierarchy and unrestrained exercise of authority is to guard carefully the *direct* rule of Christ over the local congregation.

Now, it has been alleged that this view of the freedom of the local churches from church hierarchy represents a departure from the historic Reformed view of the *connection* between the local churches through the broader assemblies of classis and synod. According to this criticism, Kuyper's stress upon the relative autonomy of the local churches can only lead to a spirit of independentism and congregationalism. The weight of gravity in Kuyper's view of the church shifts inordinately to the local church, so that the mutual responsibility and answerability of the churches to one another is seriously compromised. Kuyper's doctrine of the church does not do justice, then, to the unity and the catholicity of the church, since it permits the local churches under Christ to exercise an authority that is unrestrained by the principles of the connection and inter-relationship of the churches as members of the one church of Christ.

Undoubtedly, a full answer to this objection would require a study of the history of the Reformed churches and their form of church government, including the provisions of the church orders that have been used by them. In my judgment however, Kuyper's understanding represents a proper adherence to the historic Reformed principle that Christ directly rules over the churches through their officebearers. Kuyper's view is neither *congregationalist*, where the original authority resides in the congregation's members, nor *hierarchicalist*, where the original authority resides in the broader assemblies and their officers.

Though Kuyper did not concede any original authority to the broader assemblies, he did acknowledge their authority, as delegated and acknowledged by the churches in common, to be a real authority which obligates the churches to be accountable and responsible to each other. What Kuyper opposed was the idea that the broader assemblies could *impose their will upon the local churches and councils* beyond the limits set forth in the church order, or irrespective of their adherence to the Scriptures and the confessions. For Kuyper, should a broader assembly abuse its authority by contravening the teaching of the Scriptures or the confessions, or by exceeding the boundaries of its delegated authority as stipulated in the church order, the local church council was not obligated simply to submit to its decisions. Every church remains free under Christ to be subject to His Word alone. Furthermore, should churches join together in a communion of churches (denomination or federation), they should do so on the basis of a commonly held confession and acknowledged church order. Where no such common confession or practice of church government exists, there would be no legitimate basis for the kind of interrelationship among the churches that properly expresses the unity of the church.

In these emphases, Kuyper did not err or stray from the line of the Reformation. In my judgment, he might better be regarded as a true champion of biblical principles of church polity that require continued emphasis among the Reformed churches today.

### ***Did Kuyper belittle the "institutional" church?***

Kuyper's distinction between the church as *institute* and as *organism* has often been regarded as slighting or belittling the centrality of the institutional church. Because Kuyper stressed the importance of the believer's calling as a member of the church as organism, it has been argued that he laid the basis for a limited view of the importance of the church as institute. In support of this criticism, some have argued that among "neo-Calvinist" followers of Kuyper the institutional church is viewed as largely subordinate and inferior to the church as organism.

Kuyper sought by this distinction to emphasize the calling of Christian believers *beyond the boundaries of the institutional church*. However important and central may be the ministry of the church as institute, the calling of Christian believers is more comprehensive and life-embracing than their calling as members of a local congregation. In marriage, family, education, business, politics and the like, Christian believers, who do not cease in these areas to be members of Christ and partakers of His anointing, are called to offer themselves as living sacrifices in thankful

obedience to Christ. They do not live or fulfill their calling in these spheres under the direct and immediate authority of the institutional church. Though the gospel of the kingdom which the church is called to minister speaks to all of life, it would be an inappropriate overstepping of boundaries on the part of the church as institute to enter directly into these areas of life.

Thus, Kuyper never intended this distinction to belittle the importance of the institutional church. Rather, it was intended by Kuyper to maintain the church's *focus* upon the administration of the keys of the kingdom on the one hand, and to encourage Christian believers to take their confession of Christ's lordship into the marketplace of life on the other hand. When the church, for example, presumes to have expertise and authority to directly intervene in the affairs of the state, the particular calling of the church to preach the gospel and to nurture her members in the faith is inevitably neglected. The church then becomes a kind of "political force" and the authenticity of the gospel is compromised by its identification with a particular political party, cause or figure. Alternatively, when believers who are members of the church are encouraged to view their calling as Christians as *restricted* to their activity as members of the institutional church, the legitimate labor of Christ's members in a variety of areas of life is called into question. In both of these respects, Kuyper's distinction between the church as institute and as organism is useful, even necessary.

