

Dr. George Harinck (ed.)

Dr. G. Puchinger

Abraham Kuyper  
His Early Journey of Faith



# Chronology of the Life of Abraham Kuyper

- 1837  
October 29, born in  
Maassluis
- 1855  
Student Theology at Leiden  
University
- 1862  
Doctorate Theology
- 1863  
Minister of the Hervormde  
gemeente at Beesd
- 1867  
Minister of the Hervormde  
gemeente at Utrecht
- 1870  
Minister of the Hervormde  
gemeente at Amsterdam
- 1872  
Editor of the daily  
*De Standaard*
- 1874  
Member of Parliament
- 1876  
Mental breakdown
- 1877  
Editor of the weekly  
*De Heraut*
- 1879  
Founding of the  
Anti-Revolutionary Party
- 1880  
Opening of the Vrije  
Universiteit in Amsterdam  
with his inaugural  
address *Souvereiniteit in eigen  
kring* (*Sphere Sovereignty*)

- 1886  
Separation of the Hervormde  
Kerk (Doleantie)
- 1891  
*Het sociale vraagstuk en de  
christelijke religie* (*The Social  
Question and the Christian  
Religion*)
- 1892  
Union with Seceder churches  
and founding of the  
Gereformeerde Kerken
- 1894  
Member of Parliament
- 1896  
*The Encyclopedia of Sacred  
Theology*
- 1898  
Stone-lectures on *Calvinism*  
at Princeton Theological  
Seminary; honorary degree of  
the Department of Law of  
Princeton University
- 1899  
Supports the Boers in the  
Boer War; *La Crise  
Sud-Africaine*
- 1901-1905  
Prime minister
- 1908  
*Om de oude wereldzee* (*Around  
the Old World Sea*)
- 1907  
Minister of State
- 1908  
Member of Parliament
- 1920  
November 8, dies in  
The Hague

The Kuyper-Archive is located at the Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism, and has a volume of about 100 boxes. It contains more than 10,000 letters and many other documents relating the life of Dr. Abraham Kuyper.

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Translated by Simone Kennedy

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## Introduction

Dr. Jan de Bruijn

The recently established 'Abraham Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life' for 1998 has been awarded by Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey (USA) to the Dutch historian Dr. George Puchinger. Dr. Puchinger is the first director (1971-1986) of the Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam. On Saturday February 28, 1998, Dr. Puchinger received this prize at Princeton for his many merits in promoting the Calvinist theology and world view, especially through his publications on Abraham Kuyper.

The board and patrons of the Historical Documentation Center welcomed the honorable distinction granted to its former director with great approval. After Dr. Puchinger's retirement in 1986, he received national recognition when Her Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands appointed him 'Officer in the Order of Orange-Nassau' and when the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences honored him with its Akademiepenning in 1996. The award of the 'Abraham Kuyper Prize' shows that his work is appreciated internationally as well.

The volume and variation of Dr. Puchinger's oeuvre is evident from the 1286 entries listed in his bibliography, which was published by the Historical Documentation Center in 1996 in honor of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>1</sup> The hundreds of publications deal with diverse subjects in the field of history, theology, philosophy, politics, literature, and economics. Dr. Puchinger mastered a

wide range of genres in order to express himself adequately. He published biographies, monographs, selections of primary sources, essays, articles, reviews, speeches, interviews, meditations, and even poems. His style differs per genre; depending on occasion and audience it is lyric, solemn, descriptive, or terse. But despite this variety of subjects, genres, and styles, nearly all his work has a historical character. An able historian, Dr. Puchinger's intimate knowledge of the sources is matched by his writing skills, enabling him to reach a large public.

Despite Dr. Puchinger's broad international orientation, his work has never been translated into English. Therefore, the Historical Documentation Center decided that the occasion of the 'Abraham Kuyper Prize', was an appropriate moment to publish a representative part of Dr. Puchinger's work in English. *De religieuze Kuyper* (1987) and some other lectures best reveal Kuyper's essence: his spiritual biography. Dr. George Harinck, staff member of the Documentation Center, condensed these lectures into one essay. He removed references to specific Dutch circumstances, which would make this essay less accessible to international readers. The result is a representative piece of Dr. Puchinger's style, argumentation, and personality, not in the least thanks to the excellent translation by Mrs. Simone Kennedy.

The VU Uitgeverij of Amsterdam was willing to publish this booklet. The Historical Documentation Center is grateful for the support received from several persons and institutions: Mr. and Mrs. Rimmer and Ruth De Vries, Washington (USA), Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan (USA), the Institute for Calvinistic Studies, Seoul (South-Korea), and the Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg (The Netherlands). This cooperation does justice to the international meaning of Kuyper's legacy, as well as to the work and person of Dr. Puchinger, who rightfully received the first 'Abraham Kuyper Prize'.

Abraham Kuyper  
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[ 1 ]

Kuyper continues to fascinate us. Is it because of his dream or because of the reality he created? Both need to be distinguished. The young Kuyper tried to realize his dream with the help of a few intellectuals and large segments of ordinary people; and the result – a mixture between what he desired and what could be realized – he rigorously tried to maintain in old age. Both, his dream and the reality, continue to intrigue us.

