

# Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian<sup>1</sup>

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Klaas Schilder's little book *Christ and Culture* was first published just over a half-century ago. Even though it has been available in an English translation<sup>2</sup> now for a quarter of a century, the book is little known in North America, except in a small circle of Reformed Christians in the Dutch immigrant community. This neglect is unfortunate. Schilder's views on Christ and culture are quite pertinent to present-day discussions in North America regarding the proper mode of Christian involvement in public life. My purpose here, then, is to explore the contemporary relevance of Schilder's thought for the North American context.

## The Scope of "Public"

The phrase *public theology* has come to denote, in recent decades, a rather vital area of discussion in North American theology. To be sure, the agenda of public theology is not composed of entirely new subject matter. North American Christian thinkers have long been concerned with issues that have fallen within the scope of Christian social ethics, and they have also addressed topics of political theology, as well as those matters associated with the church-and-society projects of the World Council of Churches. Of course, these other subdisciplines, especially social ethics, are still very much alive, but even these discussions have begun to be conducted with an awareness that there are broader questions about public life that are not adequately addressed simply by focusing on ethical, political, or church-and-state topics.

This expanded theological focus parallels—and is to some degree influenced by—an emphasis that has taken hold in the broader American academic community in recent decades. Already in the 1970s, the well-known sociologist

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to both Professor Jack De Jong of the Canadian Reformed Theological College and Dr. George Harinck of the Vrije Universiteit for helpful critical comments on an earlier version of this article. A Dutch translation of this essay will appear in *Alles of niets: Opstellen over K. Schilder*. George Harinck (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> K. Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. G. van Rongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg, Man. Premier Printing Ltd., 1977).

Peter Berger was complaining that people concerned about normative issues of societal life tended to give too much attention to the relationship of individuals to the political order. In doing so, he said, they failed to recognize the important role of what he called “mediating structures.” If we are to avoid the twin evils of individualism, on the one hand, and statism, on the other, he argued, we must pay attention to the ways in which we can strengthen a whole variety of associational patterns—neighborhood organizations, youth clubs, service groups, churches, and families themselves—that can provide a buffer zone between the state and the individual, thus providing crucial resources for character formation.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1970s, an important group of scholars have taken up, with similar concerns, the cause of civil society. A recent prominent case in point is the work of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam. In a much-discussed 1993 essay, “Bowling Alone,” and in a 2001 book with the same title,<sup>4</sup> he has bemoaned the decline of participation in voluntary societies in North American culture. His title, for example, is a reference to the fact that while more Americans are bowling than ever before, fewer people are joining bowling leagues than in the past. When people bowl alone, they do not sit around and eat together during their bowling activities, and there is a significant loss, Putnam argues, in the “social capital” that is associated with camaraderie and team spirit. The decline in these types of social bonds means that individuals do not develop the qualities of public character that are the preconditions for a healthy participation in civil society. When this pattern prevails, the dangers posed by Berger’s individualism-or-statism alternatives are acute.

These same concerns are very much on the minds of the Christian participants in the public theology discussions. By choosing to focus on public life, they are recognizing that there is a vast and complex territory that lies between the individual and the state. They want to emphasize the importance of those contexts for human association that extend beyond the realm of kinship, but are not yet—or at least they ought *not* to be—swallowed up by the political. In addition, they are especially interested in how the Christian community can effectively address this broader public agenda.

### An Important Debate

These public theology discussions have given rise to significant disagreements. An intense debate, for example, has been waged over the question of the kind of language Christians may use in addressing issues of public life. One

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no.1 (January 1995): 65-78; for the book version see Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

thinker who has stirred up much controversy is Duke University's Stanley Hauerwas, who has drawn on the Anabaptist tradition to insist on the importance of "radical discipleship" communities that stand over against the status quo of public culture. Hauerwas has been especially outspoken in his criticisms of the notion that Christians can employ a neutral public language, on the assumption that terms such as *justice* and *peace* are understandable from a variety of worldview perspectives. That assumption, Hauerwas insists, is fundamentally misguided. How can we as Christians give meaning to such terms, he asks, "apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth"? Only the biblical witness to Jesus' ministry "gives content to our faith, judges any institutional embodiment of our faith, and teaches us to be suspicious of any political slogan that does not need God to make itself credible."<sup>5</sup>

Hauerwas's critics have responded by charging him with a much too narrow theological framework. James Gustafson, for example, has accused Hauerwas and his sympathizers of succumbing to "the sectarian temptation," a pattern of thinking that fails to acknowledge a robust theology of creation.<sup>6</sup> A similar critique has been set forth by Max Stackhouse, who defends a common public discourse by arguing that from a Christian perspective:

human life has, at its root, a very profound *logos*, rooted in *theos*, that makes it possible for Jews, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and humanists to talk reasonably with one another and to live together in a society governed by a modicum of justice. Further, we can, in some measure, talk across boundaries and more or less discern what is valid and not valid in what others say. And we expect others to understand us and to challenge us when we do not make sense.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, though, Hauerwas has actually been criticized from the other end of the spectrum for *conceding* too much to the possibility of a common language. Robert W. Brimlow highlights some comments in Hauerwas's writings where he seems to allow for some sort of "translation" of particularistic Christian language into terms that make sense to non-Christians. These concessions, argues Brimlow, blunt the force of Hauerwas's emphasis on radical discipleship.<sup>8</sup> Christians, Brimlow insists, "are called to the margins; we are

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 23.

