

## Chapter 22

### Christian Politics According to Abraham Kuyper

#### Chapter Summary

The earliest systematic expression of Abraham Kuyper's thought in English is found in his 1898 Stone Lectures, published as *Lectures on Calvinism* and regarded by Kuyper himself as an authoritative statement of his views. In addition to discussing politics, this work includes Kuyper's views on religion, art, education, and science. Informed by his arguments, students should be able to understand contemporary issues in religion and politics in North America far better than if they do not study Kuyper.

He was born in October 1837 into the home of a Dutch Reformed minister who preached a liberal or modernist form of evangelicalism. After earning a doctorate in theology in 1863, Kuyper was ordained as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. In attempting to enlighten the members of his first congregation to the truths of the modern world, Kuyper himself converted from advanced theological liberalism to a living faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. As a result of this deeply emotional experience, he returned to Calvinist orthodoxy.

Following moves to Utrecht then Amsterdam, Kuyper developed a comprehensive world-and-life view to express his living faith and Calvinist convictions. In 1869, he met Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer who had founded a small Calvinist group in the Dutch parliament based on what the latter called "anti-revolutionary principles." Kuyper supported these ideals and helped found the first modern Dutch political party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party. Elected to power in 1888 with a slim majority, the Anti-Revolutionaries appointed Kuyper prime minister in 1901 until his defeat in 1905.

Declaring conservatism dead and liberalism dying, Kuyper sought to re-create a Christian perspective on politics and society that would form the basis for Christian social action, which he envisioned as an integral part of a Christian world-and-life view based on Scripture and its interpretation within the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition. For Kuyper, Calvinism "has a theory of ontology, of ethics, of social happiness, and of human liberty, all derived from God." He taught that life revolves around three fundamental relationships with: (1) God, (2) mankind, and (3) the world. In Calvinism alone, he argued, one finds the right balance between these vital relationships.

The determinative principle for Calvinist political theory, Kuyper argued in his writings and lectures, is "the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos." From this statement of principle he deduces three realms of sovereignty: the state, the society, and the church. He then refers to these realms as integral wholes or "spheres," identifying his political principle as the application of the principle of "sphere sovereignty" to politics.

A. The state: Kuyper does not define what he means by "the state," yet appears to mean the civil government as recognized by the citizens of a country and by foreign powers. Due to sin and the fall, man's original unity was fractured thereby necessitating political life to make life in a fallen world tolerable. Kuyper rejects theocracy, teaching that the state has three duties to perform: (1) to

draw a boundary between the different spheres to avoid social conflict; (2) to defend individuals and weak elements within each sphere; and (3) to coerce the separate spheres to support the state and uphold its legitimate functions.

B. The society: It includes the family, business, science, arts, etc., and stands in antithesis to the state. The family is the basis of all human social relations based and is based upon the primal blood relationship. Government, in contrast to society, is a mechanical device set over people with power over life and death to be exercised in the administration of justice. Within the social sphere Kuyper finds numerous others (social relationships, corporate, domestic, communal, etc).

C. The church: Kuyper believed that implicit in Calvin's teaching about liberty of the conscience is the ideal of a free church in a free society. While acknowledging that unity between churches has an aesthetic appeal, he argued government must suspend judgment in this area and allow divisions to exist among Christians because "the government lacks the data of judgment" and would "[infringe] the sovereignty of the Church." Allowances must be made for historical and cultural differences between denominations and Roman Catholics are to be accepted as allies against atheism.

Regarding the sovereignty of the individual Kuyper argued that "conscience is never subject to man but always and ever to God Almighty." His overall aim was to enable "every man to serve God, according to his own conviction and the dictates of his own heart." In developing Calvinist themes Kuyper was carrying on the task of reformation.

A number of ambiguities are evident in Kuyper's work. What does he mean by spheres within society? Does he mean "relationships" as per Durkheim? His reference to the sphere of state as above the sphere of society is puzzling—what is the relationship between the state and society? At times it seems Kuyper almost falls into that class of theologians who say the state is a result of sin, although his view is really not that simple.

Kuyper's work is perhaps more of a vision or model than a blueprint to be followed. He blends two dominant models of society in one political theory, bringing together the mechanistic image of the state usually associated with radical thinkers with the organic image of society favored by conservative thinkers. This may be a truly Christian third way. Kuyper offers a uniquely Christian vision of the state and society based on Scripture.