It is remarkable that this highly talented character not only fascinated thousands of people, but also annoyed thousands; he attracted tens of thousands and repelled an equal number. Younger and older generations chose him to be their lifelong teacher and leader, and found support in his never ending stream of words and writings; while others turned their backs on him, because his message aroused strong resistance within them.

In personal meetings he could be very charming, with sudden utterances of bright ideas or outbursts of anger, just as in his writings. In his articles and brochures he could deal with his opponents as a cat treats a mouse. When contending with those who dared to speak up against him, he would at times be very emotional, then use roguish wordplays or mild, but deadly, irony.

He was not only able to fight, he was also belligerent; he was not only often right, he was also *rechthaberig* in his polemical

writings. He could not refrain from identifying each ally with his visionary scheme; while from his opponents he demanded compromise, otherwise they faced dismissal as being stupid or immoral. While Kuyper realized that there were many noble humanists, who were deeply religious in their own way despite being strangers to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas or Calvin, he never openly acknowledged this.

His soul was as devout as it was argumentative; sometimes repelling, other times heartwarming, at times grossly exaggerating, and occasionally reducing a complex issue to its most fundamental explanation. His contemporaries were compelled to watch all this in admiration, or in resentment. We sometimes smile at seeing so much mischief, but we cannot long turn away from the challenge of his work.

We have to add that Kuyper had the soul of an artist, with all the accompanying great qualities and flaws. Even in his seriousness he was often playful; he was not only changeable, but even whimsical; not just highly imaginative, but fanciful as well. When he made up a theory, right or wrong, he could elaborate on it endlessly. Moreover, he was not merely hurried most of the time, he was also sloppy – and this all was made worse by the myriad of daily tasks he had to complete. But with all this he possessed a large measure of something we usually lack: visual imagination.

When older, Kuyper observed the creativity of the youth in his own circles with some suspicion, although he had claimed and captured the creative spirit in manifold ways while young himself. Within his own Calvinist circle he could rescue everybody from all forces and opposition in the outside world, but after his death the Calvinists had to free themselves from his character and *theologoumena*. The church splits of 1926 and 1944 were partially products of this struggle.

All this may be true, but it does not undermine the force of Kuyper's principles and ideals for us today. It is not his ingeniously constructed theology that stays with us, nor the institutions he



founded, nor the hatred and love for his character that he evoked, not even the relationships he created among his followers and the sometimes depressing misunderstandings caused by his emphasis on antithesis. What remains and is decisive is his lifelong interaction with religion and the choice of his starting point: the orthodox church people in the village of Beesd, in the province of Gelderland, and later Amsterdam.

From the start Abraham Kuyper belonged to the Protestant community. This functioned as a climate where he could cultivate himself and develop into a good citizen and a learned scholar, rather than as a force shaping his religious set of beliefs.

That is not so surprising. What is remarkable is that early on he experienced a conversion in his life that showed him that not culture but religion touched his deepest emotions. At the university he had envisioned to serve the church with the goods of culture, but in his first congregation he already realized that he had to serve the culture with religion. This discovery, made with the help of the orthodox Calvinist people, filled him with the ceaseless inspiration he had missed during his years at the Theology Department in Leiden. When the religious spark was kindled, Kuyper's emotional self turned out to be a cultural powder keg, that, once it was brought to explosion, would leave its marks in the Netherlands to this day.

Only acknowledgment of the *religious* Kuyper enables one to acquire a right perspective to see all his other aspects, which are rich in number and fascinating in spirit.

In historiography it is, among other things, important to present a historical character in its simplest features, to portray a defining moment in his life unpretentiously and retell it with the help of known and recent facts. Only then such a character will stand, as born-again, *next to us in our world*. Only then we can cross ages and commence a conversation with the deceased in our spiritual world about our *own* questions, after we have first recognized *their* questions. In that spirit we will take as our

starting point *the* central event in the life of Abraham Kuyper, a *religious* event: *Kuyper's conversion*.

[ 11 ]

Abraham Kuyper was of humble decent. The eldest Kuyper known to us was Dirk Kuyper, a sailor, later cabinet maker, born around 1707 in Libau, Latvia, who married Anna Van Duyn in the *Nieuwe Kerk* on the Dam Square in Amsterdam. They got ten children, and the eighth was called Abraham, baptized on November 27, 1750, in the *Westerkerk* in Amsterdam. He became a brush maker. His son, Jan Frederik, born in Amsterdam on May 20, 1801, would become the father of the illustrious Abraham Kuyper.

For our topic it is important to briefly introduce Abraham's father, because he was an enterprising man. Twice Jan Frederik would experience a drastic change in his life. First he did not, contrary to his father's expectations, choose the profession of brush maker, but decided to work in a trade office. Furthermore, he had such a command of the English language that he translated a number of English religious tracts in Dutch for the Association of Religious Tracts. The excellent quality of the translation compelled one of the board members of the Association not only to encourage the young Jan Frederik to study theology, but also to provide the necessary financial assistance. On August 10, 1828, he was installed by his benefactor as a minister in Hoogmade.