<sup>6</sup> James M. Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 40 (1985): 88.

<sup>7</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, "Liberalism Dispatched vs. Liberalism Engaged," *Christian Century* 112, no. 29 (October 18, 1995): 963.

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Brimlow, "Solomon's Porch: The Church as Sectarian Ghetto," in *The Church as Counterculture*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (Albany: N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000), 115.

called to be weak and separate and to view ourselves as such. We therefore must turn our back on all that is incompatible with the Gospel.<sup>9</sup>

This brief sketch does not do justice to the complexities of this important debate, but it should be sufficient to demonstrate that these contemporary American Christian thinkers are exploring issues that have long been argued about—indeed, often with quite divisive consequences—within the Dutch Reformed community. Those longstanding debates were much on Schilder’s mind as he wrote *Christ and Culture*, and the perspective he spells out in that short book deserves careful consideration in our present context.

### The Relevance of Reformed Thought

Little attention has been paid in these recent American debates to the nuances of classical Reformed thought. To be sure, some of the key figures—Gustafson and Stackhouse are important cases in point—see themselves as appropriating specifically Reformed themes in rejecting the perspective of Hauerwas and others. In offering their critiques of “the sectarian temptation” Gustafson and Stackhouse choose to make their case with reference to what they see as a venerable tradition of Christian political thought that they associate with a broad range of thinkers, a group that includes, but is by no means limited to, the Reformed contribution. For example, in responding to Hauerwas’s sustained attack on the “liberal” tradition of Christian political thought, Max Stackhouse offers this brief account of the sort of liberal perspective that he wants to defend:

Such liberal views are rooted in the Bible and have been embraced by Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley and Edwards—and, for that matter, by Locke, Kant, Weber, Troeltsch, Whitehead and the Niebuhrs. This kind of liberal Christian believes that Christianity offers the best account of why it is that all humans can come to this table of conversation (“general revelation,” *justitia originalis*, the gift of reason in the *imago dei*, all distorted but not erased by sin). And this kind of liberal Christian also believes that one of the key tasks of the church is to continually rediscover, extend and thereby refine our understanding of this capacity so that it may help sort through the religious stories, principles and actions that people use to see which are most adequate to God and for holy living.<sup>10</sup>

While I will not go further into the details of this particular debate about the appropriateness of Christians’ employing a neutral public discourse, enough has been said, I think, to see that the differences come down, in rough terms, to this set of alternatives: a perspective in which a classic (1) Anabaptist-type perspective has been reformulated for application to contemporary pluralist

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>10</sup> Stackhouse, “Liberalism Dispatched vs. Liberalism Engaged,” 963.

democracy, (2) a broad “common ground” framework that draws on a variety of resources in the Christian tradition to reinforce an active liberal Protestant engagement in the public arena.

What does a confessionally Reformed outlook have to say by way of assessing the issues at stake in this debate? That is the question I will be wrestling with in what follows, with a special focus on the case that Schilder makes in *Christ and Culture*. Before I look at the specifics of Schilder’s perspective, I must say something about the limits that I will set for myself in pursuing this exploration.

First, it will be very clear here that I am discussing these issues as a *North American* Reformed Christian. While I have a keen interest in the various theological perspectives that have emerged within the Reformed community in the Netherlands, I still view the interactions between those diverse schools of thought from a considerable distance. I spend most of my time in a theological and spiritual environment that is best described as broadly evangelical, and there are very few people in my day-to-day world who have even the faintest grasp of some of the issues that have been debated with great passion on Dutch soil. In such a context, I am forced to be very selective in applying lessons that I have learned from studying the Dutch scene to my North American context.

Second, I do take a *sympathetic* approach to the American debate that I have just briefly described; I am convinced, for example, that important and helpful points have been made on both sides of the argument. In this regard, I know that I am assessing the issues in a spirit quite different from Schilder in discussing the options presented. I think it quite likely that he would have rather quickly found reasons simply to dismiss both options as deeply defective. I am convinced, however, that it is possible both to approach the North American debate with sympathy and at the same time to insist that some key insights offered by Schilder point to an alternative way of seeing the situation—a perspective that should be taken seriously by public theologians in North America.

