



Conscious Christianity

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF ABRAHAM KUYPER

LAST YEAR Calvin College history professor James Bratt published a definitive new biography of Dutch theologian, statesman, and educator Abraham Kuyper called *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Eerdmans 2013). Banner staff recently sat down with him to discuss the man and his influence on the church today.

Banner: This is a big book (499 pages!) that must have taken a long time to research and write. What made you take it on?

JB: It was partly that I had been raised in the Christian Reformed Church, and few people have had more influence on this church than Abraham Kuyper. So I was exploring my own roots. In addition, my graduate school advisor, Sydney Ahlstrom, who knew more about American religious history than almost anybody, read the chapter about Kuyper in my dissertation way back in the 1970s and was quite struck by it. He said that there had never been anyone quite like Kuyper on the American scene and that I should write a biography of him some day. So eventually I did.

Banner: Let's get back to that in a minute. First, can you give a quick snapshot of Kuyper's life?

JB: That's a real challenge, since Kuyper had a long career in many different enterprises. But here are the basics:

He was born in a minister's family in 1837 and received a first-rate education in Leiden. At university he turned against

the generic conservative religion in which he had been raised. But then, while finishing his doctorate, he experienced an evangelical conversion.

In his first pastorate in a small country town, he turned further toward rock-hard Calvinist orthodoxy—only he wanted to update its message for the conditions of modern life. Those conditions included the intellectual challenges of science and secular philosophy and the social conditions of rapid communications, industrialization, and democratic politics. All these things traditionally minded Reformed people had opposed or were afraid of. Kuyper devoted his career to showing that Calvinism was more relevant now than ever, that it offered precisely the healing solutions to modernity's many problems.

Banner: So how did he do that?

JB: He served two more parishes in the big cities of Utrecht and Amsterdam—and there he got intensely involved in the big question of the times: mandatory public education. This led him to start his own newspaper, run for political office, and eventually found a Calvinistic university to educate leaders for his growing movement. Likewise, he organized a separate Christian political party and led thousands of orthodox Calvinist members out of the national Dutch Reformed Church into their own independent denomination.

Once in politics, Kuyper had to give up pastoral ministry, so he spent the prime of his life (1880-1900) as a journalist, political party chieftain, scholar, and professor of theology at his Free University.

Banner: He eventually became prime minister of the Netherlands, right?

JB: Right. He had championed the broadening of voting rights all along. Plus, he forged a bold coalition with the Calvinists' ancient political enemies on the Roman Catholic side. That took him into the prime minister's office from 1901 to 1905, where he hoped to bring in a full agenda of progressive change compatible with Christian values on everything from education to health care, colonial policy, and labor relations. That was short-circuited by his defeat for reelection in 1905. After that he took on a senior statesman role—but not very gracefully. His final years were marked by lots of in-fighting with the rising generation of leaders in his own movement. He was gravely shaken by the outbreak and conduct of World War I and died in 1920.

Banner: A full and active life, to say the least! What held it all together for him? What was the central message that inspired and sustained his followers?

JB: He called them to live out their core conviction as Reformed believers: that God is Lord of *all* things, and that we live unto God's glory. Plus he showed them that, in the modern world, living by these convictions meant more than being faithful in the traditional areas of church, family, and personal life. It entailed politics and higher education, too; it meant paying close attention to how "God's sovereignty" applied to labor conditions in factories, international trade, the claims of rival ideologies and visions for society. It meant revisiting and holding yourself accountable to the core principle of loving your neighbor as yourself in a new world where you suddenly had a wider expanse of neighbors living in unprecedented conditions.

Banner: His movement's slogan was "being Christian in all areas of life."

JB: Right. And it's come down to us today as being "agents of renewal," "seeking shalom," and so forth. On top of that, Kuyper regularly repeated that, while the strange new modern world had plenty of features to cause fear, it also offered plenty of opportunities for this holistic Christian witness. Ultimately, God remains in charge and provides for those who seek God's will, even in uncharted territory.

Banner: How would the ordinary believer set out to do this?

JB: Through the traditional means of worship, prayer, and Bible study. But also by paying active attention to national and world affairs. Kuyper wanted believers to follow the news and read the studies on society and culture and economics that were coming out of the Free University faculty. All of this,

furthermore, had to be framed by a comprehensive and consistent "Christian worldview." Kuyper was big on boring down to first principles—uncovering the unspoken assumptions we bring to our thinking and practice. He wanted his followers to become *conscious* of these and conform them more and more to biblical principles and the "ordinances" (laws) that he saw stemming out of God's original creation of the world.

Banner: Sounds like the old catechism lesson about special and general revelation.

JB: Right. Kuyper pushed people to apply those sources of teaching rigorously to understand the whole world around them through Christian lenses. It's also important to note that he saw everybody in the world, not just religious believers, as having such a framing grid of presuppositions that organized their thinking and behavior. This is the flip side of "all of life is religious": so-called secular people had, and lived by, their own fundamental commitments. It's not that secular people are "rational" and believers are "faith-based." We're *all* faith-based.