On September 28, 1834, he transferred to the Maassluis congregation, where Abraham Kuyper was born on October 29, 1837, on a Sunday, a reason why his mother often called him her 'Sunday's child'. Apart from this, we know next to nothing about Abraham Kuyper's youth, except for a couple of anecdotes.

In April of 1841 the pastor's family left for the capital of the

province of Zeeland, Middelburg. In 1849 he was offered an esteemed position in his old university town, Leiden. There his son Abraham enrolled at the gymnasium and was taught by the famed historian R.J. Fruin, who would later also be his professor at the university. On July 16, 1855, the eighteen-year old Abraham Kuyper registered as a theology student at the University of Leiden.

Abraham was a student like many others in the 1850s: their university schooling continued an upbringing within an inclusive, rational, theological tradition. Theology was preferred by these students, as it was regarded to be a superior, noble and generally formative field of study, that was related to all the arts and humanities, a kind of *studium generale* organized around the study of God.

Generally students were armed with knowledge from two sources: they knew the classics, the Greek and the Roman texts, in their linguistic, historic, literary and philosophic aspects, and they knew the Bible. The latter was read in their families' home, where it had a place of honor. The Bible was also taught in catechism lessons and explained in the weekly sermons.

In similar circumstances Abraham Kuyper was raised. As for most students, university life meant an immense change for Abraham. But his transformation was quite different from what most people, even today, think.

The Theology Department in Leiden itself changed fundamentally by the teachings of the professors Scholten, Kuenen and Rauwenhoff. The Department wanted to subject all Protestant church doctrines and theological scholarship to renewed examination. The traditional Reformed doctrines seemed under severe attack by the Leiden professors.

Particularly, the classes of professor Scholten drew much attention, and many students were so impressed with him that one of them even wrote to his father: 'I really believe that Scholten is

greater than Paul.’<sup>2</sup> There were students from other university towns who saved money to be able to attend Scholten’s classes in Leiden for a semester, to hear how compelling he taught the new, *modern* theology.

But this is remarkable: in contrast to what is expected, and what is often said of him, the young Abraham Kuyper was *touched* by all this – who could ever withdraw from the impression Scholten made on his students and listeners? – but he was *not carried away*. He carefully observed the turmoil of theological innovation in Leiden, which attacked the Reformed orthodoxy, and it certainly affected him and his faith, but it did not tempt him to make the decision to have this theology influence his life for ever, as many of his fellow students did. As early as October 22, 1860, the student wrote his fiancée Jo Schaay: ‘There was no professor in the Theology Department I liked.’<sup>3</sup> On April 5, 1867, the young minister Kuyper wrote to G. Groen Van Prinsterer (1801-1876): ‘I have never been ‘modern’, but, unfortunately, for four years the modern education that I received in Leiden made me sink deeper and deeper into complete neology.’<sup>4</sup> Six years later Kuyper wrote in his *Confidentie*: ‘I will not say that I ever lapsed into positivism or godlessness, but I did not retain the slightest part from my old treasure.’ (page 35)

Kuyper lived with his parents on the Hoogewoerd in Leiden, and studied hard in the small room that he once called ‘my Patmos’. His diligence and endless energy, which evoked respect from his professors, was met with some reservation by his father, who thought that his son isolated himself too much from normal family life. That he was such a diligent student is understandable considering the lack of finances that troubled both father and son. For this reason he worked as a weekly tutor for high school students.

When a student he went through the same process as other great theologians, like Karl Barth, after him: unsatisfied with the teachings of his professors, in spite of their reputation in larger

circles, he studied for himself, in order to find his own way in the jungle of academia, a way that would be more satisfying than the path that was pointed out in his classes. He did not *follow*, he was a *seeker* and wanted to find his own solutions. Even this – the desire to do it yourself – is typically Reformed.

But undeniably he was very ambitious, since he wanted to master all aspects of his study to perfection. For his whole life, Abraham Kuyper would have the aspiration to teach himself everything there was to know in all the fields in which he became involved. In his time at the university this meant that he prepared himself feverishly for examinations so as to be sure of all the details. I do not intend to be purely negative about this ambition, because it also shows us his strong desire to do everything as well as possible, to not just study for the exams, but to understand and survey the topic and face the problems in the field of theology. By speaking of his aspiration I want to point out that, as a student, Kuyper yearned for achieving a great reputation among his professors and fellow students. In his polemics in later life Kuyper could be very harsh and judgmental of others; but as a student he was also brutally harsh on himself in his ceaseless studying.

But now a reality looms that defies all imagination: this brilliant man, who almost never lost a minute in joyful play and loose entertainment, who organized his days as a student according to a strict schedule, fell in love with a young, sixteen-year old girl, who can probably best be characterized with the words of Goethe's *Faust* about Gretchen:

Halb Kinderspiele

Halb Gott im Herzen!

This twenty-one year old theology student poured – with the power of a spiritual warrior – all his mighty intellect into conversations and correspondence with a lovely, joyous girl, to

make her equal to himself intellectually and spiritually. His first imperialism, his first disciplined pedagogy, his first tendency to control people and make them into his image, were directed to her whom he loved with all his heart. Her deficiencies in knowledge and intellect, in insights of faith and understanding of the world, encouraged him only to fill her with the knowledge and experience he had acquired himself. He would raise her to what he wanted her to be. Like Pygmalion he desired to form the image and breathe life in to her! In this he showed some measure of arrogance, of tyranny.