Third, I am drawing on these insights from Schilder as an American *Kuyperian*. Abraham Kuyper is one person from the Dutch Calvinist context who is familiar to the larger Christian community in North America, though the awareness is of a very general sort. For example, in October 2000, the well-known sociologist Alan Wolfe—himself a secularist thinker—published a much-discussed essay in the mass circulation magazine *Atlantic Monthly*, in which he discussed the emergence of a strong evangelical scholarship, especially at places such as Calvin College, Wheaton College, and Fuller Theological Seminary.<sup>11</sup> Wolfe singled out Abraham Kuyper’s influence as an important factor in this development; however, he described Kuyper’s thought only in very general terms as encouraging serious Christian intellectual activity in pietist environs where the life of the mind has often been neglected.

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<sup>11</sup> Wolfe’s article can be found on the web at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/10/wolfe.htm>

While there are Christians in North America outside of the Dutch-American subculture who do know some of the more specific details about Kuyper perspective, they certainly are quite ignorant of many of the aspects of Kuyper's thought that have been much debated in the Netherlands. Even most of the American scholars who would happily identify themselves as Kuyperians would be hard put to give an account of what Kuyper thought about such matters as ecclesiastical hierarchicalism or presumptive regeneration. "Kuyperianism" in the American context is a label that has come to stand for some very general themes; it is associated with such things as an appreciation for the "not-one-square-inch" manifesto regarding the kingship of Jesus, a broad acceptance of the idea of sphere-sovereignty, and a commitment to the integration of faith and learning.

Indeed, one of the ironies about this situation is that some of the specific formulations that American Christians associate with Kuyper's influence may actually be closer to Schilder's thought than to Kuyper's. I must confess, for example, that after many years of employing the notion of the *cultural mandate* in my own writings, with the confident sense that in doing so I was propagating an important Kuyperian theme, I was quite surprised to discover N. H. Gootjes' observation that this term "was in all probability coined by Schilder."<sup>12</sup> I was even more surprised to learn from Gootjes' discussion that another view that I had long attributed to Kuyper, namely, that the Christian community is called to produce its own uniquely God-honoring patterns of culture, is actually a position developed by Schilder as an *alternative* to Kuyper's perspective. Because culture was for Kuyper, as Gootjes points out, intimately linked to common grace, Kuyper was not inclined to see special grace as producing a distinctive *culture* as such.<sup>13</sup>

### Schilder and Kuyper

While Schilder was frequently quite critical of Kuyper, it seems clear that he often meant to be appropriating some Kuyperian themes against others. For example, in a 1951 speech to a young women's convention, Schilder encouraged his *vrijgemaakt* hearers not to worry if they find themselves isolated, because of their convictions, from the general trends in Dutch culture. Indeed, he insisted, Reformed Christians should see that sort of marginalization as a sign of faithfulness. "If our numbers do not shrink over the whole world," he observed, "we should ask ourselves whether we have ever really comprehended Christ's eschatological discourses and properly understood the Revelation of John."<sup>14</sup> It is interesting that Schilder backed his own words here by appealing

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<sup>12</sup> N. H. Gootjes, "Schilder on Christ and Culture," in *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder*, ed. J. Geertsema, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Klaas Schilder, "Your Ecumenical Task," in *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*, appendix III, ed. Rudolf Van Reest, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alta: Inheritance Publications, 1990), 452.

to Kuyper's authority. Kuyper rightly recognized, said Schilder, that only when the antithesis between belief and unbelief is stated as clearly as possible can we "see to it that the half-hearted hybrid hangers-on leave as soon as possible, shaking their heads."<sup>15</sup>

Most important, though, are the words that Schilder uses to conclude these observations: "Thus Kuyper in 1878."<sup>16</sup> What Schilder obviously wanted to signal here was that he was invoking the authority of the "earlier" Kuyper. The need to think about "earlier" versus "later" in assessing Kuyper's various comments about church-world relationships is explained in this way by the Calvin College historian James Bratt:

Significantly, Kuyper's appeal to the antithesis peaked in the first half of his career, the period of institutional formation, and declined in his later years, when Calvinists had to take their share of managing public life. The concept served [in the earlier phase of his career] a crucial strategic purpose: besides showing Reformed skeptics that cultural activity did not endanger purity of faith, it fortified group identity during a potentially threatening transition. Certainly it must have mobilized many Seceders, living as they did under the memory of separation.<sup>17</sup>

In the later stages of Kuyper's public leadership, he was less inclined to emphasize the radical antithesis between belief and unbelief. It is clear that Schilder saw this as a sign of a weakening in Kuyper's commitment to Reformed orthodoxy. Bratt, on the other hand, seems to applaud the development. He insists that the strong antithetical thinking of the earlier Kuyper, while important for gaining the Reformed community's trust in Kuyper's cultural leadership, also had connections to Calvinism's "darker legacy," for "few doctrines could match the antithesis at fostering spiritual arrogance or abusing principal analysis."<sup>18</sup>

I agree with Bratt that there are some dangers associated with a Reformed perspective on culture that leans heavily on the idea of the antithesis. I also worry much about the dangers posed by the emphases of the later Kuyper—not the least of them being a triumphalist spirit and a too-easy accommodation to the patterns of non-Christian thought and action. Schilder was very aware of these dangers. Indeed, the case that he makes in spelling out his own alternative perspective seems at times—as I read his writings within the contemporary North American context—to have some important similarities to the Anabaptist type thinking of Stanley Hauerwas and others. This factor alone makes

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 453-54.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 454.

