

Harry Van Dyke, “Hermeneutic of Suspicion.” CC, December 10, 2018.

It was good of Gerry Gerrits to write a review article about Jeroen Koch’s 2007 biography of Abraham Kuyper (“The ‘Complete’ Kuyper,” Nov. 12, 2018). Great spiritual leaders, too, have feet of clay. Their weaknesses and shortcomings, let alone their misdeeds, should not be hidden or explained away. In each case, truth demands a more “all-round picture,” as Gerrits rightly notes. Fortunately, distance in time and ongoing research often help keep the record straight by balancing “a saint’s life” with “a sinner’s faults.” The current interest of North American evangelicals in Kuyper’s ideas about Christian involvement in public life is not likely to rekindle the mistake of a particular segment of the Reformed people a century ago who fell into the trap of idolizing the man.

Yet a word of caution is in order. Koch seems to lack the first requirement of a biographer: the ability to empathize with his subject. To be sure, he incorporates a great deal of research into his book of 672 pages. The result, however, is a biography that suffers from what may be called a hermeneutic of suspicion. At almost every turn Koch interprets what Kuyper said, or wrote, or did, in a negative way as either self-serving hypocrisy or misguided delusion. His struggle for church reform and the campaign for freedom of education is described by Koch in terms of outdated orthodoxy and personal ambition. While I appreciate Koch’s nuanced account of the railway strikes of 1903, he spoils it for me by ascribing the forceful response of the Kuyper government to an inflated sense of the office of government.

Here is a sample of how Koch summarizes two phases of Kuyper’s career: “The spontaneous revolt of the Christians under the guidance of the holy spirit [sic] against the liberal occupiers, an uprising he awaited halfway the 1870s, never materialized. And the attempts of his Cabinet to refashion the country in accordance with God’s blueprint equally suffered shipwreck.” (573) Both sentences refer to real historical developments, but scholars will recognize the descriptions as twisted and the wording as tendentious.

To those still interested in the subject after reading Koch, I would recommend the not uncritical yet far more reliable biography of Kuyper by James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).