

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION

ACCORDING TO ABRAHAM KUYPER

29 Propositions by

NOTES:

1. The limited time available to me for this project prohibited me from doing the wide research in Kuyperiana that the subject deserves. I pretend no more than to give you a basic outline without proper nuances. I am aware that without these nuances, I cannot claim much authority for these notes. This is rough work—at its best, I hope. This paper can help you begin the journey into deeper research.
2. This paper consists mostly of short propositions without expressed connections to each other. They are a distillation of the rough draft read to a seminar organized by the Reformed Spirituality Network at Hope College, Holland Michigan in July 1999. It has since undergone slight revision in August 1999 and had some footnotes added in February 2016, the year it was published on this website.

INTRODUCTION

1. Kuyperianism has been around long enough to deserve the epithet of “*tradition.*” Traditions easily degenerate into rigid systems among later generations. Severed from their original context, they begin to appear as rigid and impractical theories that lack their original freshness and dynamism. They develop an aura of mustiness and now become rejected as hopelessly conservative by a people living in a different context who have not familiarized themselves with the original sources. Others will react by a selective adherence to the tradition, one that misses the grandeur of the original as well. These propositions hopefully recapture some of the original freshness and dynamism. ***A reading of the original reveals a passionate concern for liberty, a throbbing affirmation of a religion that embraces life and culture in a comprehensive way and a vigorous engagement with that culture. This has all the hallmarks of a genuine, creative, Holy Spirit driven revival in the best and deepest sense of the word, a very***

unusual movement of the Spirit. Ignoring this movement because of superficial prejudices and ambitions is nothing short of blatant disregard and ingratitude for a very unique and special gift of God to His people that needs to be shared with the ecumenical community, for which, in fact, many out there are searching as a viable option for Christian engagement in mission and culture.

2. Among the CRC, one finds a wide range of reactions from outright rejection—it is seen as outdated, conservative, un-American—to continued inspiration. *Important components, after being recycled through the Evangelicals return to the CRC in hollowed-out fashion.* EG: worldview, wholism, spiritual warfare/antithesis.

3. A considerable number of *Evangelicals have latched on to Kuyperianism* with enthusiasm in reaction to their own background. Charles Colson is probably the most famous example.

4. Kuyper reacted to various groupings of his age. One of these were *the Evangelicals*. After a brief and disastrous flirtation, *he turned his back on them for their narrow dualistic view of the Christian religion.*

MAIN PROPOSITIONS

5. The original way in which humanity was to serve God was the *cultural mandate*. Through it the race was to express its divine image. It constituted part of our religious, spiritual service. Though it was deeply distorted through the fall, this mandate has not been withdrawn.

6. *Gen 3:15 marks the beginning of spiritual warfare.* Here begins the battle of spirits, of principalities and powers, between the seed of Christ and satan.

7. *“Spiritual battle” is the contemporary Evangelical term for what Kuyperians call “antithesis.”* “Antithesis” sounds old and musty to many Christian and even

Reformed ears. It is considered part of that dull Reformed tradition that many “Reformed” have attempted to shake off in favour of the more contemporary “spiritual warfare,” a term that sounds so much more refreshing and vital. See Jeff Stam’s *Spiritual Warfare* as a case of CRC evangelical recycling of Kuyper.

8 An example of Kuyper’s description in English of the *concrete and vivid nature of this antithetical spiritual warfare* can be found in Bratt, pp. 88-89. Kuyper gave a very concrete description of it in a meditational setting that puts it squarely in the parameters of spiritual warfare. I reproduce it in translation. He asks, “How does the Lord God want us to behave over against the hostile powers that seek to subdue us in this world.” He identifies these hostile powers as fallen angels, fallen people and fallen nature. He begins with the fallen angels:

Satan is an unusual and superior creature of the Almighty God. It can even be safely said that satan* is the most exceptional/superior/capable creature of all. Some pious Christians have called satan “the brother of Jesus.” This is not a bad way of putting it. After all, in the Bible satan is portrayed as the officer in charge of the entire kingdom of devils over against Christ as the Head of God’s army. Thus, if in accordance with the Scriptures, we think of the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness as two powers with opposing spiritual motivations, each with its own Head, then satan and the Messiah equal each other in rank. He, satan, is the head of the kingdom of destruction in the same way as the Messiah is Head of the Kingdom of Grace. We do not find a power equal to the Messiah in rank among either the good angels or human beings. That terrifying power or status is reserved only for satan, the head of the host of demons. The Messiah can claim his strong superiority only because He is God revealed in the flesh. In contrast, satan possesses his overpowering strength as a mere creature. Just imagine what a most glorious and most excellent being this creature would have become if he had not

* Though grammar dictates that the term “satan,” a proper noun, be capitalized, throughout my writing life I have refused him that dignity, except when the word begins a sentence. At the same time, I capitalize all references, including pronouns, to the Trinity.

succumbed to rebellion but had kept his position as angel. Anyone who is so impressive after he rebelled against God, what would not have become of him had he bathed himself in adoration of eternal love. What a terrible and frightful being has satan become in his opposition to the Messiah and His people, with his venomous devilish heart, as he inveighs against the Holy One of Israel!

We need to give far more thought to this power of satan. We hardly have a clue of the destructive superiority of his terrible desecration with which he wants to attack us at any moment to destroy us. Neither are we sufficiently aware of the strength of grace and the power of mercy needed from moment to moment to protect us and our children against the hideous and horrendous destruction satan causes. The more aware you become of this awesome power of satan, the more intense you will call upon your God, the closer you cling to Him, and the deeper your gratitude will be that Jesus protects you against this hellish monster (Kuyper 1909, *Praktijk*, 87-88).

9. ***The human race is divided between the regenerate and unregenerate.***

Regeneration itself is a mystery as in John 3:8. It is the implanting of the new life by the Holy Spirit in the heart, the centre of our lives. From there it affects the rest of our being and lives. Regeneration sets the stage for battle with the unregenerate whose heart is directed away from God and His ordinances.¹

10. ***In the Western world the battle of the spirits is primarily against the secular mind set. It was embodied in the French Revolution.*** Subsequently, adherents to secularism consciously set out to reshape society along revolutionary secular patterns. It was a revolution against the authority of God which it sought to replace by human autonomy.²

¹ See Kuyper 1956, 313 for an English description from “Father” Abraham himself. For a popular short discussion of the subject, see posts 70 and 71 of my blog < BoersMyWorld—MyNeighbour >.

²The word “anti-revolution” in Kuyper’s political party, Anti-Revolutionary Party, refers to the anti-God stance of the French Revolution. Kuyper recognized the need for radical reformation of French society, but he rejected the enthronement of human autonomy and had wanted to re-channel society into more Godly directions.

11. ***The Holy Spirit provides the regenerate with adequate power to wage this war.***

They are not left on their own. This is power to fight satanic ideas not only but also satanic plans for the enthronement of the secular worldview for all of society by turning it into the new “common sense” which would form the basis of social structures. This was a life-and-death struggle on the part of the people of God who saw themselves almost overwhelmed by the new secular spirit that was becoming the dominant worldview of their day. ***This was the people of God fighting a serious battle with the followers of satan.***

12. ***This was not only a personal but also a structural struggle.*** New structures were established by

Christians to counter the structures that embodied the secular spirit. Sin and rebellion against God had taken on structural forms that called for alternative counter structures. Awareness of the secular spirit of autonomy embodied in these structures was too acute for Kuypersians to join them. Current examples of that structural war are the Christian school system and the Christian Labour Associations of both Canada and the USA.

13. There was ***a strong sense of the body of Christ beyond the pale of the organized church.*** Christians need to inspire each other, pray for each other, support each other in all areas of life. This, too, encouraged the formation of new structures, where they could do all these things together.

14. The underlying question was ***whether the Bible and the Spirit would serve merely as brakes on a secular organization or should they be the accelerators in Christian organizations?*** Where would the Holy Spirit have more freedom of action and inspiration?