For five years he overwhelmed her through letters with his uncontrolled and passionate spirit. From the moment that *they* got acquainted with each other, in 1858, *we* can get acquainted with the young Abraham Kuyper, because all those hundreds of letters they wrote each other were saved, and have been available to researchers for the last twenty years. They are a clear source for those who want to get to know the young Kuyper personally and as rising theologian. Regarding the correspondence there is one feature that I would like to highlight: Kuyper the educator. He wanted to bring his girlfriend, whom he loved passionately, to his own intellectual level. He urged her to read literature, preferably foreign literature, and write him her opinions about these books. He sent her religious questions and wanted her to answer them flawlessly. He did not have much regard for her love for concerts and theater, which he thought useless pastimes; she had to read, to read profound books and write her opinion about them.

That she could barely handle this he tried to overcome by continuous stimulation and admonitions in his letters. Kuyper was a young scholar, who was very strict towards her for her own sake, as he saw it. He was always studying, she was daily busy helping her mother at home, a mother who did not understand why those children were writing each other all the time!

Those who read her letters meet somebody with an uncompli-

cated, orthodox faith, which was shaken to its foundations after being overpowered by the modern insights of the Leiden theology, but did not collapse under the attack. When you see her battle with the flow of letters that proved to be beyond her, letters full of questions he asked, admonitions and warnings he sent, and theological statements that made her almost succumb under his stern criticism, you inadvertently think of the line in the St. Matthew's Passion by Bach: 'Ach mein Lamm in Tigerklauen!' – we may put it this way since Kuyper himself came to the same conclusion.

The young Kuyper desired intellectual recognition even as a student, and, therefore followed the suggestion by professor Matthijs de Vries, who taught Dutch, to participate in a competition organized on April 15, 1859, by the University of Groningen on the Polish Reformer John à Lasco (1499-1560).

Nowadays in our newspapers we are flooded with notices of prizewinners, but in the middle of the nineteenth century winning a university competition meant more than obtaining a doctorate.

Kuyper's work for this competition was important scientifically for two reasons. First, to be able to write about an author you have to read his books thoroughly. The problem was that, although the titles of à Lasco's books were known, the location was not and no one knew how to find them, because the tireless Jesuits had burned the writings of the heretical Protestant à Lasco during the Reformation. In all of Europe one could only sporadically find his documents.

It was Kuyper's singular achievement that he not only wrote on à Lasco, but also located his books, which nobody had been able to track down before. It is almost impossible to describe how diligently Kuyper labored for more than a year on this competition, with nobody else taking on that same challenge.

And indeed, on June 15, 1860, the Theology Department at the University of Groningen sent word that they had decided to

'reward the golden medallion to the only treatise received after organizing the competition last year'.

Kuyper took the reward with flying colors, but had to pay a high price for it in 1861: a months' long depression. The professors from Leiden were concerned about their depressed student and forced him to take his final exams at the end of 1861, something Kuyper, the perfectionist, dreaded. At last, on December 6, 1861, he was examined and passed cum laude. *Cum laude* and *Abraham Kuyper* – they belong together for those who see a developing talent in him.

Although Kuyper wanted his dissertation to be a *biography* of à Lasco, his theology professors at the universities of Groningen and Leiden permitted him to rewrite his treatise for the competition and make his dissertation a comparative study on the opinions of John Calvin and John à Lasco on the church, since he had lost so much time because of his depression and was in dire need of a pastorate to earn a living. Thus Abraham Kuyper received his doctorate in theology summa cum laude on September 20, 1862, with the famous J. H. Scholten as his advisor.

[ III ]

To a certain extent everybody's life is an intersection of successes and setbacks. This was unquestionably the case with Abraham Kuyper, even though his followers and some historians have tried to present his career as one great victory! After receiving his doctorate he went through many ordeals: it took half a year before he got his first call to the pastorate and several of the churches that he had wanted to serve passed him by.

In these months of trial this young doctor's faith changed in an important respect. We should note that in the nineteenth century the moment of conversion to God was often a clearly demonstrable and datable fact, with Groen van Prinsterer and



others as examples of this. For Kuyper this need for conversion must have been an important idea, because he already wrote the following as a ten-year old boy, possibly his oldest available handwriting:

A. Kuyper. A holy Memory. To God in Heaven. To the King of kings from a humble heart: It was October 10, 1848, at 10:30 P.M. that I went to bed and was unable to sleep thinking of the evil I had done. It was at 11:15 P.M. that I was converted and made the firm decision to flee evil and strive for the good. Signed, Abraham Kuyper. Middelburg, 1848.<sup>5</sup>

It is a childish memo, but it shows sincerity. It proves that he was serious about religion already from an early age. It was an emotional impulse he would retain into his later life, which was of a purely religious nature and touched the heart of religion: the conversion.

The remarkable thing is that the young Kuyper, apart from this memo from his childhood, was converted *twice*: once at the end of his student days, in February/March 1863, and the second time, date unknown, during the initial period as a pastor in Beesd. From both conversions he left important testimonies, including those in that precious book, *Confidentie*, written in 1873.