However, perhaps to avoid misunderstanding, it would be preferable to use different language than that used by Kuyper to make this distinction. It has been suggested, for example, that it might be better to restrict the term "church" to its common use in the Bible. In the Scriptures, the most common use for the term "church" is as a reference to the local congregation of Christ's people. This congregation or church is under the care of Christ Himself, supervised by those officebearers (ministers, elders, deacons) whom He charges with a distinct calling, and who are responsible to administer the means of grace. This is what the Scriptures most commonly mean when they speak of the "church." It is what Kuyper meant to refer to when he spoke of the church as "institute."

When he spoke of the church as "organism," Kuyper meant to refer to the broader and more comprehensive calling of those who, as members of Christ's church, are also *citizens of the kingdom* of God. As citizens of the kingdom of God, believers have a calling in every area of life to serve and honor their King. Believers are to seek the honor of Christ not only in the church but also in all of the areas of life claimed by Christ. Rather than speaking of the church as organism, then, it would be better to speak of the institutional church and the kingdom of God. Though the institutional church plays a foundational role by administering the gospel of the kingdom, those who are members of the church are called as *citizens of the kingdom* to serve Christ in every area of His dominion. The distinction which Kuyper describes between the church as institute and the church as organism might just as well be expressed as a distinction between the *instituted church* on the one hand, as the central instrument of the kingdom, and the many facets of *kingdom life* on the other hand.

### ***Should the "pluriformity" of the church be encouraged?***

Kuyper had an aversion to the uniformity of modern life with its "blurring of the boundaries" between differing kinds of creaturely institutions, spheres of life, and the like. Kuyper was a lifelong opponent of the tendency of modern thought toward *monism*, the worldview that failed to distinguish properly between the Triune God and the creation, and between the diversity of kinds of creatures which God has created. The bland uniformity and commonness of modern life – in its architecture, dress, music, business, politics, education – was something Kuyper viewed with grave suspicion. Nothing was more repugnant to Kuyper in politics and in the church, for example, than a kind of *forced and artificial unity or oneness*.

Something of this emphasis upon diversity came to expression in Kuyper's rather expansive doctrine of the "pluriformity" of the church. Appealing to the diversity of creation, the variety of circumstances within God's providence, and the limitations of human knowledge and understanding, Kuyper articulated a doctrine of church pluriformity that *approved the diversity of churches and denominations*. Rather than being regarded as a *sinful deflection from the biblical standard of unity among the churches*, Kuyper regarded the diversity and pluriformity of the churches to be a kind of necessary, even inevitable expression of such factors as the diversity of

creation and the variety of God's providence. That the churches are pluriform in confession, in church order, in practice, and in so many other ways, is not something to be viewed with dismay or regret, but with benign approval.

Though there are elements of Kuyper's doctrine of the pluriformity of the church that have a measure of validity, in the main Kuyper's doctrine represents an illegitimate approval of the church's sinful diversity or pluriformity. While it is one thing to emphasize the catholicity of the church and to resist the sectarian temptation to restrict the true church only to the purest churches Kuyper's recognition of the church's pluriformity does achieve these ends – it is quite another thing to endorse the actual pluriformity of the church in the way Kuyper does. By appealing to the motifs of creational diversity, providential circumstances, and the limitations upon any church's grasp of the wholeness of truth, Kuyper grants to the existing (*de facto*) diversity of the church a kind of normalcy (*de iure*). However, the actual pluriformity of the church is more often the product of sinful departure from the standards of God's Word than it is the benign result of the inevitable diversity of human life and organization.