<sup>17</sup> James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans., 1984), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

it interesting to consider what Schilder might have to say to Reformed Christians in America who take the public theology debates seriously.

Schilder's *Christ and Culture* is well under one hundred pages in length, but even so, I will not touch on all of the matters that Schilder treats. Schilder's tone is terse, and it is clear that he has many controversies on his mind as he develops his case. For example, before he actually gets around to discussing cultural activity as such, he covers much theological territory, especially issues of Christology. This is not the sort of book that is designed to appeal to American readers, especially those who are unfamiliar with Schilder's theological context. Schilder needs an American "translator-interpreter"—someone capable of the difficult task of recontextualizing his thoughts for a new situation. My effort here will not fulfill that purpose. I hope, though, that I can at least provide some hints as to how the larger task might be accomplished.

My modest effort here will treat only two basic themes in his discussion. First I will look at the ways in which his views give some support—more than most American thinkers with Reformed sympathies, including American Kuyperians, would be inclined to offer—to the Anabaptist type cultural strategy proposed by Hauerwas and others. Then I will look at how such emphases for Schilder fit into a larger perspective in which there are at least some hints toward a theological rationale for a broader cultural task.

### The "Anabaptist" Corrective

I begin with a provocative observation that Schilder makes in the last three sentences of his book: "Blessed is my *wise* ward-elder," he writes, "who does his home visiting in the right way. He is a *cultural* force, although he may not be aware of it. Let them mock him: they do not know what they are doing, those cultural gababouts of the other side!"<sup>19</sup>

The implication here is clear. The ordinary work of the local congregation, conducted without conscious attention to any mandate to engage in cultural transformation, is in fact a crucial cultural activity—more important from a Christian perspective than the efforts of those who want directly to shape the larger culture in its many dimensions.

In the recent North American debates, Stanley Hauerwas has made claims that are very similar to the one Schilder is setting forth in this comment. In one of his many provocative formulations, Hauerwas has argued that the church does not *have* a social ethic; the church *is* a social ethic. "Put starkly," says Hauerwas, "the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church."<sup>20</sup> Then he explains further, using examples that parallel Schilder's

<sup>19</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Social Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99.

reference to his faithful elder, that the church best serves the larger culture when it sets its own agenda. It does this first by having the patience amid the injustice and violence of this world to care for the widow, the poor, and the orphan. Such care, from the world's perspective, may seem to contribute little to the cause of justice, yet it is our conviction that unless we take the time for such care neither we nor the world can know what justice looks like.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that Schilder's views so closely parallel a contemporary American perspective that claims inspiration from the Anabaptist tradition leads us to ask about the relationship between Schilder's perspective and an Anabaptist one. Needless to say, Schilder would not likely appreciate the comparison. There has been a longstanding hostility on the part of Calvinists toward Anabaptist life and thought—so much so that the accusation of Anabaptist leanings has been one of the more serious insults that Calvinists have used in debating with each other.

My own conviction is that this deep-seated animosity toward Anabaptists on the part of Calvinists has to be understood as an “intrafamily” matter. I have argued this at some length elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> so I will not repeat the details of my case here. To briefly summarize, however, it seems clear to me that the Reformed community's frustrations with the Anabaptists—beginning with John Calvin's experience in Switzerland—had much to do with the ways in which the Anabaptists have accused Calvinists of inconsistency on two important points.<sup>23</sup>

The first matter has to do with the Reformed emphasis on church discipline. Noting that Calvin and his followers accused the Lutherans and Catholics of laxity on this matter, the Anabaptists boasted that they took discipline far more seriously than did the Reformed.

The second issue was the church's relationship to the larger culture. Here, too, the Anabaptists ridiculed the Calvinists for claiming to believe in total depravity while regularly finding patterns of accommodation with sinful culture. They especially singled out for criticism the Calvinists' willingness to endorse, and even to encourage an active involvement in, the political system of the larger culture. Obviously, the Anabaptists were most upset by the Calvinists' willingness to use the “sword” in their political and military involvements. Even apart from the concern about overt violence, though, there is a very basic Anabaptist objection to what they saw as Calvinist eagerness to compromise with the political patterns of a sinful culture.

These Anabaptist types of criticisms of Calvinism as such can be found in Schilder's writings when *as a Calvinist* he criticizes other Reformed Christians

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. my *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 20-24.

