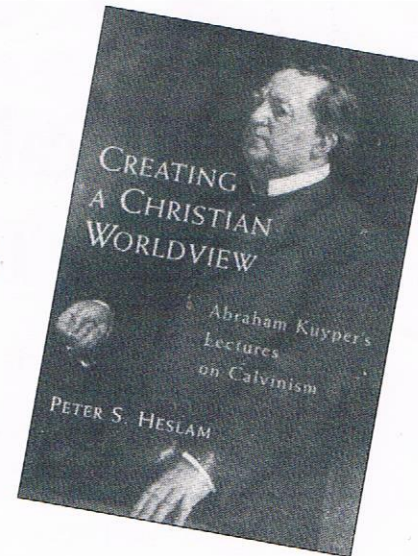


## Review

# Kuyper's Gift to Modern Christians

by Stephen Lazarus

*One of the greatest needs in American churches today is for followers of Jesus to recover a comprehensive Christian worldview to take the life-giving power of the gospel into every area of life. A new book by the English historian and minister, Peter Heslam, chronicles how one historic figure in the life of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper, developed a vision to encourage just such a renewal in Dutch society.*



### Heslam on Kuyper

In *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism*, Heslam does not attempt to provide an exhaustive biography of Abraham Kuyper. Nor does he offer a popular look at Kuyper's life and work for the purpose of inspiration or instigating activism. Heslam examines Kuyper's key ideas and their historical context. He focuses attention on how the Dutch theologian and prime minister developed the ideas which form the central thesis of his widely-published Stone Lectures—Kuyper's extended manifesto on the Christian worldview that he delivered to an audience at Princeton University 100 years ago. Heslam takes Kuyper's six lectures on Calvinism and culture and develops a careful, critical, historical commentary on each. He shows how Kuyper builds his argument that Christianity, and particularly Calvinism, offers a complete belief system and way of life that stands as an alternative to modern humanism.

Heslam's work can introduce a new generation to the main features of Kuyper's neo-Calvinist theology and political and social philosophy. Churchgoers and secular academics who still find the idea of Christian political philosophy to be a contradiction in terms need to be introduced to the fury and passion of Kuyper. Those already familiar with Kuyper's writings and achievements will appreciate Heslam's accomplishment of situating Kuyper's thinking in the context of 19th- and early 20th-century Euro-

pean thought, though his findings are not without controversy.

### Kuyper's Message to Modern Christians

It is Kuyper's main theme in his Stone Lectures that American Christians today especially need to hear. Heslam presents Kuyper's argument well. The modern world poses a challenge to the authority of Christianity. Modern humanism, with its roots in the French Revolution, denies the sovereignty of God, rejects his laws, and claims that we—and not God—possess all power and authority.

Furthermore, this denial by "modernism" of the truth and authority of the Christian faith is culture-wide. The arena of conflict is not limited to church doctrines and teachings, reflected, for example, in challenges made by liberal theologians to the divinity of Christ. The denial of God's sovereignty and divine revelation goes much further and is manifest in politics, education, the arts, indeed, in every facet of modern culture.

To counter this revolution, Kuyper calls Christians to cultural engagement to defend and extend Christian principles not only at home and in the church, but in schools, in government, in business, and everywhere in society. Kuyper envisions the people of God living out their faith through all of their diverse callings and responsibilities, thus confronting an all-embracing life-system of humanism with an equally comprehensive form of Chris-

tianity. In place of withdrawal from culture into a life of private piety and churchgoing, Kuyper invites his audience to a bold engagement with society, motivated by the conviction that this world belongs to God. Kuyper's life demonstrates how he worked tirelessly to implement this vision, editing a newspaper, serving as a minister, founding both a university (the Free University of Amsterdam) and a political party (the Anti-Revolutionary Party), and eventually leading the nation as Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905.

Calvinism for Kuyper was clearly not a narrow doctrinal system but a faith which addressed all of life. Heslam explains well the theological foundations of Kuyper's call for people to work for Christian cultural renewal in their society. Redemption for Kuyper is creation-wide or cosmic in scope. Thus, Christian involvement in politics and society is necessary to begin to reverse the social and systemic consequences of sin. Heslam points out that Kuyper's resolution of the question of the Christian's relationship to politics, society, and culture is one of his most important contributions to the church of his day.