As a result, Kuyper's doctrine of the church's pluriformity glosses over as rather insignificant, the real differences of confession and practice that obtain between those churches that claim to be true churches of Jesus Christ. Rather than encouraging a biblical practice of ecumenicity, based upon efforts to reach a *true unity of confession and practice among the churches*, Kuyper's doctrine tends to lend tacit approval to the existence of a multiplicity of different churches with widely varying confessions and practices. It grants normative standing to an actual state of affairs with which believers ought not to be at peace, namely, the sadly divided and fragmented character of the church of Jesus Christ in our day.

Were Kuyper only to have insisted that the church is catholic, comprising a great number of churches, some more pure, some less pure, he would have been on surer ground. Likewise, were he only to have maintained that denominational or federative union among the churches requires genuine unity of confession and practice, not an artificial appearance of unity through organizational conformity, his view could be defended. However, Kuyper meant much more than this in his defense of the pluriformity of the church. To the extent that his doctrine went beyond legitimate emphases such as these, it does not measure up to the Scriptural norm for the unity of the church of Jesus Christ.

### **Sphere-sovereignty or sphere-responsibility?**

One of the most distinctive and provocative elements of Kuyper's worldview was his articulation of the principle of "sphere-sovereignty." According to Kuyper, the various spheres of life within God's creation stand under the universal sovereignty of God. God's sovereign authority is administered through a diversity of human instruments and created institutions, each of which has its own peculiar task and authority under God.

Thus, in the development of his political theory, Kuyper insisted that the state is directly instituted of God, granted the authority and power of the sword, to provide for a just ordering of society and the preservation of peace. The state's authority is not under that of church, nor is the authority of the church under that of the state. Each is "sovereign in its own sphere," but subject to the direct sovereignty of God who instituted the state and the church for distinct callings and tasks. Similarly, the other spheres of life – marriage, family, school, business, economics, art – have been instituted by God and given a specific mandate or task.

When Kuyper used the language of "sovereignty" in this understanding of the diversity of life spheres, it was not his purpose to suggest that these areas of life are autonomous or a law unto themselves. On the contrary: it was his purpose to stress their accountability and responsibility to God who called them into existence for a particular task or service within His kingdom. Nor was it Kuyper's intention to suggest that these various spheres of life are to exist in a kind of isolation the one from the other, without any kind of mutual interaction or accountability. Kuyper acknowledged a kind of sphere *universality* in which each of the various life spheres was accountable or responsible to the other, *so far as its peculiar task was concerned*. The state, for example, has a

responsibility not only to protect the freedom of the church to fulfill her calling, but also to require that the church contribute to the legitimate ordering of human life. If a church building were to flaunt local fire codes or engage directly in political activities, then the state would be obligated, in order to fulfill its divine mandate, to insist upon compliance with those laws that serve the interests of public safety or the distinct calling of the church. The sovereignty of these life spheres only underscored their freedom from interference on the part of other spheres *in their internal affairs and responsibilities*.

One criticism that has often been registered against Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty is that it too sharply separates between the various life spheres. By speaking of sphere *sovereignty*, Kuyper lent support to a view of the relation between the spheres of life that is radically pluralistic. The responsibility of the various spheres of life to each other is either minimized or rejected altogether. As a result, the different spheres of life become a kind of "law unto themselves," immune from criticism or responsibility to other legitimate authorities. Sphere-sovereignty gives rise, accordingly, to a kind of vision for life that isolates the various spheres of life from each other. Mutual accountability is denied between these spheres of life and high walls are erected between them.

One of the areas where this criticism is most often heard relates to the matter of Christian education and Christian schools. If the Christian school, for example, is a sovereign sphere, neither an organ of the church (non-parochial) nor an extension of the home, then it is no longer accountable in any meaningful way to the authority of the church or of the home. Furthermore, because the calling of the Christian school is quite specific, the constitution that governs its affairs can be neither the confessions of the church nor the aspirations of the parents of the children. The school's constitution is an educational creed, not a church creed. When parents entrust their children to the instruction of teachers in such a school, the expertise and calling of the teachers is such that parents are not to interfere directly in the areas of the school's or the teachers' competence.

