

COMMON GRACE IN ABRAHAM KUYPER'S *LECTURES ON CALVINISM*

Bálint Márk Vásárhelyi

A Short Biography of Abraham Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper, whose father was a Reformed pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church, was born in 1837 in Maassluis. Kuyper began to train for the ministry in 1858. He received his first call to the church of Beesd (1863) and went on to serve in two more pastorates, Utrecht (1867) and Amsterdam (1870). While the training he received was modernist and liberal, during his ministry he converted to the orthodox Reformed faith. As a pastor and theologian, he fought for the reformation of the church, until he resigned from the ministry to become a member of the Dutch parliament in 1874. Kuyper was one of the leaders of the movement *De Doleantie* (1882), the members of which were *aggrieved* at the departure of their denomination from the gospel. They left the state Reformed church in 1886. There had been an earlier reformatory movement in the Netherlands, namely *De Afscheid*, which seceded from the established church in 1834. In 1892, the two movements united.¹

In 1874, having resigned from the ministry, Kuyper became a member of the Dutch parliament. Kuyper was a member of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, which formed a coalition with the Roman Catholic party. This coalition enjoyed electoral success in 1901, with Kuyper becoming the prime minister of the Netherlands, which office he held until 1905.²

He was also one of the founders of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, a Christian school “free from any governmental or ecclesiastical control,”³ in which institution he taught dogmatics from 1880 to 1902.⁴

¹ Herman Hanko, *Portraits of Faithful Saints* (Jenison, MI: RPPA, 1999), pp. 358–368.

² Hanko, *Portraits*, pp. 368–370.

³ Hanko, *Portraits*, pp. 370–371.

⁴ www.ccel.org/ccel/bavinck

The Doctrine of Common Grace

Kuyper stands in the line of orthodox Reformed theologians. However, he introduced some new ideas into Reformed thinking, the most influential of which was the doctrine of common grace, a doctrine that posits a general favour of God towards all men and women, head for head. This common grace of God supposedly promotes the well-being of mankind and society.

Kuyper's goal was to *Christianize* the Netherlands and her colonies, which he tried to do by forming a coalition with the Roman Catholic political party.⁵ Thus he used state powers to promote his goals, using as his doctrinal justification the idea of common grace, which he had introduced into Calvinism.⁶

The doctrine of common grace had significant consequences in church history, especially in the United States, where the three points of common grace (1924) occasioned division in the Christian Reformed Church with the eventual forming of a new denomination in 1925. Three ministers, Rev. Herman Hoeksema, Rev. Henry Danhof and Rev. George M. Ophoff, refused to subscribe to this teaching. Viewing it as unreformed, irreconcilable with Scripture and contrary to the confessions, these men and their congregations, with others, formed the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, a denomination which continues to this day.⁷

The doctrine of common grace also has serious consequences for the six loci of dogmatics, namely, anthropology, ecclesiology, eschatology, soteriology, Christology and theology, as well as the doctrine of the covenant and other fields. Many of these consequences are developed in Kuyper's book, *Lectures on Calvinism*. Here we mention only the most significant issues.

With respect to anthropology, traditional Calvinism teaches the total depravity of man. God forbade man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, threatening him with death if he disobeyed (Gen. 2:17). Adam fell into sin, with the result that, "according to the Scriptures, the sinner is dead, everlastingly dead, unless he is quickened by the Holy Spirit through regeneration in Christ, who is the resurrection and the life."⁸ Paul writes, "And you

⁵ Hanks, *Portraits*, pp. 369–370.

⁶ Herman Hanks, *Contending for the Faith* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2010), p. 352.

⁷ Hanks, *Portraits*, p. 399.

