

## Theology and History

*The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* by Vincent E. Bacote. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005. Pp. 172. \$18.99 paper.

In this helpful introduction, Vincent Bacote, assistant professor of Theology at Wheaton College, presents a contemporary contextualized appropriation of Abraham Kuyper's (1837-1920) public theology. The book stems from a personal search for a theological rationale for Christian engagement in the public realm. Frustrated with the lack of political and cultural engagement in the evangelical subculture in which he grew up, Bacote encountered Kuyper while studying at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Reading "Kuyper's text on theology of culture was like breathing some much needed oxygen" (7). The result was a dis-

sertation at Drew University on Kuyper's public theology of culture, here revised in a very accessible semi-popular book. In general terms, the book provides the helpful introduction that it sets out to give, though there are some general shortcomings, such as the lack of engagement with Dutch primary sources.

Bacote is clear about the purpose of the book, which is twofold: to link pneumatology to creation and history, public theology, and the theology of Kuyper; and, in particular, to articulate a contemporary formulation of Kuyperian public theology rooted in the Holy Spirit's role in creation and history (53). The book argues that Kuyper's doctrine of common grace, viewed from a pneumatological perspective, provides a useful impetus for Christian engagement in the public realm. Setting the stage, the first chapter presents a brief overview of contemporary approaches to cosmic pneumatology (Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, Sinclair Ferguson, Colin Gunton, Jürgen Moltmann, Clark Pinnock, and Mark Wallace). Bacote then gives a brief but helpful discussion of Max Stackhouse's apologetic approach and of Ronald Thiemann's confessional approach to public theology, raising the question as to which approach best fits with Abraham Kuyper (47). Bacote concludes that the tension in Kuyper between common grace and antithesis reflects his attempt to combine the apologetic and confessional approaches (53).

The second chapter presents an exposition of the way in which Kuyper put into practice his own public theology, particularly in the period of 1890-1905. Here, Bacote gives a brief analysis of several of Kuyper's most significant public speeches, such as his speech on sphere sovereignty at the opening of the Free University (1880), his "Maranatha" presentation at the 1891 Anti-Revolutionary Party congress, and his well-known foray into "The Social Question and the Christian Religion" at the First Christian Social Congress (1891). As I was not familiar with Kuyper's rectorial address on "The Blurring of the Boundaries" (1892), I read Bacote's commentary here with interest. Kuyper's anti-pantheist discourse seems to me quite relevant in today's immanentist culture. Bacote also comments briefly on Kuyper's well-known Stone Lectures (1898), and he concludes this chapter with reflections on Kuyper's rhetorical skills.

In the third chapter, Bacote comes to the heart of his book: "The Spirit of Kuyper's Theology." Here, he discusses "the implicit relationship between common grace and Kuyper's doctrine of the Holy Spirit's work in creation" (91). In other words, Bacote is concerned to trace the relationship among cosmic pneumatology, common grace, and public theology. He begins by presenting a clear overview of Kuyper's understanding of common grace (tracing it back to John Calvin), followed by a discussion of some of the criticism that has been leveled against this notion. Interestingly, it is only in the last pages of this chapter that Bacote actually discusses Kuyper's view on the role of the Spirit in creation (112-16). The reason, it seems to me, is that at this crucial point, Bacote has difficulty proving his thesis. His main discussion on Kuyper and common grace (96-112) says a great deal about Jesus Christ as mediator of creation and about his role in common grace, but it (rightly!) does not talk about the Spirit's role

in connection with common grace. In fact, Bacote acknowledges that Kuyper does not specifically make the link: “[T]hough Kuyper’s work on the Spirit clearly reflects the language of common grace, the direct connection is not made in his discussion of common grace” (113). This probably should have been a warning sign. Several times, Bacote is forced to acknowledge that there is merely an “implicit” link in Kuyper between cosmic pneumatology and common grace (91, 114-15). It may be possible to construct such a link theologically, but we have no evidence (at least not in this book) that Kuyper actually created this link. He seems to have consistently based his doctrine of common grace christologically rather than pneumatologically.