15. ***Considering our secular neighbours and their structures as enemies seems fanatic to most of us.***

We have become accustomed to the secular spirit with which we have been surrounded since birth. We no longer sense the radical break they created a century ago. They have

become the new common sense, the new standard of our society. What was experienced as acutely new is today experienced as normal. It can be argued that we have lost the sense of antithesis between us, even when its emaciated and individualistic contemporary form, spiritual warfare, is being recycled among us. I doubt that, with our sense of antithesis having waned, we would set up a system of Christian schools and labour associations today. Both are remnants of a waning tradition against which much of the CRC today reacts with an unholy prejudice and blind ignorance. A case could be made that the CRC is suppressing the Holy Spirit in refusing to acknowledge the exceptional gifts of prophecy and discernment He gave the Christian community through Kuyper.

NOTE: If it were not for Evangelicals have joined the Christian school movement associated with the CRC constituency, it most like would now be on its last legs. The present resistance to the Christian Labor Association in West Michigan can only be seen as a case of class interest that does not want to acknowledge the antithesis, the spiritual warfare that Christians should be fighting against the secular spirit of satan dominating labor relations, business and industry. Spiritual warfare has been reduced to a bare minimum of the individual versus satan in a recent CRC publication on the subject. Recognition of spiritual warfare at this front would seriously interfere with our economic class interest. Relegating the antithesis both to the past and to its foreign origin and reducing spiritual warfare to individualistic categories are both tools we use to avoid the clash with contemporary economic culture. The argumentation seems so respectable, so culturally relevant, so pious and contemporary—and puts our consciences to a convenient rest.³

16. *The antithesis also runs right through the hearts of Christians and their institutions.* The devil

is also busy in our hearts. Though Christ reigns in our hearts, satan has not completely vacated. We still struggle every day. Thus, we are both combatants and battle field simultaneously.

³ For my involvement in the Christian Labor Association in West Michigan and the opposition it evoked among the CRC constituency, see the Boers' memoirs: *Every Square Inch: A Missionary Memoir*, volume 4, pp. 14-18, on the Boeriana page of this website.

17. Kuyper borrowed the concept of *common grace to explain why society and its members are often*

much better than the teaching of total depravity would lead us to expect. Common grace is the tool of God to restrain human depravity so as to prevent the collapse of society due to evil. Within the Trinity, the Spirit is identified as the primary agent of common grace.

18. Through common grace, *the Spirit not only restrains the power of satan, but also generously*

distributes gifts and truth to mankind in general. Pagans and secularists alike create great beauty so that Kuyper, along with Calvin, had great admiration for classical culture and appreciated much of the Renaissance. He even approved of some of the results of the French Revolution, though he vehemently opposed its root worldview. In fact, in his battle against the secular spirit of his day, he freely borrowed from the very people and movements he opposed. Current students of Kuyperianism such as Bratt and Heslam emphasize how much he borrowed from them. *However, common grace does not cancel either total depravity or the antithesis. The ambiguity of this scheme merely reflect the ambiguity of life itself.* No single consistent formula can adequately account for the full range of reality.

19. Rather than contradicting each other, *the antithesis needs common grace to come to its final*

resolution. The glorious potentials of human development must come to their full fruition before the enemy will have at her disposal the weapons he requires. At the end of this dispensation, when the enemy, the “man of sin will try to turn this whole system against God and on that account ... blown away by the breath of God’s mouth”, at that moment

... Babylon—that is, the world power which evolved...-- will exhibit not the image of a barbarous horde nor the image of coarse bestiality but... a picture of the highest development of which human life is capable. It will display the most refined forms, the most magnificent unfolding of wealth and splendor, the fullest brilliance of all that makes life dazzling and glorious. ... Only when common grace has spurred the full emergence of all the powers inherent in human life will

“the man of sin” find the level terrain needed to expand this power. Only then will the end be near and judgment come over him suddenly...(Kuyper, *Common Grace*, Vol. I, as translated in Bratt, 181-182).⁴

The ambiguity of it all! Common grace making continued human development possible by restraining the worst expressions of evil not only but also encouraging the development of sophisticated cultures. Spiritual warfare on the foundation of common grace, without which the warfare would not reach its climax or conclusion!