The first conversion, which took place in Leiden, was an ethical conversion, and happened after reading the English novel *The Heir of Redclyffe* by Charlotte Yonge, a present of his fiancée. Kuyper had always been very sensitive to foreign influences. In this book he felt for the first time the influence of Anglican spirituality and experienced the deep truth Calvin wrote in his first sentence of the *Institutes*, that there is a deep, secret relation between knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves. The first sentences of the *Institutes* are, after all, as follows:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.<sup>6</sup>

Both the letters to his fiancée, Jo Schaay, and the later *Confidentie* show that the young Kuyper's soul was seized by the author Charlotte Yonge, and that he humbled his proud intellect before the God who calls sinners to confess. In this first conversion Kuyper also received the insight that he needed to be born again and converted just like any other human being, because he could not produce any good by himself.

In *The Heir of Redclyffe* two characters are central: that of the strong-willed Philip and the much milder Guy. It was during the reading of this novel that a major change took place in young Abraham Kuyper's heart. In his book *Confidentie* he would later write:

It was as if in the broken Philip my own heart was smashed, as if every word of self-condemnation spoken by him pierced my heart with judgment on my own ambitions and character, and I envied the happy person who did penance. (page 41-42)

He now knew that not the strong and grandiose, that he had initially admired in Philip, was the real thing, but the purity of Guy, even though it was weak.

The student, whose letters to his fiancée were usually full of admonitions and critical suggestions, desires and lessons concerning *her* development and education, seems broken by the hand of God, as when he writes on March 2, 1863, to his fiancée:

Things were not right with me. I was too self-satisfied, too ostentatious, too selfish, too much lacking in nobility, too little a child of God. For years I have deceived myself and

told myself that I did good, I rocked my conscience and my naive soul asleep. I no longer knew what sin was, I never had remorse. (...) I could no longer control myself, it was already half past twelve – I was alone in my study, went upstairs, fell down on my knees and prayed, long and passionately. I had not done that for years. (...) Did I search for God? No, it was virtue, a concept, an ideal, that I raved about, that fit with my ambition, that kept me standing and brought me this far. But I did not know God, because the confession of sins and the deep, inner remorse of a broken heart were still strange to me, they did not live in my heart. If I had written to somebody else but you, my dear Jo, I would have torn up my letter fearing that the confession of my struggle would have been interpreted as another expression of my ostentatious heart; but you won't think so, I know that.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to quote one more self-description about this period, in which he writes on his own inner life. This section of a letter to his fiancée is written three weeks later on March 22, 1863:

First I was a child, as simple and faithful as a child can be. But I was left too long in that stage, there was no transition to the world and the years as a student, and when the shock came and my childish faith fell, it did not hurt me a bit. Nevertheless, Jo, with that childish faith true religion disappeared from my soul. And still I loved that faith, even though I had lost it. But through you I found it back, it is not as strong, but it is back nonetheless. There was a time that I tried to destroy that image of me as a faithful child in you, too. But I changed my mind just in time. (...) Only now I understand how my vanity must have annoyed you, how it must have grieved your religious heart.<sup>8</sup>

Four years after having read the novel by Charlotte Yonge, on

April 5, 1867, Kuyper wrote Groen van Prinsterer: 'From that moment onward I *was* fundamentally orthodox, without even knowing it myself. But I was not yet enlightened, my heart had not yet illuminated my intellect.'<sup>9</sup>

Every human being needs an ethical conversion and new insights into the life of the soul. But that remains a secret between God and that person, in this case between Abraham Kuyper and God, something he only entrusted to his fiancée.

His second conversion in Beesd was quite different.

[ iv ]

In the meantime the year 1862 had passed without Abraham Kuyper having received a call. The churches were not looking for learned doctors in religion; they had other requirements than theological and scientific ones. After a half year of waiting Kuyper finally received a call to Beesd, a village between Utrecht and Den Bosch, only accessible by carriage or farmer's cart.

Kuyper was very satisfied with this call, because it meant that he could marry his beloved, which happened on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863. The first sermon preached by Kuyper on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 1863, in the evening service, after having been installed by his father in the morning service, dealt with 1 John 1:7: '(...) if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another'. In this sermon Kuyper expressed already a desire for community, when he remarked: 'Or don't you see with what passion this need for community makes itself known in my own heart.'

The short-tempered Kuyper came to Beesd with very high ideals, which I have never seen better described than in his September 1860 letter to his fiancée:

My happy star will climb high in the sky of my life – hopefully not too high, may God keep me from self-exaltation – so that

God may prevent that my whole life can be summarized in one word on my grave, in the bitter word Disappointment. Please, sustain my aspiration, nurture and challenge my ambition, encourage and stimulate me not to lay down or laze away, point me to the dangers which I have to overcome, and be my guardian angel, sent by God to make me what I can be.<sup>10</sup>

But in Beesd the frightening thought struck him, which had tortured him as a student, that he not only would be forgotten as a pastor in a village, but that nobody outside of the village boundaries would even be aware of his existence. Next to his normal tasks as a pastor – preaching, house visitations, catechism classes, caring for the poor, classis meetings – he wanted to *achieve* something. He felt that he owed it to himself and to the university that he would achieve, for the time being, scholarly goals. After his dissertation on Calvin and à Lasco he wanted to publish the writings and letters of à Lasco, and, after having been in Beesd three-and-a-half years, he accomplished this enormous task in 1866. The writings and correspondence of à Lasco were published in two volumes and introduced by Kuyper in a 120-page preface in Latin. The volumes received recognition and praise in the national and international academic world.