What we're privileged and called to do is bear witness to the presence of God's kingdom among us.

Banner: Well, whose faith wins when there are so many around?

JB: This was a hard message for Kuyper to get across; it took him a while to understand it himself, in fact. But ultimately he said it is not just fair play but God's will that we *not* try to impose our convictions or our rules on people of other faiths by force. His was a *principled pluralism*; it's not just that we can't but we shouldn't want to use the force of law to privilege our convictions. Rather, we try to persuade others that the fruit of Christian convictions will serve the common good that they and we share together. This is possible because of Kuyper's famous and quite expansive concept of *common grace*.

Banner: Can you explain that concept in a nutshell?

JB: That God, though not saving all people, does shed abroad for each and all a restraint of the full effects of sin, plus a capacity for everyone to come to a certain measure of ordinary ("civic") virtue and perceptive truth. Common grace not only makes society possible but makes it possible for Christians usually to live in society alongside people who don't know or outright reject Christian teaching. »

Banner: What happened to full and consistent living out of obedience to our sovereign God?

JB: A tension is what happened! Kuyper talked a fine line—better, oscillated back and forth—between the strong demands of biblical faithfulness and working for incremental change in a positive direction.

Banner: “Common grace” over against “the antithesis,” right?

JB: Sort of. Kuyper said that living as regenerate people would bring us into all kinds of conflict, both in thought and practice, with unregenerate people. In those cases we dig in and testify as to our convictions. But “the antithesis” ultimately runs not between different groups of people but right down the middle of each human heart—of the Christian’s heart as well—in the struggle of the new person a-borning within us against the lure of the “old person” we’re trying to shed. Romans 7, in short.

Banner: Kuyper was a politician. Where would he land on the political spectrum of our day?

JB: Well, to hit the flashpoint of United States politics, he was for compulsory medical insurance with a public option. He would be horrified by the power of banks and finance: “too big to fail,” he would instantly recognize. U.S. Supreme Court decisions on campaign finance? He’d consider that the doom of democracy. On the other hand, he was always suspicious of the “big state,” of government intervening beyond its competence. In short, today—and also in his own day—he would aim at not being defined by the existing spectrum but at rising above it to take a distinctive and consistent Christian position on the issues of the day.

Banner: Can you explain his famous principle of *sphere sovereignty* in this context?

JB: As Kuyper saw it, the various domains of human life—economic, political, educational, religious, etc.—were each endowed by God at creation with their own native genius. They flourish, as does society as a whole, when they are left alone to follow their own compass. Interference by an outside agent tends to push them off course. Kuyper was especially concerned with government intrusion in his day, but we can extend that principle to other problems in our own time. Churches and universities being run as businesses. Diplomacy and economic development being carried out by the military. Everybody obeying the market’s bottom line. These divert people and institutions from their true and healthy purpose in life.

Banner: But people aren’t a collection of different “spheres” or facets. They’re whole people living with other whole people. How did Kuyper deal with that?

JB: By means of his other principle, which hasn’t been noticed as much. Kuyper was a strong *communitarian*. Each individual

has rights and liberties, yes, but society (and churches) must not be regarded as a collection of individuals, he’d say. We find our meaning, our health, our safety, our opportunities as parts of living social bodies. So Kuyper was suspicious not only of “big government” but also of “free market individualism.” He wanted local communities and intermediate institutions empowered over against both of those.

Banner: These are fine-sounding principles. Where could Kuyper’s project go wrong?

JB: Now you’re asking for a whole ‘nother interview! Let me cite three danger spots. First, the oft-repeated mantra that “every square inch” of human existence belongs to God can be invoked to ratify whatever ambition we want to pursue. It’s all “God’s work,” right? Actually, no. What is the strategic necessity of our time and situation? All talents come from God, but how would God have you use that talent for the healing of the nations, to reflect luster back upon the divine giver?

Second, Kuyper’s followers have sometimes imitated his devotion to thinking and activism—head and hands—without remembering that his most common form of writing was the weekly devotional meditation he published in the Sunday religious issue of his paper. Our *hearts* need to regularly draw “Near unto God,” per the title of his most famous collection of these pieces.

Banner: And third?

JB: The third danger is the often-cited trait of “Kuyperian triumphalism.” The idea that we, and we only, fathom the mandates of God, and that our theory and action will bring in the kingdom. Kuyper always knew better than that, though his need to mobilize and sustain a movement sometimes led him to forget. In fact, *we* do not bring in the kingdom. God has already done that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What we do, what we’re privileged and called to do, is bear witness to the presence of that kingdom among us, and so to give those around us—Christian or otherwise—cause to bless the name of the Lord.

Banner: What’s the one take-away you hope readers get from your book?

JB: Not to repeat exactly what Kuyper said and did back then but to use him as a resource and inspiration to imagine how to think and act as Christians in our own time. Kuyper was so perceptive and creative in transforming old principles for new circumstances. What would be the “dynamic equivalent” of that for us today? ■



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