For those who express this criticism of Kuyper's doctrine of sphere-sovereignty, the common complaint is that the Christian schools and their teachers are encouraged to ignore the concerns of the church – that instruction in the Christian school be distinctively Reformed, for example, in accord with the creeds of the church – and to treat the concerns of parents as a kind of illegitimate intrusion into the affairs of the school. As a result, Kuyper's view of sphere sovereignty has the practical effect of throwing up barriers between the church and home on the one hand, and the Christian school on the other. To use rather colloquial language, the Christian school is able to "thumb its nose" at the church and home when they express directly their disapproval regarding the policies and practices of the school.

This is a potent criticism of Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty, and it certainly should be admitted that in some cases this principle has been used to isolate the various spheres of life from each other. There are no doubt, instances where some Christian school administrators and teachers have sought refuge in the principle of sphere sovereignty so as to avoid their accountability to the church and the home. The critical question, however, is whether this kind of practice represents a genuine application of Kuyper's principle.

I would argue that it does not, but rather it represents a serious corruption of Kuyper's position. When Kuyper spoke of sphere sovereignty, it was not his purpose to isolate these spheres from each other or refuse any legitimate accountability on the part of one life sphere to another. Certainly, it was not his position that the church's creeds have no authority over the instruction that takes place in a Christian school, least of all a Christian school established by an association of parents who subscribe to such creeds. Nor was it his position that when parents through an association establish a Christian school, they cease to exercise authority over the functioning of the school. Kuyper was well aware of and advocated the principle of what is called *in loco parentis*, that is, that the Christian school teacher serves "in the place of the parents" as one entrusted with a specific responsibility to teach in accord with the convictions of the parents. He was also keenly aware of the fact that the Reformed confessions must give direction and shape to the formation of a Reformed Christian school.

Kuyper emphasized the principle of sphere sovereignty in order to maintain that the church, the home and the school, have distinctive tasks under God to whom they are ultimately accountable.

The church is not the home, nor is the home the school. Each is different and has its own calling within the kingdom of God. Each is finally *responsible* to God and, for that reason, to the other so far as their respective callings are concerned. For this reason, Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty might better be termed a principle of sphere *responsibility*. Though relatively free from inappropriate interference by other spheres, each legitimate sphere of human life is *directly responsible* to God for its calling and authority. Once it is recognized that Kuyper's primary emphasis lies upon each sphere's accountability to God, it should become clear that Kuyper's purpose was not to grant to any sphere of life a kind of radical independence or freedom from responsibility to other legitimate, God-ordained authorities.

Having considered some of the more common criticisms of Kuyper's doctrine of the church and his principle of sphere sovereignty, we have yet to consider those criticisms that relate to Kuyper's understanding of the antithesis and of common grace. Here too Kuyper's viewpoint has evoked rather different responses. Indeed, something of the complexity of Kuyper's thought is evident in his, emphasis upon both the antithesis and common grace. Among those influenced by Kuyper, quite different approaches and viewpoints have been adopted, depending upon the role and prominence of one or another of these principles.<sup>1</sup> Some have enthusiastically embraced Kuyper's insistence upon the antithesis between faith and unbelief as it affects every area of life. As a result, their policy has been to vigorously separate from all illegitimate entanglements with the world in the area of worldly amusements, organizations and institutions and so on. Others have more affinity to Kuyper's view of common grace and have adopted, accordingly, a more affirmative policy toward the world. Each of these policies can easily find support in Kuyper's writings.

### **Criticism of Kuyper's view of the antithesis**

One of the keynotes of Kuyper's life was that of the *antithesis* between faith and unbelief. This antithesis between the truth and the lie, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of this world, cuts through all of life and profoundly influences human life at every level and in all of its expressions. There is no neutral place so far as the recognition and service of Christ as King is concerned. Whether it be in marriage, the home and family, the business enterprise, the school or academic institution, the political party, the labor union — in all the areas and spheres of life one either works "*for the King*" (*pro Rege*) or *against* Him.