### Calvinism and Politics

In his chapter on Calvinism and politics, Heslam helpfully summarizes the main features of Kuyper's political thought. For Kuyper, neither "we, the people" nor the state can possess sovereignty in any absolute sense. Only

God is sovereign, and to God all citizens must account for their actions, their politics included. Because all authority is established by God, political authorities are God's caretakers of the public order and deserve to be respected and obeyed by citizens.

The magistrates are indispensable to human life, because God ordained the state to restrain sinful humanity. However, while the institution of government preserves human society from self-destruction, citizens must keep a watchful eye on the state's exercise of authority to ensure it does not overstep the bounds of its authority and become destructive to other God-ordained institutions which compose the "organic" fabric of society, such as families, schools, churches, and businesses. Thus political leaders bear a triple accountability. According to Kuyper, they owe an accounting for their use of power not only to the people, as democratic thought suggests, but also to the many institutions of society and to God.

Kuyper criticizes the political philosophy of liberal individualism as antithetical at key points to a politics inspired by Christian principles. He rejects outright its attempt to deny God's sovereignty and to deduce the authority of the government from the right of the individual to enter into a social contract. "Authority over men cannot arise from men," he argues.

Kuyper praises Calvinism and not liberalism as the true source of American and European liberty. "In Calvinism lies the origin and guarantee of our constitutional liberties," Kuyper states, quoting his political mentor Groen Van Prinsterer. Calvinism secures liberty and "protests state omnipotence," he argues, "not by appealing to popular force, not to the hallucination of human greatness, but by deducing those rights and liberties of social life from the same source from which the high authority of government flows—even the *absolute sovereignty of God*."

Kuyper's political thought also recognizes the inescapably social character of human life and criticizes liberal political thinking for its individual-

ism and materialism. His critique prefigures one of the contemporary "communitarian" charges often lodged against liberalism, that it destroys the social bond between individuals.

Heslam notes that in Kuyper's address to the Social Congress in 1891 he links 19th-century liberalism to the elevation of the individual in French Revolutionary humanism, and rejects the fruit of both. Here Kuyper argues that while liberalism proclaims freedom, equality, and brotherhood, it also encourages in practice a "passionate struggle for possessions" that results in material inequality, great social need, and injustice.

Heslam criticizes Kuyper for exaggerating the opposition between

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## Kuyper invites his audience to a bold engagement with society.

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Christianity and liberalism. According to Heslam, Kuyper's lectures fail to distinguish between different strands of liberal thinking, represented by the tradition of French Radicals such as Voltaire and Rousseau, and the more moderate, less atheistic, British and American traditions of Locke and Montesquieu. However, here Heslam does not show how either Locke or Montesquieu retain a consistent emphasis on the sovereignty of God in their political thinking, which Kuyper finds lacking. This would strengthen Heslam's argument, because the secularity of contemporary liberal theory and policies in North America appears to justify Kuyper's concern about the humanist roots of liberalism of any variety.

Heslam also contends that Kuyper conceals his own indebtedness to the liberal tradition. He admits that Kuyper parts fully with liberal social-contract thinking. However, he also argues that Kuyper's concern for limiting state authority and protecting in-

dividual and group freedoms reflects the influence of liberalism. "Although [Kuyper] emphasized the Calvinistic origins of his political thought, he owed a great deal to the liberalism of Locke and Montesquieu in the formation of his views," writes Heslam.

The author does not discuss how or what portions of Locke or Montesquieu's thoughts influenced Kuyper's ideas on politics. It is also doubtful that the liberal tradition deserves credit for Kuyper's concern to limit the power of government and preserve individual and group freedoms. Heslam does not appear to take seriously enough Kuyper's argument that these are legitimate contributions Christianity has made over time to the development of political thought and practice. While Kuyper no doubt was influenced by the liberalism of his day, more documentation in Heslam's text is needed to demonstrate precisely where in Kuyper's thought the Calvinist influences end and the liberal influences begin.

Finally, one significant limitation of the book is worth noting. While Heslam provides one of the most thorough historical examinations of Kuyper's ideas available in English, he does not attempt to apply Kuyper's thought to contemporary politics or society. He appears reluctant to draw any conclusions in this area. Such conclusions may lie beyond the scope of Heslam's book, focusing as it does on Kuyper's intellectual environment. The reader, however, is left with the task of discovering how Kuyper's thought might guide Christian political action today.

This is an important challenge for Heslam's readers to take up. Acquainting ourselves with Kuyper's attempt to develop and implement an integrally Christian approach to politics will make us question our easy acceptance of politics-as-usual in this secular age. Most likely, we will discover a type of Christian political witness American society desperately needs.

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