Kuyper made progress in Beesd as a scholar, but as a pastor he was not very well received by his parishioners. It was neither dissatisfaction with the fulfillment of pastoral tasks, nor his short temper in disagreements that annoyed them. But his frequent trips to foreign countries – to research archives – were considered to be unnecessary and undesirable to the farmers and laborers in Beesd, who themselves rarely left their village. Even the thought that their minister could be absent in days of cattle plague – which is a threat to a farmer's existence – was unimaginable to them.

What would turn out to be a lasting influence by his church on Kuyper was of a wholly different nature. It came from what we would call now the orthodox wing in his church, living on the fringes of the church. A group – if they can be called that – with which Kuyper initially had no contact.

To know how Kuyper looked upon this group of dissatisfied church members we should go to the *Confidentie*, in which he tells us clearly and engagingly how the two, the young preacher and these people with deeply held religious convictions, met one another. The work load in his new congregation was heavier than he had initially expected. In his *Confidentie* he writes about this:

In the circles where I moved a strict conservatism prevailed, with a few good exceptions. This conservatism was orthodox, but not really illuminating and devoid of spiritual resilience. There was no voice from the deep, no voice from the distant past in the revelation of congregational life. People were satisfied with the way it was. They wanted to receive from me, but preferred not to give anything back. (page 44)

Kuyper continued, and I will let him speak without interrupting:

I did hear that there was a group of dissatisfied church members, but the rumors indicated that those pedants were not the nicest people. They were quick to take offense, proud and peculiar, ‘making life difficult for every pastor’, and mostly from such low descent that it was best not to be upset by them and get out of their way, like former pastors did. But I had trouble doing that, and while doing house visitations I also knocked, with a trembling heart – like young pastors who approach those fires – on the doors of these very principled people. These people certainly did not treat me in a

friendly fashion. They had heard from the public that my orthodoxy was still immature and they did not yet see me as a human being, but as a representative of a church, which was not well disposed towards them, and so they reacted against me. Even though they were somewhat upset, those simple people did not put me off. They were not absorbed in the habits of daily life, they had principles, they could talk about more than just 'nice weather', about 'he is sick' or 'his laborer was sent away'. Here I found an interest in spiritual matters. Moreover, they were knowledgeable. Being educated at the university had not given me enough knowledge of the Bible to be able to compete with these simple people. But not only did they know their Bible, they also had a well-organized world view, which was based on traditional Reformed theology. It sometimes seemed as if I was seated again in the classroom, hearing my talented professor Scholten teach on the 'doctrines of the Reformed Church', but with an opposite sympathy. What was most attractive to me was that they did not only talk about their history, their life experiences, perceptions and emotions, but that they had lived through them. This made me come back. My return visits in turn aroused sympathy and so we started talking. The verbal arguments quickly ended. I often tried to continue to present myself as the minister, but, nevertheless, I felt mostly drawn to listening instead of speaking, and involuntarily I noticed that such talks made preaching easier on subsequent Sundays. But it still bothered me that they stuck to their strict convictions. From all the flexibility shown by me I had thought they would have been a little more sympathetic. But no, there was not even a shadow of lenience. I noticed that these people were not trying to gain my affection, but to convince me of their case. They were not willing to yield and it became increasingly clear to me that I had to make a choice: I had to either resist them sharply or go along unre-

lently until the 'full sovereign grace', as they called it, was fundamentally accepted, without leaving even the smallest space for any of the safety valves in which I tried to find salvation. I did not resist them, and I still thank God for that decision. Their tough perseverance became a blessing for my soul, the rise of the morning star in my life. (page 44-45)

In this context I have to name Pietje Baltus (1830-1914), a miller's daughter, who was still young, in her mid-thirties, while Kuyper was the pastor in Beesd, although *we* only have pictures of her as an old woman – she died when she was 84.

It is a well-known fact that she refused to shake the Rev. Kuyper's hand when he tried to visit for a house call because she found him a deficient minister, who did not preach the full gospel. This was not only an act of principle, but also of courage. She not only refused to go to church as a protest against the preaching, she also dared to offend the minister personally.

And how did Kuyper respond? People have sometimes written and spoken about the objectionable side of his personality, but in this situation he showed that he had a good character. It would have been logical to expect the minister, whose office was highly respected those days, to be deeply offended by Pietje Baltus' refusal to shake his hand. But he was not! It is touching to see how this young, not yet thirty-year old minister tries to convince her to shake his hand, which she eventually does without taking back any of her convictions. She shook his hand, she told him, only as a human being.