For this reason, one of the distinctive fruits of Kuyper's reforming activity in the Netherlands was the promotion of distinctively Christian institutions whose formative principles were based upon the Christian worldview. Not only in the Netherlands, but also in North America, those who have followed Kuyper have sought to establish *separate Christian organizations* in various life spheres.

Kuyper's influence was farreaching in the promotion of, for example, Christian schools at every level (from primary school to university), Christian labor unions, and Christian political associations. The consequence of this emphasis is known today in the Netherlands as a process of *verzuiling* ("pillarization") in which the whole of society is structured along ideological lines with different groups (Reformed, Catholic, secularist) developing separate institutions to express their particular principles.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the conflicts within many Reformed communities regarding the subject of "worldly amusements" and the dangers of world-conformity were the product, at least in part, of a Kuyperian emphasis upon separation from all illegitimate entanglements with the principles and practices of the world.

Kuyper's stress upon the antithesis and its implications for the separate development of Christian institutions has been criticized in several ways. One criticism often voiced is that Kuyper's emphasis encourages a kind of *isolationism* in which the Christian community develops a radically separate form of existence in each sphere of life. By insisting upon the separate development of Christian institutions in every area of life, Kuyper's worldview encourages *pluralism* within human society that unnecessarily and dangerously isolates differing communities from each other. As a consequence, there is little place for any bonds of community or society that bridge the differences between ideological or religious communities. This can lead, say Kuyper's critics, to a kind of isolation from the world on the part of the Christian community that will be counter-productive to any leavening influence within society. Furthermore, within the academic sphere, Kuyper's stress upon

*two kinds of science* can lead to an obscurantism within the community of Christian scholars, one which rejects any accountability to or interaction with the broader world of scholarship.

A different, though related, criticism of Kuyper's insistence upon the antithetical development of distinctively Christian institutions is the charge that it often produces an *unrealistic*, even *triumphalistic*, social policy. Advocates of Kuyper's vision have often maintained that — no matter how impractical it might prove to be — the Christian community must establish its own organizations in order to be faithful in the service of Christ. Nothing less than a Christian political party or a Christian labor union, for instance, will answer to the need to honor Christ's lordship, respectively, in politics and labor relations. Critics of Kuyper's vision frequently argue that this approach is naïve at best, grandiose at worse. It assumes that Christian believers not only can form such organizations, but also can expect them to make a real difference in society. But it is hardly possible in a country like the United States that a Christian political party could be formed that would have any meaningful impact upon the formation and implementation of public policy. Nor is it likely that — in spite of the brave talk about the *transformation* of this or that dimension of modern life — these efforts will make any appreciable difference in the patterns of western secular society. Often, it is alleged, these efforts result more in *being conformed* to than *transforming* the world.

It is difficult to respond to these criticisms of Kuyper's emphasis upon the antithesis and its implications for Christian practice. Some of them do not so much address Kuyper's position as distortions or one-sided approaches on the part of those who claim to be working "in his line." Others represent a lack of appreciation for the biblical teaching that the believer and the believing community are to be *separated from* the world in order to be consecrated to the Lord's service. Still others reflect the conviction that the transformation of individual believers is a more appropriate policy than the formation of Christian organizations which often become an obstacle to real transformation.<sup>3</sup>

However, in some cases Kuyper's emphasis may produce the kinds of ill fruit described. Ironically, the separation from the world which Kuyper advocated on the basis of his doctrine of the antithesis can become the occasion for a kind of isolationism which cuts the Christian community off from any meaningful (including evangelistic)<sup>4</sup> engagement with the world. This is ironic in view of Kuyper's emphasis upon separation from the world *for the sake of a distinctively Christian practice in the world*. Kuyper did not intend the formation of Christian institutions to be the means of escape from engagement in legitimate worldly vocations. Rather, he intended these institutions to be the means of expressing and exhibiting Christ's lordship over all of life in the various life spheres. The kind of isolationist practice that characterizes some advocates of Kuyper's principle of the antithesis represents a distorted and one-sided appropriation of Kuyper's insights. This practice often reflects an appreciation for Kuyper's emphasis upon the antithesis, but a rejection of his emphasis upon common grace.