<sup>23</sup> For much evidence for what I am suggesting here, see Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William Heynen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1981).

for their understanding of the proper strategies for Christian cultural involvement. If my analysis of the intrafamilial character of Reformed-Anabaptist polemics is correct, then this should not surprise us. Schilder is attempting to avoid the very inconsistencies that the Anabaptists have pointed to in much Calvinist practice: He insists on rigorous discipline within the church so that the people of God can live out their obedient patterns of cultural life, and he also wants to do full justice to the reality of the antithesis between believing and unbelieving cultural activity.

I noted earlier that Stanley Hauerwas himself has been criticized for toning down some of his own antitheticalist comments with his suggestion that the particularist language of Christian discipleship can be “translated” into a less overtly Christian public discourse. Hauerwas’s motive here is laudable. He obviously senses an obligation to contribute directly to the well being of the larger human community. The problem, however, is that he does not provide a clear theological basis for fulfilling this obligation—a defect that leaves him open, as we noted earlier, to the charge by other Anabaptists that he is being inconsistent with his basic premises. From a Reformed perspective, Hauerwas’s problems are endemic to Anabaptist thought, wherein there is a reluctance to acknowledge the cultural importance of the doctrine of creation. It is a significant benefit of Schilder’s thought that while he, too, senses the larger cultural obligation, he also provides a nuanced creational basis for taking the obligation seriously.

### The “Abstinence” Option<sup>24</sup>

Schilder has little use for Christians who choose simply to ignore the problems that plague the larger human community. He has very harsh words for that kind of “Christian [cultural] abstinence” that “originates in resentment, laziness, diffidence, slackness, or narrow-mindedness”; such, he says, “is sin before God.” He also insists that there is a “heroic” abstinence, and this is the strategy that he commends. The right kind of cultural abstinence happens, he argues, when “Christian people [are] maintaining their colleges, supporting their missionaries, and caring for the needy who were left them by Christ, . . . [and] are doing a thousand other works of divine obligation” that make it difficult for them to perform those highly visible works of “cultural transformation” for which Kuyper and others have called. Schilder does not question the legitimacy of a broader cultural calling, but for other urgent<sup>25</sup> needs in the present situation it “finds its limits and legitimation in, e.g., Matthew 19:12, where Christ speaks about those ‘that make themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of

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<sup>24</sup> My comments in this section closely follow my treatment of Schilder’s views in *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, 78-80.

<sup>25</sup> The English translation of Schilder’s text is misleading here. It has him citing the present “emergency,” whereas he is actually pointing to the urgency (*nood*) of other pressing concerns in the life and mission of the church.

heaven's sake' and not in order to avoid this Kingdom."<sup>26</sup> This self-limiting pattern is not anticulture as such, but it does restrict the territory in which we carry out our cultural activity.

There is much to be said in favor of this vow-of-abstinence approach to cultural involvement. It certainly can be quite legitimate for a specific Calvinist community—or an Anabaptist one for that matter—to restrict its cultural tasks to the maintenance of its own internal life. Just as individuals have specific callings, so do particular Christian communities. Schilder's use of the "eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom" image in this regard, then, is a helpful one.

We must ask, though, whether this particular vow of cultural abstinence is required of *all* Christian churches. Once we admit that the decision to abstain from a broader cultural involvement is a special vow—the acceptance of a vocation to do without something that is in other circumstances, and for other Christians, a worthy thing to pursue—then we must ask what it is about our own present circumstances that calls for this pattern of abstinence. It is clear, for example, that the Lord called his people in Old Testament times to work for the well being of the larger Babylonian society in which he had placed them during the time of their exile: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:7).

Was the larger cultural calling more urgent in those ancient times than it is in our present situation? Is there something unique about our contemporary context that requires all of us to be cultural eunuchs? We can understand how, for example, Schilder's wartime experiences, where he hid for months at a time from the Nazis, might have led him to think in terms of a temporary reordering of the church's priorities. It is difficult to know why his specific recommendations ought to apply to the whole Christian community under present cultural conditions or even to the whole *Calvinist* community.

### The "Restraint" Promise

I do not want to make too much, however, of this abstinence theme in Schilder's discussion. If he means to be suggesting that the church of the present age, both in Europe and North America, must pledge abstinence until the Lord's return, then I believe he is simply wrong. I do not see this as the main thrust of his account. At the very least, it is not the main thrust of what we can reappropriate from his reflections as we seek to be faithful to the Lord's cultural call in our present situation.

Recognition of the possibility of an abstinence vow can be a helpful thing to keep in mind, though, for our contemporary context. I have already observed that many present-day public theology discussants seem to give the impression

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<sup>26</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 69-70.

that the Anabaptist perspective, with its strong antitheticalist tones, is the only plausible alternative to a liberal perspective that, selectively drawing on Reformed and others sources, emphasizes commonness and a neutral public discourse in the larger public arena. In arguing for the abstinence vow, Schilder is not insisting that cultural withdrawal is a matter of nonnegotiable principle. He gives full expression to the cultural mandate in his discussion—indeed at points he does so in a way that exceeds the eloquence that many of us associate with Kuyper’s manifestos on this subject. Much of what he says would seem to be designed to inspire the Christian community to move into the larger cultural arena with great enthusiasm. Even so, when he suddenly endorses the abstinence strategy, it is not because he is convinced that a larger cultural program is illegitimate as such, but rather it is because of his gloomy assessment of the historical circumstances in which he finds himself.