It was his greatness that Abraham Kuyper did not leave her place as an insulted person, did not decide to never come back and to tell his elders and deacons and everybody who would have wanted to listen how badly she had treated him and had offended him, but that he, instead, thought deeply about her tough attitude. Eventually he would write the following after her death, in a March 30, 1914, article in the daily *Standaard*:



The distinctive feature of this, at the time still young, woman was her *determination*. (...) She adhered to the full confession of faith for which the martyrs had died. She had seen in all that yielding and compromising the approach of death. Even when Dr. K. became a minister, she did not want to have anything to do with him. Still there was a meeting, a meeting that changed Dr. K.'s opinions because he suddenly grasped in this woman *the power of the absolute*, and from that time onward he broke with all half-heartedness. The meeting was followed by an education in the spiritual heritage of the fathers. The Synod of Dordt, which had always repelled him, became attractive. Calvin illuminated him. This simple woman changed his life from *half* to *full*, and Dr. K. continued to remember that only through their meeting he was brought to where he now feels he should be.

Nobody should think that Kuyper's spiritual transformation happened overnight: it was a lengthy process of spiritual struggle, taking place in the Beesd parsonage. Kuyper battled long bouts of depression, in which he would rise from the table and sing at the top of his voice Psalm 42:5: 'Hope thou in God, the God of thy salvation.' To the outside world Kuyper was always a passionate and militant warrior, but in his own home he was a worrier, restless, concerned, and alarmed about his own life's journey and that of the church he served. Moreover, in his village he was, as he wrote Groen van Prinsterer on April 5, 1867, 'lonely and completely deprived of intimate friends who share my convictions',<sup>11</sup> somebody who struggled with God like Job and the psalmist about his path of life.

In his loneliness in Beesd, this very learned young doctor, who had been so successful at the University of Leiden, followed a second set of courses going from farm house to worker's slum. There, on the fields of Beesd, the light of Ephraim dawned and pierced his heart, thanks to the most uncomplicated believers,

who knew nothing of Leiden scholarship, just as Abraham Kuyper knew nothing of the treasure of orthodoxy, buried in the fields of Beesd. Let us one more time hear Kuyper in his *Confidentie*:

How can I be helped! I did not have conservative-orthodox books, I never saw them, they were unknown to me. This is how it was among the theology students in Leiden. The orthodox confessions were presented to us in such ludicrous caricature that it would have been extravagance and a waste of money for poor students to spend their money on such useless writings. I had acquainted myself with Calvin and à Lasco, but the thought had never crossed my mind that I could have been reading truth. My heart was still opposed to it. I read and studied their books for a historical issue, a formal issue, and simply tore their ecclesiastical view away from their root (...) And what happened? Well, those laborers, who had hidden themselves in a corner, told me in their Betuwe dialect exactly what Calvin gave me in perfect Latin. Calvin lived, however distorted, in these simple laborers, even though they had rarely heard his name. Calvin had taught in such a way that people could understand him, centuries after his death, in a foreign country, in a forgotten village, in a room with a tile floor, by laborers with ordinary education. (page 46, 47)

These common laborers and farmers admonished him more harshly for his lack of religious knowledge than his Leiden professors had ever done – and he let them teach him. Only in Beesd was the proud Kuyper a humble man, while listening to the plainest people. In Beesd the young doctor Kuyper arrived as a bigwig among small people, but he became small among those people whose rigid opinions he valued as great.

No one can understand the Kuyper he became without realiz-

ing that his decisive *confessional* transformation was not an academic conversion, but a religious one, which happened through the talks with the simplest farmers and laborers of Beesd, who pointed him the way spiritually.

Abraham Kuyper's intellectual education may have been in Leiden, but his firm convictions were formed in Beesd, nowhere else.

[ v ]

What was Kuyper's own conclusion after all this? He did not join those 'fellowships' to which Pietje Baltus, who in her disapproval did not attend church, belonged. But at the same time he understood that the faith of the farmers and laborers in Beesd was indeed a reliable *foundation*, although their words could not be the last words spoken. Kuyper understood that this faith had to be reformulated in contemporary language. Leiden had offered him academic insights, but not 'nourishment for the heart'.

Just as John Henry Newman experienced moments of repulsion and anger against learned theologians who, in the words of H. Dooyeweerd (referring to Luke 11:52), had 'taken away away the key of knowledge', so did Kuyper. In Leiden he learned to compose theological works, but he now understood that the melody came from the farmers and laborers in Beesd, which he sang in his own voice.

Kuyper was born-again, but he did not consider it his life's fulfillment to preach his religion to others. Otherwise he would have continued to be a minister, he would have been satisfied to stay in Beesd, as was expected from every pastor and priest. No, Kuyper wanted to represent something else as journalist, political agitator, member of Parliament, professor, social lobbyist, and prime minister. He wanted to point to the fact that, even in a neutral state, the public character of religion needed to be taken into account. Not only in education, but also more generally in

the opportunity for every religion – Catholic or Reformed, orthodox or liberal, humanistic or non-Christian – to be *expressed* and *respected*.

Kuyper was not only a restorer, he also was an innovator. After he discovered, like no other theologian, that the Reformed element in society could not be eliminated, he understood that it had to be *restored* and made *decent*, in other words, it had to be *thought through* again.