One legitimate aspect of these criticisms of Kuyper's understanding of the antithesis relates to the *different situation* Kuyper faced in the Netherlands at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. What Kuyper advocated and encouraged in terms of the separate development of Christian institutions in the Netherlands in this period is often impractical in North America at the end of the twentieth century. This is not a concession to a kind of pragmatism that measures what is proper by what is practical. But it is a recognition that there were unique circumstances and developments in the Netherlands during Kuyper's lifetime that cannot be replicated in North America in our day. Though the principles Kuyper articulated are of continuing significance, the policies that these principles recommend may be somewhat different. Though the formation of separate Christian organizations, where this is feasible and permitted, may be a preferred means to express the lordship of Jesus Christ in different areas of life, alternative means may in some cases have to be found by the Christian community today.<sup>5</sup>

### **Common grace and "positive" Calvinism**

It is fitting that I should reserve to the last the doctrine of common grace as Kuyper developed it. No feature of Kuyper's thought has been the subject of more sustained reflection or severe criticism than his understanding of common grace. No feature of Kuyper's thought has provoked

greater dissension among his critics. On the one hand, there are those who receive Kuyper's doctrine of common grace as an important "corrective" or antidote to his at times extremist development of the principle of the antithesis. According to these critics, the doctrine of common grace blunts the sharp edges of Kuyper's view of the antithesis, preventing the kind of isolationism and obscurantism of which I spoke in the preceding section. On the other hand, there are those who regard Kuyper's development of this theme as a kind of "Trojan horse" within the camp of a Christian worldview. By developing and expanding the doctrine of common grace beyond anything known previously in the Reformed tradition, Kuyper opened the door to the very thing his emphasis upon the antithesis ought to have nailed shut – a policy of *conformity* to the world.

One of the remarkable features of the discussion of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace is the prominent role this doctrine has played within the (Dutch) Reformed community in North America. Students of the history of the Reformed churches in North America are familiar with the debates regarding common grace, for example, that troubled the Christian Reformed Church in the early decades of the twentieth century and led to the formation of the Protestant Reformed churches.<sup>6</sup> Though I will not enter into the history and course of these debates, these ecclesiastical developments reflect the intense and ongoing debate that Kuyper's doctrine of common grace has evoked.

Among those who appreciate Kuyper's doctrine of common grace, it is generally acknowledged that this doctrine allowed Kuyper to account for the possibility and propriety of engagement with the world at every level. Because common grace expressed God's continued goodness toward the creation in upholding, maintaining and directing its life and development, Christians were obligated to continue to serve God within the full range of human life and culture. Because God by His common grace hindered and prevented the full expression of sinful rebellion in human life and culture, much that was good and praiseworthy could be found and appreciated by the Christian community in its use of the products of human culture. Common grace, according to Kuyper, accounted for the presence of institutions (the state), the progress of science and scholarship, the arts, and the like, which Christian believers are obligated to receive with gratitude and use in the service of Christ. However corrupted or distorted through human perversity and sinfulness, these fruits of God's common grace in the preservation and development of the creation are not to be despised or wholly rejected. Common grace, therefore, provided Kuyper with a basis for encouraging Christian activity *in* the world rather than *flight* from the world. This doctrine provided the kind of balance Kuyper needed to prevent his understanding of the antithesis from spinning off in the direction of the kind of isolationism described in the preceding section.