⁸ Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2003), p. 94.

hath he quickened, who were *dead in trespasses and sins* ... by nature the *children of wrath*, even as others ... Even when we were *dead in sins*, hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace ye are saved)” (Eph. 2:1, 3, 5). In contrast to the clear testimony of Scripture, Kuyper’s common grace teaches that after the fall man did not die: “Adam and Eve did *not* die on that day ... immediately after the fall into sin the revelation of [common] grace entered.”⁹

According to Kuyper, there are two kinds of grace. The first is saving, particular grace (Dutch: *particuliere genade*). The other is a temporary, common grace (Dutch: *gemene gratie*), which restrains sin. Without common grace, particular grace cannot even work.¹⁰ God deals with humankind according to His common favour towards all men absolutely.

However, according to Scripture, the fact that man did not lose his mere physical life is not proof of God’s grace, because man is still under divine wrath and judgment. This is evident from Ephesians 2:1-5, as well as Romans 5:12 (“by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men”) and other passages.

The doctrine of common grace breaks down the antithesis between the seed of the woman (Christ and, in Him, the church) and the seed of the serpent (the reprobate wicked). This antithesis is a result of God’s particular, sovereign grace, and it is nothing else than the spiritual separation and opposition of Christ’s church and the godless, wicked world.¹¹ The covenant of God with His people implies that those who belong to God’s people are spiritually separated from those who do not. God’s people do not have a common cause with God’s enemies, for the church fights for the gospel and for God’s glory, which the wicked world opposes. Contrary to this, common grace gives a common ground for God’s people and the wicked, which results in the covenant people building Christ’s kingdom in alliance with the wicked.¹²

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 1 (Te Kampen: J. H. Kok, Fourth Edition, 1939), pp. 219-220: “Adam en Eva zijn op dien dag niet den dood gestorven ... terstond na den val in zonde de openbaring der genade intreed.”

¹⁰ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol. 1, p. 223: “Zonder die laatste [gemeene gratie] kan de eerste [particuliere genade] haar werking niet doen.”

¹¹ Ronald Hanko, *Doctrine According to Godliness* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2004), pp. 209–210.

¹² David Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2003), pp. 70-71.

Common Grace in Kuypers Lectures

According to its promoters, common grace is the main factor behind the development of the human race.¹³ This implies postmillennialism: before the return of Jesus Christ, a golden age is to come in which the church will be in power, as the fruit of common grace. Although Kuypers himself was not a postmillennialist, a consequent development of his doctrine is exactly this teaching, an eschatology popular in today's Christianity but in contrast with the traditional, Reformed amillennial view, which is supported by both Scripture and the confessions. According to amillennialism, there is no golden age before Christ's return. Instead, the Antichrist will arise, during whose reign the church will be persecuted. Christ will come quickly, defeat the Antichrist and bring His people to His eternal glory.

Lectures on Calvinism

The book, *Lectures on Calvinism*, contains six lectures on Calvinism given by Abraham Kuypers at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey in 1898. Kuypers's Calvinism, which is really Neo-Calvinism, is a product of his historical and philosophical background, differing widely from confessional Calvinism, as we intend to demonstrate. In *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kuypers develops the system implied by his doctrine of common grace, with each lecture or chapter being devoted to a certain aspect of Calvinism. Thus, after showing that Calvinism is a certain life-system or worldview, the author discusses the relationships between Calvinism and religion, Calvinism and politics, Calvinism and science, and Calvinism and the arts, concluding with a consideration of the future of Calvinism.

Calvinism as Worldview

The first lecture demonstrates that Calvinism is a *life-system*, which is Kuypers's term for *worldview*. Kuypers shows that Calvinism can be understood in different senses: the *sectarian* use of the term refers to Protestant minorities in Roman Catholic countries; the *confessional* Calvinist is one who believes in predestination; some include the term in the name of their denomination, hence its *denominational* use; and, finally, it might be used in a *scientific* sense, referring to the philosophical and political content of this idea.

¹³ Cornelius Van Til, "Common Grace – I," *Westminster Theological Journal* 8.1 (November, 1945), pp. 39–60.