Actually, Schilder’s cultural pessimism is shaped at least in part by the acceptance of an apocalyptic reading of the contemporary scene. Schilder observes, for example, that, during the course of history, God restrains Satan, so that the proclamation of the gospel can on occasion “penetrate very deeply even into the circles of the unbelievers.” He insists that while “[t]his restraint is never completely lacking in this world,” neither “will it be of a constant measure” throughout the course of time. Indeed, we can be sure, he says, that it “will decrease to a minimum at the end of time,” when “any *status quo* existing between the Church and the world will be denounced—from both sides—also in cultural life, even precisely there. Then the whole world—except God’s elect—will crowd together around the Antichrist.”<sup>27</sup>

I have no quarrel with Schilder’s eschatology as he states it here. Be that as it may, I do think it is risky to base our overall counsel to the church on cultural matters on firm assessments regarding where we are in relationship to the end-time events. My own strong inclination is to rely on the “restraint” promise, described so clearly by Schilder, in the hope that by our efforts God’s Word can indeed in our own day—to repeat his words—penetrate very deeply even into the circles of the unbelievers.” At the same time, of course, we must pray for the discernment to know when the time actually arrives when the Lord’s people must resist with all of our strength the power of the Antichrist. We best arm ourselves against that day, I am convinced, by looking for special signs of lawlessness, of rebellion—overt or subtle—against God’s creating and redeeming purposes in the world. These signs include the broader patterns of lawlessness that show a disregard for that which God deeply cares about: racial justice, the plight of the poor, fidelity in human relationships, and the dignity of the non-human created order. As long as we prepare ourselves to oppose this lawlessness wherever and whenever it appears, sensitivity to warnings about the future can serve to strengthen us for faithfulness to the gospel.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 57.

## Our Human “Being-together”

Not only does Schilder hold out the hope that we can, in at least some historical situations, proclaim the Word in such a way that it will “penetrate very deeply even into the circles of the unbelievers”—he also gives us a helpful way of thinking about the cultural goals that we are hoping to promote in such proclamation. There does exist, he tells us, “a *sunousia*, a being-together, among all men.” This is not to be confused, of course, with “cultural *koinonia*,” which is a bond that “can only be achieved wherever the same nature is directed towards a common goal through love for the same basic principles and wherever the same interests are promoted in common faith and hope and love.”<sup>28</sup> But neither can we ignore *sunousia* by insisting that *koinonia* is our exclusive Christian concern.

Schilder’s *sunousia* is roughly equivalent to the public or civil society themes in the recent American discussions. His comments about the importance of sustaining *sunousia*, the being-together of Christians with members of the larger human community, are scattered and few in number, and they are always closely paired with warnings against conformity to the cultural patterns of the sinful age. For all of that, however, he does make these comments, and, when he makes them, it is clear that he sees the sustaining of *sunousia* as an important Christian obligation. We can wish he had said more on the subject, and in the absence of further amplification by him, we have to work a bit to tease out his meaning. In doing so, we can be confident that we are spelling out ideas that—however reluctant he was to treat them at length—are clearly implied by what he says.

Schilder’s warnings against cultural compromise typically draw on the Bible’s apocalyptic writings. For example, he argues, citing Revelation 18:4, that the church is called by the Lord to come out of Babylon. He is also quick to add that this does not mean that Christians are “to go out of the world” as such. Continuing with the imagery of Revelation 18, he observes that refusing to associate with Babylon-as-harlot “does not mean to condemn womanhood, to renounce nature.” Here Schilder places Ezekiel 16 in parentheses, alluding to the way in which the Lord, while condemning Israel for her harlotry, nonetheless remembers in mercy her original created womanhood—her underlying “nature.” Then, he offers this summary statement about our relationship to Babylon: “Not to be partakers of her sins does not mean: along with her creaturehood to deny or abdicate the *sunousia*.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, “the tension between our lot of being in contact with men (*sunousia*) and our daily duty to fellowship (*koinonia*).”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 83.