Those who have little appreciation for Kuyper's doctrine of common grace view this doctrine in an entirely different light. According to these critics, Kuyper not only failed to show any meaningful *connection* between his understanding of "particular" and "common" grace, but he also provided a basis by means of this doctrine for emasculating the antithesis of its power. By expanding the doctrine of common grace, Kuyper laid the foundation for the kind of *positive* Calvinism that has little eye for the antithesis between faith and unbelief, but a keen eye for all the ways the kingdom of Christ and of the world converge. This positive Calvinism finds much of the culture and scholarship of the world to be congenial to the Christian faith. It looks eagerly for common ground with the world and risks thereby accommodation to the allurements of worldly success and approval. Though it still speaks of the need to "transform" all of life, its practical policy is one of "conformity" to the dictates of contemporary culture and scholarship. Rather than seeking to distance the Christian community from the world's patterns of thought and life, the mind of common grace looks upon the world and its products as benign and nonthreatening.

That Kuyper's doctrine of common grace could give rise to such widely divergent responses ought to caution against too simplistic an evaluation of his position. However, it is striking to notice how Kuyper is criticized by some for emphasizing too much the antithesis. This criticism maintains that Kuyper's doctrine of the antithesis can only lead to isolationism and radical separation from all worldly engagements.

Others also criticize him for emphasizing too much the doctrine of common grace. This criticism then maintains that Kuyper's doctrine of common grace can only lead to world conformity and



accommodation to sinful human culture and scholarship. Two more conflicting sorts of criticism could hardly be imagined!

At the risk of being regarded as too much a "Kuyperian," I would argue that these criticisms of Kuyper represent a kind of one-sided caricature of Kuyper's worldview. Neither of them answers to the complexity and breadth of Kuyper's full position, a position that resists playing off the antithesis against common grace as though these were inherently at odds. No doubt many of Kuyper's followers have embraced one or another aspect of his thought – some emphasizing the Kuyper of the antithesis, others emphasizing the Kuyper of common grace. Kuyper's legacy includes not only those who are sometimes termed "antitheticals," but also those who are sometimes termed "positive" Calvinists. Each of these approaches can appeal to Kuyper against the other. But in so doing they confirm that Kuyper's world-view was more complicated and rich than their own, one-sided worldview which offers, dare I use the term, a more "simplistic" handling of the issues Kuyper was addressing.

Now this does not mean that Kuyper's doctrine of common grace is wholly satisfactory. There is some real ambiguity in Kuyper's doctrine on the question of the relation between particular and common grace. In some of his formulations, Kuyper so emphasizes the working of God's common grace that it seems to have a completely independent significance, unrelated to the purpose and working of God's special grace in the salvation of His people.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Kuyper does not always carefully articulate the significance of common grace as it provides a *context* for the accomplishment of God's redemptive purposes. Nor does he provide an adequate account of the kind of interrelation that exists between the principle of the antithesis and the doctrine of common grace. It is not surprising, therefore, that students of Kuyper have been able to take hold of one or another of these emphases while rejecting or depreciating the other.

## **Conclusion**

When I first consented to the request of the editors of *The Outlook* to write an article or two on Abraham Kuyper, I had no idea that this project would grow into a series of articles. However, now that I have come to the conclusion of this survey of Kuyper's life and legacy, I am struck by how much more could be written! Much of what I have written has been rather general and abbreviated. Many things demand further discussion and reflection. But I will have to resist the temptation to do so here.

It has not been my purpose in this series to provide a complete account of Kuyper's life. Nor have I provided anything like an adequate evaluation and critique of his articulation of a Christian worldview. Rather, I have written this series in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Kuyper's famous *Stone Lectures* at Princeton Theological Seminary, with the hope that it will contribute in a small way to a renewal of interest in Kuyper's life and legacy.

As the Christian community in North America, especially the Reformed community, confronts the challenges of the present day, Kuyper's writings and ideas represent a rich resource of biblical and Reformed insight. They deserve to be read and pondered, as the challenge of presenting the Christian worldview confronts the forces and currents of contemporary culture. If withdrawal from the world and retreat from the challenge of modern scholarship are not viable options for us – as I believe they are not – then we have a great deal of hard work to do in carefully studying the resources of our tradition and articulating the catholic claims of the biblical worldview in our time.