Kuyper also explains the requirements of a life-system: it is the relation of a human being to God, to other men and to the world. Using these criteria, Kuyper compares five different worldviews: Paganism, Islamism, Romanism, Modernism and Calvinism. Kuyper argues that Calvinism is important in the general development of the human race, claiming that Calvinism is true because it, in distinction from the other worldviews, represents a high stage of man's development, which has also much benefit for humanity. Kuyper's Calvinism proclaims that "in the world we should realize the potencies of God's common grace."¹⁴

It is striking that, when defining worldviews and Calvinism in particular, Kuyper misses the original meaning of Calvinism. Indeed, even more surprising is that the central figure of Calvinism, namely, Jesus Christ, is not even mentioned in the first chapter. His name first appears in the middle of the second lecture on page 59. Kuyper insists on Calvinism as a political system but *without Jesus Christ*. This is but a feature of Kuyperian *Neo-Calvinism* and the result of common grace, a common ground of believers and unbelievers. The worldview introduced in this chapter, therefore, is not distinctively Reformed, but positivist and humanistic.

Authentic, orthodox Calvinism is centred in Jesus Christ, as the head of the covenant. The real Calvinist worldview is not based on common grace: "it is God-centred ... It is about God and His glory ... [It] honours Jesus Christ as Lord."¹⁵ It is also antithetical, not promoting an earthly life but a heavenly, for the Christian is a pilgrim on earth. He is not interested in ultimate human development, and he is not "engaged in the work of building a good, godly, and even Christianized city on earth."¹⁶ The Christian's goal is the cause of God and His Christ, the cause of the gospel, as he holds the hope of Christ's eternal kingdom by faith and by grace. We can conclude that the worldviews of Kuyperian *Neo-Calvinism* and of biblical, orthodox Calvinism are not the same but antithetical to one another.

¹⁴ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), p. 31.

¹⁵ David J. Engelsma, "The Reformed Worldview," in David J. Engelsma and Herman Hanko, *The Reformed Worldview* (USA: British Reformed Fellowship, 2012), pp. 18, 19.

¹⁶ Engelsma, "The Reformed Worldview," p. 25.

Calvinism and Religion

The second lecture considers the relation of Calvinism and religion. Kuyper enumerates four fundamental issues related to religions. First, does a particular religion exist for the sake of God or for man? Second, is the religion direct or mediated? If it is mediated, there must “stand a church, a priest, or ... a sorcerer, a dispenser of sacred mysteries, between God and the soul.”¹⁷ Third, is it partial or does it impact our whole existence? Fourth, is it normal or soteriological? With this last question, Kuyper is asking whether the religion views the present condition of man as normal or as abnormal, with man needing salvation. Having compared the answers of a few religions and philosophies, Kuyper draws the following conclusions regarding Calvinism.

First, in Calvinism, religion is for God, for “the creation exists for the sake of God” and for His glory.¹⁸ Hence, religion is “exclusively a sentiment of admiration and adoration.”¹⁹ In this respect, Kuyper conforms to orthodox Christian teaching.

Second, Calvinism is direct, not mediated, for no church, no priest and nothing else may stand between God and man. The mediator between God and man is God Himself. While the church is necessary as the covenant people of God, it is not an organization between God and man. Although we agree with Kuyper's teaching on this point, the very name of the only Mediator, Jesus Christ, is missing. It is strange that Kuyper makes only a vague reference to Him, namely, the One who is both God and man. Surely, it would have been better to mention His holy name at this point.²⁰

Third, Calvinism is an all-comprehensive worldview that affects the whole existence of humankind. Strangely enough, at this point Kuyper reasons from common grace. It is true, as Kuyper claims, that man is “constantly standing before the face of his God,”²¹ but that is not God's grace: it flows from man's position as a creature and from God's omnipotence.

¹⁷ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 47.

¹⁸ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 45.

¹⁹ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 46.

²⁰ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 47.

²¹ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 53.

Finally, Calvinism is soteriological by which Kuyper means that man's present, sinful condition is abnormal since, in the beginning, God created him holy and righteous. The Holy Spirit regenerates man through the testimony of the Holy Scriptures. With this we fully agree, but Kuyper apparently misses the key point and figure of soteriology, namely, the *Soter*, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We do not find any reference to Christ under the head of soteriology, which is a huge failure.

