

A photograph of a church interior, showing rows of wooden pews and a dark wooden ceiling with a grid pattern. The lighting is warm and focused on the pews.

Abraham Kuyper and the Stone Lectures

By Steven Yu

Widely recognised as historian, theologian, philosopher, politician, and professor-educator, Abraham Kuyper was born in Maassluis in the year 1837, the son of a National Church (Reformed) pastor, and was later to accompany his family to the town of Leyden. In 1862, following his father's footsteps, Kuyper was awarded the degree of doctor of theology from Leyden University.

By the time Kuyper took charge of his first pastoral position in Beesd, the National Church of Holland was already sliding away from the Reformed teaching. J. E. McGoldrick writes of this period: "Liberalism appeared in the Netherlands around 1840, when Dutch scholars began to study German philosophy and German Higher Criticism of the Bible. In an effort to revise traditional beliefs, so as to make Christianity acceptable to the world-view of a scientific age, the Liberals often denied the possibility of miracles and regarded the Christian faith as only the current stage of development in the evolution of religion."

During his pastoral time in Beesd, Kuyper was challenged by a peasant woman named Pietje Baltus. "You do not give us the true bread of life," she said bluntly when asked by Kuyper as the reason why she has stopped attending the church service. She later explained to Kuyper how her beliefs differed from his, as she presented him with the historic Reformed confessions and related their teachings to him, he listened carefully to what she had to say, and he made a point of pursuing further conversation with Pietje and her friends. Later he wrote: "I did not set myself against them, and I still thank my God that I made the choice I did. Their unwavering persistence has been a blessing for my heart, the rise of the morning star in my life." These conversations lead to Kuyper's conversion and paved the way for the struggle

for reformation of the National Church from 1886 till 1892 when the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands were formed.

Kuyper held pastorates in Utrecht, Amsterdam, and elsewhere while leading the reform movement. Prompted by his interest in the legitimacy of private schools, he became affiliated with and was later the leader of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP), which was opposed to godless revolution and supported the Word of God and its implications for life. He edited a weekly, *De Heraut* (The Herald), "for a free church and a free church school in a free land," as well as a daily party newspaper, *De Standaard* (The Standard). By the time the Free University of Amsterdam opened in 1880, Kuyper had established his reputation as the nation's leading exponent of reformation through journalism, education and political action.

In 1901, Kuyper was appointed as Prime Minister of the Dutch cabinet after the ARP's victory in the election. During his time as Prime Minister, he showed a strong leadership style but encountered problems at home (by his use of parliamentary legislation to crush a national rail strike) and abroad (by his fervent support of the Boers in their struggle against the British in South Africa). Following the defeat of his government in 1905, he spent his last years leading the ARP as a member of the Upper Chamber and continuing his editorship of *De Standaard* before entering into glory on 8 November 1920.

THE STONE LECTURES

In 1898 Kuyper was invited to present the Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary. In the lectures, the terms "life system" and "life and world view" were introduced, there were approximations of the German philosophical term *Weltanschauung*, marking

the introduction of the worldview concept to the English-speaking world. A year prior to the Stone Lectures, James Orr, another Reformed theologian, published his own lectures under the title *The Christian View of God and the World in Edinburgh*. Between them, Kuyper and Orr opened up a new approach to theology and apologetics. Instead of defending particular doctrines, the worldview concept made it possible to put Christianity forward as a whole and to defend it on the basis of internal coherence and the necessity of Christian first principles to understanding the world correctly.

In his first lecture *Calvinism a Life-System*, Kuyper argues that a great war is going on. On one side is modernism, which, he says, stands “in deadly opposition to this Christian element, against the very Christian name, and against its salutiferous {health-giving} influence in every sphere of life.” If Christianity is to hold its own in this battle, he says, “we have to take our stand in a life-system of equally comprehensive and far-reaching power” which life-system, he declares, is Calvinism. Unlike some “vague conception of Protestantism”, it can “furnish human society with a different method of existence, and populate the world of the human heart with different ideals and conceptions.” Such is Kuyper’s high view of Calvinism.

In the subsequent lectures, Kuyper argued how Reformed theology finds expression in and affects such areas of life as religion, politics, science and art. In the final lecture, he explored what must be done if Calvinism is to engage modernism effectively.

KUYPER’S IMPACT?

What Kuyper outlined in the Stone Lectures lays the foundation of the so called Neo-Calvinism movement, as declared by him

in the inauguration speech of the Free University of Amsterdam: “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!’”

Kuyper understood Christianity as a life system that was radically at odds with the cultural activities pursued by unbelievers. As David Naugle notes:

Regenerate people with a Christian worldview produce a roughly theistic interpretation of science, and non-regenerate people with a non-Christian worldview produce an idolatrous science. While Kuyper carefully nuances his position to avoid absurd conclusions, nonetheless he is clear that the experience of palingenesis [spiritual regeneration], which radically alters the content of human consciousness and reshapes worldview, makes a decisive difference in the way the cosmos is interpreted and science is pursued.

Kuyper’s approach has had far-reaching implications. Just as Paul has written in his letter to the Romans, “... do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” (Romans 12:2), the gospel should transform the culture. God created all things good; the Fall corrupted both man and creation, but the redemption of Jesus Christ is complete and, ultimately, all things will be redeemed. The kingdom of God extends to all spheres of life and “grace restores nature,” even though we will have to wait until the Second Coming to see this fully realised..

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