For this reason, Kuyper's legacy is not so much the ideas or principles he articulated, important and useful as they may continue to be. Nor is Kuyper's legacy the extraordinariness of his life and labors. We do not pay homage to any person.

Rather, Kuyper's legacy lies in his *insistence that we bring every thought and work captive to the obedience of Christ*. There can be no rest for the Christian or the Christian community in relentlessly seeking to love the true and living God with all of our soul, mind and strength. This means not only that every thought be brought captive to Christ, but that every deed be tested by

the standard of God's kingdom and its righteousness. The Triune Redeemer who is the Creator of all things demands (and deserves) nothing less than that from us.

Kuyper's legacy remains best expressed in his well-known words, spoken on the occasion of the founding of the Free University: "(N)o 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!*'"

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<sup>1</sup> The Protestant Reformed churches, for example, have historically embraced Kuyper's insistence upon the antithesis but rejected wholeheartedly his development of the doctrine of common grace.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview*, pp. 2-8, for a brief description of this process in Dutch society and its connection with Kuyper's influence.

<sup>3</sup> This last objection to Kuyper's promotion of Christian institutions does not seem very significant. The failure of an institution to fulfill its promise (e.g. a Christian school) might simply call for renewed effort to improve the institution or form another, similar institution. Though no-one should place their trust in such institutions, they are often a helpful means of acknowledging the lordship of Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup> In this connection, it is interesting to note that Kuyper does not have much to offer in terms of the *evangelistic* and *missionary* calling of the church. Kuyper lived in a world very different from the one many of us face in North America at the end of the twentieth century. The terms often used to describe the contemporary situation, "post-modern" and "post-Christian," would not describe the situation in which Kuyper worked. Whereas the Christian community today in the West faces a new *missionary* situation, Kuyper simply assumes the presence of a Reformed community of churches. He does not directly address the question of how the gospel should be communicated to a culture that has turned away from the Christian faith.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in some circumstances "home schooling" may be preferable to the Christian school as a means of providing Christian education for the children of Christian parents. These circumstances could include: the absence of a good existing Christian school; inadequate financial resources for tuition; the strength and aptitude of the child's parents for teaching at various levels; the unique circumstances of the child; political, cultural or legal obstacles to the establishment of a separate Christian school and others. It should also be noted that there might be circumstances where the preferred policy for the Christian community is one of *withdrawal* from involvement in some areas of modern life.

<sup>6</sup> See James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 37-54, 93-122; and Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed Thought and Experience in a New World* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1973), pp. 68-131. Bratt and Zwaanstra describe in considerable detail the debates within the Reformed churches (the Christian Reformed especially) in North America regarding Kuyper's views and the doctrine of common grace. Both of these authors argue that different sectors of the Reformed community tended to emphasize one or another of Kuyper's principles. Those who emphasized the antithesis are termed "antithetical" Calvinists by Bratt and "separatist" Calvinists by Zwaanstra. Those who emphasized the doctrine of common grace are termed "positive" Calvinists by Bratt and "American" Calvinists by Zwaanstra. Though these labels and party designations tend to oversimplify matters, they do help to sort out some of the debates and differences of emphasis that characterized conflicting groups within the Dutch Reformed community of churches.

<sup>7</sup> See S. U. Zuidema, "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper," (in his *Communication and Confrontation* (Toronto: Wedge, 1971), pp. 52-105, for a thorough evaluation and criticism of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace. Students of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace generally acknowledge that it remains an unfinished item on the agenda of Reformed theology. Cf. Edward Heerema, *Letter to My Mother* (Freeman, S.D: Pine Hill Press, 1990), pp. 5-22. Heerema describes the doctrine of common grace as "unfinished business" so far as the history of the Christian Reformed Church is concerned.