Calvinism and Politics

The third lecture Kuyper devotes to the relationship between Calvinism and politics, claiming that the dominating principle of Calvinism is the sovereignty of God, which is true, in the state, in society and in the church. Calvinism, therefore, contrasts sharply with the French Revolution (1789-1799), which places sovereignty in the hands of the people. Calvinism is also opposed to the idea of the sovereignty of the state, which considers itself as a "mystical conception,"²² its will is sovereign and "everything must bow before this will."²³ The State "having no one above itself, actually becomes *God*."²⁴

Against this background, Kuyper demonstrates that "all authority of governments on earth originates from the Sovereignty of God alone."²⁵ In this connection, Kuyper again reasons from common grace, claiming that, since "a sinful humanity, without division of states, without law and government, and without ruling authority, would be a veritable hell on earth,"²⁶ God by His common grace sustains life on earth, using magistrates and civil order for that purpose. However, according to orthodox Reformed teaching, God maintains order in this world for the sake of the church, to preserve the seed of woman, Christ and His people, for His sovereign purposes and for His glory, without any common grace.

While Kuyper rightly points out the failures of the worldviews of the French Revolution and German historical pantheism, he also fails by promoting an

²² Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 88.

²³ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 89.

²⁴ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 89.

²⁵ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 82.

²⁶ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 81.

alleged common grace towards all men, head for head, instead of proclaiming God's particular grace in the redemption of His people alone.

Calvinism and Science

Kuyper's fourth lecture is on Calvinism and science, in which he enumerates and develops four principles. First, Calvinism nurses a love for science; second, Calvinism restores science to its proper domain; third, Calvinism gives liberty to science; fourth, Calvinism reconciles science and religion. Kuyper argues that faith leads to a high view of science in pursuit of a better understanding of God's creation. In Protestant countries, science flourished more than in Roman Catholic countries, something Kuyper demonstrates from history. It is certainly true that, after the Reformation, science began to flourish in Europe more than ever before. In Protestant countries, the Romish Inquisition could not persecute those whose findings disagreed with the official teaching of Rome in scientific questions. However, since the confessions do not address scientific questions but are concerned with faith, Calvinism had no reason to oppress scientific research. The orthodox Calvinist who confesses God as the Creator should have a high view of science, that is, science in keeping with scriptural principles.

Nevertheless, we object to Kuyper's claim that science is the product of God's common grace. If it were true, God would be gracious to ancient pagan and Islamic cultures. Moreover, if science is independent of faith in God as Creator, it is sinful and serves only the pride of man.

According to Kuyper's common grace, there is good in fallen man.²⁷ Kuyper claims that God's common grace "produced in ancient Greece and Rome the treasures of philosophic light."²⁸ Common grace explains why the "unbelieving world excels in many things" and "[p]recious treasures have come down to us from the old heathen civilization."²⁹

However, if science is good in the sight of God, if it is a precious treasure from God's common grace available to both believers and unbelievers, then

²⁷ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 123.

²⁸ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 125.

²⁹ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 121.

man is able to perform some good and is not totally depraved, contrary to the teaching of orthodox Calvinism. At this point, Kuyper's Neo-Calvinism sharply diverges from real Calvinism.

Calvinism and Art

The fifth lecture develops the relationship of Calvinism to the arts. Since Calvinism has no trace of art in its worship, there is no “art style” peculiar to Calvinism. Instead, Calvinism recognizes God as Spirit who demands spiritual worship. We can find “no trace or shadow of art for worship in all the apostolic literature.”³⁰ Nevertheless, Kuyper claims that Calvinism, “by releasing art from the guardianship of the Church, first recognized its majority.”³¹ This means that the spheres of religion and of art are separate.