These comments provide the framework for understanding Schilder's highly nuanced assessment of the cultural achievements of unredeemed humanity—at points, he even speaks of their “contributions” in this regard. In making these assessments, he has no use for the Kuyperian concept of common grace. For Schilder, grace is always a saving power, and the only sense in which it is “common” is that it is shared by all who truly belong to Christ.<sup>31</sup>

There is, however, a “common tempering” in God's dealing with the human race as a whole. This means that “[l]ife is not yet split up into the forms of hell and heaven. The godless are still prevented in their cultural labor from ecstatically raging against God in the paroxysm of satanism, although this is in direct line with their hidden desire.” At the same time, the elect are also being tempered by God, in that they are presently being “prevented from doing adequately what is in their line,” in order that the Lord might pursue “the goals of the history of salvation and revelation.”<sup>32</sup> In our present situation, “nothing is fully developed and consummated, nothing is mature as yet.”<sup>33</sup>

In this “interim-of-the-interim” time,<sup>34</sup> there are still “small remnants” of the original createdness that can be discerned in the cultural activities of unredeemed humanity. Schilder's concession here is obviously grudging. He is not inclined to speak, for example, in the sorts of glowing terms that Calvin used when he wrote of an unredeemed humankind who, “though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts.”<sup>34</sup> Schilder does allow that

these residues . . . are still able, according to the scheme of development and restraint that Christ's Sender maintains in the Christological progress of all history, to instigate new cultural contributions as it pleases Him. This is an instigation the possibility of which was already given in the paradisaical world, and which has its *kairos* only because Christ has His own aim and intention with the world and reserved it unto the fires of judgment day.<sup>36</sup>

The case that Schilder is articulating here—admittedly only in broad outline—provides important correctives to most of the existing options in contemporary public theology. Unlike the liberal appropriation of creational and *logos* motifs in support of a Christian public involvement that makes much of our human commonness, Schilder insists on the radical sinfulness of the cultural patterns in our fallen world. Unlike the recontextualized Anabaptist per-

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.2.15, 273.

<sup>36</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 59.

spective of the contemporary defenders of a radical Christian communal identity, Schilder attempts to do justice to the continuing display of God's creating purposes, acknowledging the vestiges of nature even in the midst of Babylonian corruption. The church must work diligently at developing its own internal cultural life, but it must, at the same time, recognize its cultural obligations to the larger human community. Schilder's strong—and decidedly un-Anabaptist—creational emphasis is clear, even if he expresses it somewhat reluctantly: "The *koinonia* is given us by Christ, the *sunousia* comes from God the Creator."<sup>37</sup>

I am convinced that there is much here that is helpful, even crucial, for contemporary Reformed thinkers to consider. Even so, the perspective also must be developed further, spelling out implications for the purpose of addressing contemporary issues of public life. I am confident that this can be done, and I will illustrate this conviction briefly by offering one important example where I believe we can extend Schilder's thought by drawing on some hints that are present in his discussion.

### Public Piety

Not too long after the destruction of the World Trade Center by Muslim terrorists, three Michigan congregations of the Protestant Reformed Churches cosponsored a service in response to the tragic events that had occurred in New York City. According to the brief report on this service in the Protestant Reformed magazine *The Standard Bearer*, the pastors who led the service reflected on these

three areas of concern for the Christian. How do we show concern for God's people who may have suffered directly from the tragedy? How do Christians put those events into the broad picture of our Lord's return? And how do we deal with the feelings of fear we see in ourselves as well as in our children?<sup>38</sup>

What is obviously absent in this list of concerns is anything having to do with the *non-Christians* whose lives were profoundly affected by the terrible events that had occurred. To be sure, this is a brief news report, and it may not tell us all the subjects that were addressed in this service. Also, it may well be that other Protestant Reformed gatherings dealt with other sorts of concerns relating to the September 11 tragedy. If so, though, these other matters were not reported in *The Standard Bearer*—and my own perusal of the pages of issues of that magazine in the aftermath of the events in New York and Washington do not reveal any other significant references to the September 11 events. It is not mere quibbling, then, at least to point to the fact that in this brief news report the sole emphasis is on the concerns of believers: those elect persons who suffered

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.prcanet.org/standard\\_bearer/2001oct15.html#NewsChurches](http://www.prcanet.org/standard_bearer/2001oct15.html#NewsChurches)

because of these events; the ways in which God's people should interpret these events in relationship the end-times; and the fearfulness of Christian families who viewed the destruction from a distance.

The Protestant Reformed Churches were established, under the leadership of Herman Hoeksema because of their refusal to accept the Kuyperian understanding of common grace as it was adopted by the Christian Reformed synod's doctrinal statement on the subject in 1924. Hoeksema and his followers have consistently resisted any notion of an attitude of divine favor toward nonelect people. What other Calvinists interpret as gracious divine gifts to the reprobate, the Protestant Reformed view as providing opportunities for the unredeemed to extend their rebellion against God.<sup>39</sup>

Schilder adopts a similar viewpoint. The appearance of a common cultural giftedness, he insists, is due to the fact that believer and nonbeliever alike are working within the same creational context. The similarity of their cultural labors "is not caused by the similarity of their diverging minds but by that of the stiff, recalcitrant material." Using this same material, they create very different products: one a building for worship and the other a place for revelry, "but both of them go for their clay to the same pit and for their marble to the same quarry."<sup>40</sup>

I have no fundamental quarrel with Schilder's account here. Even though I have argued in my own writings that there are significant benefits to be found in common-grace theology, I have also expressed sympathy for Henry Van Til's proposal that it is best "to place the term 'common grace' in quotation marks," on the grounds that, as Van Til insists, it seems risky to equate the very real "beneficent goodness of God to the non-elect sinners" with the redemptive "blessings which God bestows upon elect sinners in and through Jesus Christ, the Mediator."<sup>41</sup> Van Til's worries about a straightforward endorsement of the idea of common *grace* are grounded in genuine worries—ones that I share—about some dangerous tendencies in common-grace theology.