In his attempt to “update” Kuyper, the fourth chapter provides an interesting discussion on the public theology of A.A. van Ruler, clearly drawing on insights provided by John Bolt. Again, though, Van Ruler’s focus is Christological and soteriological, not so much pneumatological. As a result, Bacote is forced to make an indirect application of Van Ruler’s approach and to point out six “structural differences” between Christology and pneumatology; the two are quite different from each other (118-33). In defense of Bacote’s approach, it needs to be said that this contrast-and-compare approach does yield some useful insights for a constructive pneumatology. In dialogue with Stan Grenz, Clark Pinnock, and Amos Yong, Bacote then presents his own approach to the link between cosmic pneumatology and public theology (133-39). It seems to me that Bacote could have been more critical here, in particular of Grenz’s willingness to perceive the Spirit’s voice in culture (because culture is hardly a neutral construct, as I am sure Bacote would agree, in true Kuyperian fashion). This is in line with what seems to me an overly tepid way of critiquing various contemporary immanentist pneumatologies (22-39, 151), though I appreciate the insistence that we balance immanence language with language of the indwelling of the Spirit (124-26). I also applaud the balanced way in which Bacote insists, on the one hand, that we should not be afraid to use stewardship language and should avoid pantheist and panentheist approaches (139-44); while, on the other hand, he is clearly aware of the danger of triumphalism in Calvinist thought and insists on the need for epistemic humility (139, 144-48). The last chapter is a brief conclusion, in which Bacote gives one last kick at the can and argues that despite the shortcomings of Kuyper’s public theology, we need a “neo-Kuyperian” appropriation of his theology of common grace and his general public theology (155).

While in some sense this may go beyond reviewing the book, I must express my hesitation about the usefulness of Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace for public theology. While I agree with Bacote that we need a cosmic pneumatology and a strong public theology, I am not so sure that common grace, as set out by Kuyper, is as helpful as Bacote suggests. Kuyper, in his exposition on the nature-grace relationship, relates common grace to nature (with Christ as “mediator of creation”) and relates special grace to “grace” or redemption (with Christ as “mediator of redemption”). While I have no problem acknowl-

edging God's Spirit at work in a cosmic way and also as present among non-Christians, Kuyper's position contains two elements that seem to me problematic. First, for Kuyper common grace (the realm of nature) has to do with "the social side of man's creation in God's image" (103), whether Christian or non-Christian. Common grace has to do with the body, with the visible world, and with world history (99). Common grace touches the realm of the physical world and its concerns, both in the lives of non-Christians *and* in the lives of Christians. Therefore, common grace provides the impetus for Christian scholarship, Christian politics, and Christian social action (107). Kuyper's concern, clearly, is to secure a positive place for the areas of life that he sees as marked by common grace. What he ends up doing, however, is to place most areas of the Christian life beyond the reach of Christ's redemptive work (because common grace is tied only to Christ as "mediator of creation"). It seems to me that this devalues these areas of the Christian life and demotes them to the merely "natural world," untouched by Christ's redemptive work. Thus, Kuyper reintroduces through the back door the very dualism that he is concerned to battle with his notion of common grace. To Kuyper, the body, the visible world, politics, and social action are indeed matters of concern for Christians, because of common grace. Even for Christians these areas of concern are distinct, even separate, from Christ's redemptive work.

This leads me to the second, related, problematic element in Kuyper's notion of common grace. Kuyper's dualism between common and special grace means that common grace receives an end or goal that is completely separate from that of special grace (103-4). As a result, the goal of the areas covered by common grace is always merely an inner-worldly, immanent goal. "The social side of man's creation in God's image," says Kuyper, "has nothing to do with salvation. . . ." (103). Repeatedly, Bacote speaks of common grace as "non-salvific" or "non-redemptive" (e.g., 123, 128). I am not sure how such "teleological immanence" (123) differs from the later scholastic Thomism of Cajetan and Suárez. Are we to think that the created world has its own, immanent telos, separate from the redemptive telos of eternal life? However, if the body belongs to the former, and if politics, culture, etc. all belong to the former, as well, how can they possibly have eternal value? Is not the inevitable result that the immanent telos of the areas covered by common grace will pale in comparison to the telos of the salvation of the human soul? Such a separation runs counter to the very aim of Kuyper's theology of common grace, namely, to provide a positive telos for the body, for the visible world, and for human social existence. The only way to do this is to identify the telos of *all* human activity as eternal life in the kingdom of God. In other words, as Henri de Lubac has reminded us, God has made the world with a supernatural end, not just a natural end. To rephrase Kuyper's famous comment in his inaugural presentation at the opening of the Free University: There isn't a square inch in all of human existence of which Christ, the sovereign Redeemer, doesn't call, "Mine!"

—Hans Boersma