

A Critical Analysis of the Power of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Abraham Kuyper

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Abstract

Abraham Kuyper was a Dutch Reformed theologian at the turn of the twentieth century, raised in a Christian environment deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideas and values. He was a citizen of a nation which had undergone recent political transformations that concentrated civic power in the state and had created a situation in which the state was dominant over nearly all of life, the church included. And, consequently, Kuyper was ordained as a minister in a church which was beholden to a liberal state, whose ecclesial hierarchy mimicked the centralized power of the government, and whose theology had drifted from its Calvinistic roots as the waves of Modernistic theologies made inroads to seminary faculty, clergy, and laity alike. In response to this, Kuyper articulated the power of the institutional church which sought to address the perceived ills in church, state, society, and the character and flavour of the Dutch Reformed community at large.

For Abraham Kuyper, the institutional church is grounded in the structure of God's creation, emerging after the Fall and growing over time as another institution of human culture. It occupies an essential place in human culture, a sphere with its own direct accountability to Christ, independent from intrusion from the other spheres. The church exists in two modes of being: as an institution and as an organism dispersed through the whole of life. These are not two churches but a single entity which exists bi-modally as a gathered community (institution) and as a people or as organizations/associations actively participating in all of life with a unique identity and calling as Christians (organism). In both modes of being, the church exists to be the bearer of the salt and light of the Gospel to the world. But the institutional church does not accomplish its task with the same power as other

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cultural institutions - it has a unique form of power for its unique sphere of human life. This view of the unique power of the institutional church emerges from Kuyper's Calvinistic worldview - a worldview that addresses the nature and structure of creation, humanity's calling within creation, the effects of sin on both creation and humanity, and the scripturally-disclosed narrative structure to human history.

The power of the institutional church in Kuyper's ecclesiology is the unique ability and calling of this particular civic institution, in vital union with Christ, to proclaim the comprehensive Word of God (through proclaimed Word, celebrated sacraments, whole-life discipleship, and diaconal acts of justice and mercy), for the conversion of human beings to faith in Christ who are then equipped and disciplined in order to be sent out into the whole of the world to bear witness to Christ in every realm of creation and to use their gifts for the service of God, creation, and neighbour - individually and in associations and organizations of like-minded others within civil society. The power of the institutional church does not lie in the dominance or coercion of its hierarchical offices over the consciences of members or over the other institutions of civil society but rather the offices of the church serve God and neighbour. The power of the institutional church does not lie in its political, financial, or technological competence but rather in addressing the Word of God contextually to every aspect of life. This is a power that flows from Christ and his Word, through the agency of ordained ecclesial office-bearers in the local churches, toward the telos of God's new creation. The power of the institutional church is a kerygmatic power whose nature is incarnational, kenotic, and sacramental, sign and instrument.

This analysis of ecclesial power is then brought into critical and constructive dialogue with Jacques Ellul on the nature of the power of the institutional church, and with one of Kuyper's most recent interpreters who has categorized Kuyper's ecclesiology as sacramental. Using the documents of Vatican II, the sacramental nature of Kuyper's ecclesiology is limited and clarified for application to the church in the twenty-first century.