Like no one before him he took the simple people by the hand. He did not proudly expose their naiveté and ignorance, did not mock or ridicule them, he did not subject them to irony, torment, and opposition, as was customary at that time and widely applauded by scholars, journalists and other civilized people. Instead, he healed them from many weaknesses and patiently educated them. He understood that however much he might have accomplished, he could never forsake or abandon these people who had transformed him. These people should continue to be the starting point of all his work, even his greatest visions. For them he became, therefore, what the Swiss people once said of Vinet: 'Le pasteur de nos pensées'.

Kuyper served the church his entire life: as minister, scholar, elder, and journalist. In this last function it is remarkable that he always directed himself to the simple people in the country. Practically the only work he consciously wrote for theologians and scholars after his dissertation was his impressive *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, in which he thought to have laid the foundation for all Reformed scholarship. His disciple-turned-renege, A.H. de Hartog, developed an even more extravagant perception of Christian academics, while Dooyeweerd constructed a more coherent and K. Schilder a more critically thought through vision on Christian scholarship. But all three are indebted to Kuyper for their view that Christian religion should be integrated in academia, in its foundations as well as in the way it expresses itself.

Kuyper experienced an inner struggle between dogma and prophecy, between insights and emotions, ecclesiastical policy issues and his personal calling. Could he limit himself to testifying? Was he faithful enough when he declared judgment on the church in preaching and writing while lashing them harshly, or did he have to come forward as a tactful and patient medicine man who would make them long to be healed from their ailments, whose existence and diagnosis was only known to a few? In short: did he require too much or too little from the church and himself?

Kuyper still had a long way to go. We know what the high points of his life were: his pastorate, his writing for the daily *Standaard* and weekly *Heraut* for half a century, the dozens of brochures he wrote, his membership of Parliament, the formation of the *Vrije Universiteit*, his social actions and his term as prime minister. He was partially *prepared* for all this at the University of Leiden, but was *grounded* above all in his twofold conversion.

For his whole life he would remain faithful to the orthodox people. He reeducated them, pulled them out of their backwardness to participate in the public life of church, state and society. But only after having been converted *to* the people was he able to come *forward* on their behalf and represent them in press and Parliament.

*How* he did this is open for discussion, but that he would always talk about the light that he discovered on the fields of Beesd is his great secret, the key to the rest of his life. Anyone who forgets or neglects that central fact does not *know* Kuyper intimately, and at best can have understood his work only *partially*.

Certainly, there is an ecclesiastical Kuyper, a political Kuyper, an anti-revolutionary Kuyper, with views on national and international political issues, such as education, the colonies, and the entire area of society. But all this is not rooted in the classrooms of Leiden, but in the fields of Beesd, where he followed a second

set of courses during his house visitations. There he was decisively transformed.

[ VI ]

Our generation knows what happened afterward: the Reformed Churches split, the Anti-Revolutionary Party no longer exists, the *Vrije Universiteit* is broadened and changed in character, so much so that many true Kuypersians are alarmed. But there is one continuum amidst these three institutional changes: *Kuypers stayed*.

I do not want to assert that he is an 'institution' like some people thought he was, but Kuypers was, like other great men in history, a source of inspiration, whose spiritual legacy survived not only his own generation, but also continues to inspire the next. This is, of course, partly dependent on the state, the party, the church, and the circles in which a person lives. Because inspiration always has an element of mutuality: a spark contains fire, but for the fire to burn, the spark needs to be picked up by something else. Whether you accept the work of his life or not, whether you make it the guide for your life or not, his life's work remains a mountain of rocks, climbed by only a few. But the remarkable feature of it is that from a distance it looks, if not charming, still fascinating and majestic.

Kuypers is not easy to put aside. Older and younger researchers continue to be interested in him. We should remind ourselves that there is still much scholarly work to be done before we can form set and well-grounded judgments. Theologians, philosophers, and politicians may have criticized him, whether or not they wanted to follow in his footsteps, but their conclusions were at best adjustments. When we ponder the universality (breadth) and the religious earnest (depth) of Kuypers, we understand that Kuypers is not in the first place for us, his brothers and sisters in

spirit, a scholarly subject of research, but a moving preacher who calls church and state to do penance and return to the Word of God. It is characteristic of a prophet, that we will never be completely certain how to interpret him...

What was his lasting contribution to society? This question cannot be answered academically, but brings us in all times and places to a religious self-examination to know where we are and should be. And that was his deepest wish: he was himself always ready for religious self-examination and had in his entire life called other people to do the same.

If you want to know St. Francis, you should go to Assisi; if you wish to understand Newman, you have to go to the small and unpretentious church of Littlemore near Oxford, where he preached his parting sermon for his Anglican friends.

If you want to follow Kuyper, or want him to be your guide in faith, you have to start where he started: with the faith he embraced in Beesd and held on to for the rest of his life, so that, when he died surrounded by his children and was no longer able to speak, he pointed to the image of Jesus on the cross, hanging above him on the wall.<sup>12</sup>

This reminds us on the words he wrote to his daughter Jo on February 2, 1903, which summaries so much of his life: 'My calling is high, my task wonderful, and above my bed there is an image of Jesus on the cross, and looking upon it, it seems that He asks me every night: What is your part in the cup I drink? His service is so elevating and so wonderful.'<sup>13</sup>

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