Kuyper claims that man as “image-bearer of God [still] possesses the possibility to create something beautiful ... This ... is ... an unbroken (continuous) utterance of the image of God.”³² This means that, since man is still in the image of God, there is some good in him. Man can create something reflecting “the Beautiful and the Sublime in its eternal significance.”³³ This is a shocking claim for, according to the Reformed confessions, the image of God in which man was created was “true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise Him” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 6.). Therefore, after the fall, man lost the image of God, so that he is no longer righteous and holy, and he does not know God rightly or love Him. Instead, he hates God and he cannot live with Him or praise Him. In short, man is “wholly incapable of doing any good” and “is inclined to all wickedness” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 8). However, Kuyper claims that through the arts even the unbeliever can “glorify God and ennoble human life,” which claim is without any biblical warrant.³⁴ Furthermore, if it were true that “art reveals

³⁰ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 147.

³¹ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 157.

³² Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 142, footnote.

³³ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 143.

³⁴ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 153.

Common Grace in Kuypers Lectures

to us a higher reality than is offered by this sinful world,”³⁵ and that “art has the mystical task of reminding us in its productions of the beautiful that was lost and of anticipating its perfect coming luster,”³⁶ then art must be used in Christian worship. Then Rome is vindicated in her veneration of images and sculptures, while the Reformation was sinful in opposing them. Moreover, the second commandment is void and senseless, and we should make graven images for religious purposes.

Not every kind of art is lawful according to the Scriptures for not every form of art glorifies God. We agree that a holy psalm sung for God’s glory does so, because God Himself commanded us to praise Him with singing, but it is very dubious whether an unconverted Shakespeare or Picasso glorified God with their godless art.

Calvinism and the Future

The last lecture considers Calvinism in the future. Kuypers notes the spiritual degeneration of his age, by which he means the falling away from Christianity. The effects of the French Revolution were evident in Kuypers’s day, as they are still in ours: godless science and hedonism flourish. Kuypers shows that Calvinism is a high stage of philosophical development, recommending it to the churches for their study and confession, and he even promotes a certain alliance between Reformed churches and Rome, because they confront common enemies.³⁷ We agree that the French Revolution has had a great impact on the last two centuries: its ungodly consequences on human thinking, science and religion are unquestionable. It is also unquestionable that there is a “spiritual degeneration,” for which the “responsibility ... rests in part with the Christian churches themselves,” as they neglected their calling to witness to Christ, becoming corrupt and compromised with the world.³⁸

Nevertheless, the doctrine of common grace still pervades this lecture, for Kuypers claims that, when Christ appeared, then “by His Gospel alone was the

³⁵ Kuypers, *Lectures*, p. 154.

³⁶ Kuypers, *Lectures*, p. 155.

³⁷ Kuypers, *Lectures*, p. 183.

³⁸ Kuypers, *Lectures*, p. 175.

society of that time saved from certain destruction.”³⁹ Contrary to Kuyper, Christ did not save human *society* but His elect church, His own covenant people. The redemptive work of Christ is not the hope of the *world* but the hope of the *church*. The Reformed, amillennial church does not set her hope on a certain development of humankind and she does not stand side by side with Rome to fight against other enemies of the gospel. Rome *is* one of the great enemies of the gospel, all her claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Therefore, the Christian church, rejecting alliances with the ungodly, trusts in her mighty Lord and Saviour, and sets her hope on Christ’s sure promise that He will return on the clouds to save His elect remnant.

Unfortunately, the false reasoning of Kuyper leads to false ecumenism, so that the church, setting aside some of her doctrines and rejecting the antithesis, involves herself in a fight on the side of a false church like Rome. Thus she compromises herself, and corrupts more and more of her doctrines. This is the sad decline that we see in the churches of our day in the Netherlands (Protestantse Kerk Nederland), the home country of Kuyper; in the USA (Christian Reformed Church); in Hungary (Hungarian Reformed Church); and all around the world.

We urge the reader to turn away from Kuyper’s Neo-Calvinism and to hold fast to the authentic, orthodox Calvinism of John Calvin, the Reformers and the precious Reformed confessions.

³⁹ Kuyper, *Lectures*, p. 174.