

Abraham Kuyper

23.X.1837 — 8.XI.1920

Abraham Kuyper was born in 1837 in a manse of the national church of the Netherlands. His father was a minister of the Reformed Church of the fishing port of Maassluis in the province of South Holland. His mother was of Swiss extraction, while the Kuypers had come to the Low Countries from the Baltic region several centuries earlier. Bram spent his boyhood years in Middelburg, where merchantmen lined the quays and the lure of the sea was strong. He was a zestful, talkative and gregarious lad who was often found near the harbour chatting with sailors and captains. On one occasion he persuaded a circle of longshoremen to listen to his reading of a tract against using the Lord's Name in vain upon promising each of them a cigar, a box of which he had "borrowed" from his father's study. A precocious learner, he was homeschooled, excelling in his English and French lessons.

To benefit from the educational opportunities in Leiden, the family moved there in 1849. Bram breezed through prep school and at 17 enrolled in the University to read letters and theology. Here he acquired a love of literature and an intellectual appreciation of systematic theology, but also a distinct leaning towards modernistic doctrines that denied miracles, including our Lord's resurrection. His reading of the popular novel *The Heir of Redclyffe* led to a conversion experience which broke his spiritual smugness with the words "A broken and a contrite heart the Lord will not despise" and which awakened in him a longing for a "Mother Church that guides our steps through all our life."

After receiving his doctorate upon defending a brilliant dissertation on the ecclesiology of the Polish Reformer Johannes à Lasco, he accepted a pastoral charge in the rural village of Beesd. Here he continued his interest in church history by publishing editions of primary documents from Reformation times. But the young *dominee* did not neglect the work of preparing eloquent homilies, which generally

were a great success, and—a more difficult task—paying home visits to his parishioners. On one such visit a young woman of the lower classes refused him the courtesy of a handshake “because he did not preach the ancient Truth.” Indeed, Kuyper was coming into contact with many humble folk who held strong views on sin and grace and the need for regeneration and godly living, views that came shrouded in the mystery of election yet couched in a well-ordered worldview. The humbled pastor went back to his study and pored over Calvin and the later divines. Before his move to Utrecht he had adopted a system of biblical truth that gave him, as he put it, “peace of mind and firmness of step.”

Meanwhile, he had published a pamphlet composed with journalistic flair and pleading for lay involvement in the calling of pastors, an option recently made available. Kuyper hoped that the church could thus be reformed from within by having its orthodox lay majority prevail over its liberal, latitudinarian leadership. The pamphlet was the first of over 250 publications, large and small, written during his lifetime.

It was in the city of Utrecht that the ongoing schools struggle brought Kuyper into contact with Dr. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–76), the elder statesman from The Hague. Kuyper joined the national association that campaigned to unmask the so-called religious neutrality of the public common school and to demand equal treatment by government for private Christian schools. Groen was the spiritual father of the anti-revolutionary—that is, *anti-secularist*—movement in the land. Kuyper now rapidly developed into a trenchant critic of a state and society dominated by secular liberalism, and into a proponent of a vibrant up-to-date Christianity that could act as a leaven in society and be a formative power in culture in the broadest sense.

In 1870 he became a minister in the Amsterdam church. Here he launched a newspaper, *De Standaard*, to which he contributed daily editorials and weekly Bible lessons and devotionals, a discipline he would maintain for nearly fifty years. In 1874 the Rev. Dr. Kuyper took the step of surrendering his clerical orders, to take a seat in parliament on a “Groenian” or “anti-revolutionary” platform for which he was developing an extensive programme of principles and policies. His maiden speech was devoted to child labour, while he also participated, during this session, in debates on the colonial question and educational reform. There followed a short flirtation with the revivalism of the Brighton Movement of that decade, later disavowed by him because of its inherent theological perfectionism.

A new education bill brought the schools question to a head in 1878. A Liberal

measure, it provided for expensive upgrading of all elementary schools in the land; to this end, the public elementary schools were to be endowed by the state, while private Christian schools were declared ineligible for public funding. Kuyper orchestrated a People's Petition against the bill and its discriminatory monopoly for the secularists. For collecting the 300,000 signatures he mobilized the anti-revolutionary voters' clubs throughout the country as well as the hundred odd local cells of the Anti-School Law League. Though the petition failed, its wide grassroots support helped Kuyper in the very next year to achieve the founding of the Anti-Revolutionary Party as a national organization, to act as a unified body during elections and in parliament. The ARP led the way in Holland's evolution to a modern parliamentary democracy.

Another year later, Kuyper and half a dozen Amsterdam associates founded the Free University, for the equipping of the Reformed people to participate Christianly in scholarship, the leading professions, and the public life of the nation. At its dedication Kuyper delivered an oration entitled "Sphere-Sovereignty" in which he defended the view that since education had a mission quite distinct from state and church it ought to be free of both. For the next twenty years Professor Kuyper would teach systematic theology and apologetics, as well as linguistics and literature. One fruit of these halcyon years was five tomes of Lecture Notes on Dogmatics.

In 1886 the national church suffered a schism. The large Amsterdam consistory, stacked with Kuyperians, refused to accept the transfer papers of members who had been confirmed with known liberal pastors in neighbouring towns. The intransigents were suspended and later deposed. Together with several hundred like-minded congregations the Amsterdam church formed a new denomination and shortly thereafter merged with the existing Free Reformed churches (which dated back to a secession in 1834). Thus were born the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, a church denomination that was to mount a great work of missions on Java and to offer powerful resistance during the Nazi occupation.

A high-point in Kuyper's career came in the year 1891, at the First Christian Social Congress, which he had helped organize and to which he contributed a stirring opening address on "The Problem of Poverty." In 1894 he was returned to parliament to fight for extension of the franchise. In 1898 he travelled to the USA to receive an honorary law degree at Princeton University and to hold the Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary. The *Lectures on Calvinism*, with its delineation of a comprehensive worldview and its call to action, still makes for inspiring reading (it was last published in 1994, in India). Kuyper's prominence during these later decades

is reflected in his correspondence with Josephine Butler on the European regulation of prostitution, and with Andrew Carnegie on the organization for international law for which the Peace Palace would be built in The Hague.

Following the election victory in 1901 for the Christian parties, Kuyper headed a coalition government of Calvinists and Catholics. As Prime Minister he soon had to deal with a serious illness of the Queen as well as a wildcat railway strike that threatened to turn into a general strike for political objectives. In consequence, of the raft of social legislation bills that he drafted, few ever made it onto the order papers. However, Kuyper did have the satisfaction of successfully defending, among other measures, a Temperance Act and a Higher Education Act.

When turfed out of office in 1905, he went abroad to tour the countries of the Mediterranean basin; the resulting travelogue was sold in two resplendent volumes which sold widely. Upon his return he was elected to a seat in the upper chamber as well as appointed to the Privy Council.

After 1917 Abraham Kuyper's powers began to fail. One by one he had to lay down his functions. The end came in November of 1920, when he died in the Lord. He had a private funeral, but public interest in the passing of the statesman was immense. The lower house prorogued its meeting that day for lack of a quorum. According to his last will, no elaborate memorial was erected, only a simple headstone, engraved with his name and dates, and the words:

Asleep in Jesus.

—Dr. Harry Van Dyke
Redeemer College
Ancaster, Ontario
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