

*Kuyper the evangelical*¹

In terms of his published work, Abraham Kuyper is probably best known for his tomes on academic, social, economic, political and theological topics.

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However, another genre of Kuyper's writing is beginning to receive (renewed) attention in English, namely his volumes of meditations and writings on the Holy Spirit. I have decided to contribute to that revival by

¹ *Christian Courier*, May 26, 2014, p. 11.

translating one of his meditational books, the title of which I translate as *The Ascent of the Son – The Descent of the Spirit: 26 Meditations on Ascension and Pentecost*.

Kuyper explains that he treats Christ's Ascension and Pentecost in one book because these events are so closely related. Though the church today tends to downplay Pentecost and almost ignore the Ascension, Kuyper insists on their importance. You can't do without them and you can't afford to ignore them, for they are together woven into your entire spiritual life.

The birthday of the Catholic world church

"On Pentecost, the Church of God steps onto the world stage as the universal Catholic world church," the introduction begins. It's a majestic declaration. Undoubtedly, at the time of the event itself, people would have been surprised at such an opening, since the community of believers was a mere handful. Could even the most ardent believer at the time envision a universal church? I like the spirit of that opening. The world church deserves that kind of declaration, for it represents the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Why does Pentecost, not to speak of Ascension, command so much less attention today than Easter or Christmas? For his own day, Kuyper explains that this was "not because Pentecost has less value or respect, but because it appeals to a level of imagination and conception too high for the average person and is too spiritual. Pentecost is the noblest of the three feasts, but only for those who have tasted the noblest. Only those who themselves have received the 'first fruits of the Spirit' can truly celebrate this Feast of the Spirit!"

We need to revive Pentecost, "the noblest of the three," as well as Ascension. If you are born again, Kuyper would want you be the one to start this revival!

Universalized spiritual memoir

I have become convinced that these meditations reflect Kuyper's own spiritual journey and makeup. As we'll discuss, he underwent a lengthy conversion experience during which he struggled intensely. His earlier liberal theological convictions toppled one after another. One of his biographers, Frank Vanden Berg, wrote, "his inner spiritual struggle of those days was one of those intimate personal experiences that remain behind the veil. One does not publicize them." I believe that these meditations represent much of his own personal spiritual struggles; that he did, in fact, write about them here. It was just not in acknowledged biographical format.

Furthermore, these personal experiences were mixed with his theological instincts, with each one influencing the other. Many of the chapters contain heavy trinitarian theology stuff mixed with what he considers universal Christian spiritual experiences, but which, I have a hunch, were, in fact, personal rather than universal.

Though I deeply appreciate reading these profound reflections on his spiritual experiences, I cannot always identify with them, even though he universalizes them. My experiences are different, probably a little more relaxed, from those of this intense man for whom everything seemed so absolute. I can point to experiences in my own life, but not to the antithetical type Kuyper experienced and thought common.

Kuyper's spiritual struggles never ceased. They reflect the ups and downs of St. Paul, who would descend from the mountaintop of praise and worship down to the cry that, of all men, he was the most miserable. Kuyper's forceful personality, his native quest for power and his proclivity towards pride would continually trip him up and lead to moments of despair.

The eyes of the soul

Faith and angst seemed never far from each other in what he considered a typical Christian's struggle: "Would God forget his grace and never again bless with his mercy? Was the experience of salvation only something momentary in order to let him sink into even deeper suffering? Was it a mere glimpse of a light beam that would make the dark fears in his heart even more real? And so the soul goes under, defeated. Oh, no, not so fast, not immediately. At first, when this situation develops, he, that typical Christian, doesn't know it and is not aware of missing anything. But once this forsaken state ends and the Lord revives his soul again, that's when the regrets and the pain return. And only when the Comforter returns, does he realize with unspeakable pain that the Comforter had left him."

But such struggles, real as they are, always end in victory: "Even among those born again, the eye of the soul can at times close again either partly or fully so that it can no longer see the Spirit clearly, but in such cases the consoling face retains his presence; the Holy Spirit does not withdraw. Not for one moment should we entertain the thought that the struggle of King Jesus for the further development of his Kingdom is ever suspended for even a minute."

In these meditations every true Christian is portrayed as having experienced deep and profound struggles of fear and despair until she crosses the spiritual threshold and comes to rest in the arms of a compassionate Father, now glorifying in his love and peace.

Ponder, don't analyze

I would guess that most born-again Christians go through some struggles before "delivery," but Kuyper's description of the process and experience is over the top. He was extremely intense and absolute. He had a strong love for power and needed to dominate. His egotism sometimes seemed almost boundless. It was only when he read a novel of two brothers in which all these characteristics of strength and power were pitted against those of

love and self-sacrifice with the latter clearly ending up in victory, that the truth finally dawned on Kuyper: he had to give all that up.

But then, once the light of God has entered our souls and we've given up all that negative stuff, we begin to "see all of reality in a totally different perspective, both things on earth below and in heaven above."

If you plan to read these 26 meditations, allow yourself time to let them sink in. You could read one every two weeks, spend a year absorbing them and, with this deep focus on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, deepen both your intellectual and spiritual life. After all his detailed analysis of Trinitarian affairs, Kuyper advises with respect to Pentecost, "Ponder, but do not analyze too much." That man of power and overstatement put it so gingerly and tenderly: "When you fall on your knees, this gaze in faith carries you quick as lightning, within one heartbeat, from your prayer room to the Lord in Heaven. Then you are in the presence of your Jesus, in whom you recognize the Lamb that was slain, and you worship him with a love that melts your soul."

That's the spiritual tone with which he closes many meditations. Kuyper, the most unabashed Evangelical of all Kuyperians!