For all of that, I also worry about tendencies that I see in the straightforward *denial* of common grace. These tendencies are displaced clearly in the limited agenda addressed by the Protestant Reformed pastors in their worship service. Most Reformed Christians, when they witness the horrors of human suffering, experience a deep sadness on behalf of the victims and their families, *regardless of whether those victims are Christian or not*. Indeed, most Reformed Christians,

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<sup>39</sup> A detailed exposition of the Protestant Reformed dissent from the Kuyperian perspective can be found in Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: First Protestant Reformed Church, 1936); for a more recent account, see Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 56.

<sup>41</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 244.

when they witness the bravery of firefighters, police, military, and ordinary citizens in their efforts to rescue the wounded and the dying in situations of that sort—most Reformed Christians admire those efforts and thank God for these displays of human goodness, *regardless of whether those performing the heroic acts are Christians or not.*

What should we make theologically of these Christian responses? Are we being confused in experiencing sadness and admiration for what happens in the lives of nonredeemed people? Does God *disapprove* of what we experience? I believe that these are extremely important questions. They have to do with the kinds of character traits—the spiritual dispositions, if you wish—that we should cultivate as people who are called to be holy in our thoughts, conduct, and desires (see 1 Peter 1:13-16).

Kuyper does seem to be aware of the need for developing what we might think of as a theology of *public piety*. The “interior” mode of common grace “is operative,” he argues, “wherever [there is] civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life.”<sup>42</sup> Kuyper clearly means to encourage the cultivation of these qualities in the redeemed as well as in the unredeemed. It is precisely these traits that I am saying ought to characterize our Christian responses to tragic events such as the New York City attack.

Schilder does not address such concerns in his discussion. There are phrases that he drops on occasion that could be developed for what we might think of as a theology of public piety, though. In a passage, for example, where he is emphasizing the central role of the church for cultural formation, he observes that the church is “the mother of believers” who gives birth to a renewed humanity that is called to “bear the burdens of the whole world.”<sup>43</sup> This church, he further explains, “can in a national community proclaim the norms of God in the language of the time and place concerned and so make known to that community what riches can, according to its own nature, be developed in its life, and how this can and should be done.”<sup>44</sup>

Again, these are at best hints, but they are worth exploring. What does it mean for us to “bear the burdens of the whole world”? How can we as believers, especially in times of a national crisis, speak to the larger human community in the language of the time and place about riches that are associated with the nature of that larger community?

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<sup>42</sup> Abraham Kuyper, “Common Grace,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 181.

<sup>43</sup> Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

John Calvin's advice to civil magistrates is provocative in this regard. When a nation's leaders are thinking about going to war, he says, not only should they take great care "not to be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity," but they should also "have pity on the common nature in the one whose special fault they are punishing."<sup>45</sup> If this pity on the common nature is an appropriate attitude to cultivate toward the kind of person whom Calvin describes in this context as an "armed robber," should we not be even *more* diligent in cultivating kindly feelings toward those who are *victims* of various sorts of oppression?

Schilder's strong emphasis on God's creating purposes, and on the power of these purposes at work even where they are not acknowledged by sinful humanity, should encourage us to explore his hints—muted as they might be—in the direction of a theology of public piety. For Reformed Christians who take seriously the reality of the antithesis between belief and unbelief, the theological rationale for positive and holy feelings toward the larger human community does not come easily. Yet, many of us experience these feelings stirring in our souls—and sometimes even raging there—in spite of the lack of any theological encouragement from our antitheticalist teachers. Given the larger strengths of the antitheticalist Reformed perspective, we ought diligently to explore any resources that this perspective offers—even in the form of phrases that seem to be dropped gratuitously in the middle of otherwise rather harsh warnings against worldly alliances.

The apostle counsels us to refuse to conform to the world's patterns in this way: "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord." We are, he says, to provide to anyone who asks of us "an accounting for the hope" that resides within us. He also adds a mandate that speaks to the "character" dimension of our relationships with other human beings: "yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:13-16). To cultivate these dispositions—key components of a public piety for our own day—is a mandate to all who seek the patterns of holiness that are pleasing to the Lord.

In *Christ and Culture*, Schilder does not give explicit attention to the cultivation of this particular dimension of holiness. Indeed he seems reluctant to move in that direction. In spite of his reluctance, however, he does offer an important framework—and even a few helpful hints—for those who are willing today to take up that task.

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<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.12, 1500.