20 Kuyper repeatedly emphasizes that *the Holy Spirit empowers His people with an irresistible power*. Lack of power among Christians can only occur where the Spirit is lacking and thus has not empowered. This situation is marked by discouragement, fear, coldness, anxiety and sense of defeat. This situation arises when Christians suppress the Spirit. He is generously available with all His empowerment resources for all who turn to Him.

21. Kuyper repeatedly emphasizes *the need for a Christian worldview*, a concept apparently very popular among philosophers from the other “side” of his day. Having a Christian worldview spells a consciousness about the world and provides a perspective that provides strength in spiritual warfare. Lack of it among Christians is the reason Christians are in a position of weakness vis a vis the enemy.

22. Though, to the best of my present level of knowledge, Kuyper did not carefully spell out the content or source of a Christian worldview, the overall tenor of his thought would bring one to conclude that *its content would be provided by revelation in the wide sense of the word*, including both the special and general varieties, including thus also history and

⁴ I have read similar predictions from the pens of fundamentalist dispensationalists. However, these latter are offered us in the context of an almost bizarre method of Bible interpretation so that we easily reject the entire picture. Somehow, these predictions from the pen of Kuyper have a different flavour and we cannot quite so easily dismiss them. I am tempted to continue the quotation for there, over a century ago, Kuyper prophesied developments which reflect very closely conditions in which we find ourselves at the end of the second millennium, roughly a century later.

experience. Receiving anything through revelation meant to him that it was received and appropriated through the Holy Spirit.

23. The *spiritual battle in society can be described as a matter of worldview vs worldview.*

Specifically, it was the Christian worldview vs that of the secular spirit popularized by the French Revolution. The root of that secular worldview was inspired by satan and was thus anti-God.

24. *Kuyper saw his own life's mission as the promotion of a renewed, revitalized Calvinistic worldview.* That worldview had in the past brought Calvinistic cultures to the highest pinnacle of development.

25. The Calvinistic worldview was not only a matter of church and theology, but it covered the entire waterfront of human culture. This was the main point of his Stone Lectures. In other words, it was *wholistic, all-embracing, total in its reach.*

26. *Kuyper also describes his main concern as one for liberty.* It is merely another way of expressing his main motive. To have and apply the Christian worldview spells liberty. Calvinism had bequeathed to its nations the greatest liberty ever achieved by mankind. This liberty began in the church by overthrowing hierarchy and from there worked its way into politics, art, education, labour, housing, etc. Liberty meant especially freedom from an oppressive church and government. It also meant freedom from oppressive corporations with their exclusive emphasis on profits.

27. *Underneath all of this struggle for and movement towards liberation, motivating it all is the Spirit of Liberation, the Spirit* that, in concert with His Trinitarian Brother, is ready to empower and envelop us, the Spirit that will support God's people as they conduct their spiritual warfare against the spirit of satan embodied in secularism (Kuyper 1923, 73, 83).

28. At the end of a paper on Kuyper's view on the role of the Spirit in social transformation, it is appropriate to point out that to *him Pentecost is more important than either Christmas or Easter*. "Pentecost is the most noble of the three," he writes (Kuyper 1923, 61).⁵

CONCLUDING ENCOURAGEMENT

I end this paper with *a word of encouragement from Kuyper to his readers that was so typical of him and expressed his deeply pastoral heart for a tired, confused and oppressed people:*

...have courage, you who are oppressed and tossed about by the storms! Your Saviour lives to pray for you, while in you lives and works God the Holy Spirit. Your God is in your midst and He will neither give you up nor forsake you! Whatever happens to you, "be strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:18)! Know and tell your children after you: It is precisely this that constitutes the work of God the Holy Spirit in you, namely that He lives in you in order to work through you. He causes you to do it and you do it in and through Him (Kuyper 1923, 79)!

⁵For more details of this nature, I refer you to my translation of Kuyper's meditations on Pentecost: [The Ascent of the Son - The Descent of the Spirit: 26 Meditations on Ascension and Pentecost](#). 2014, on the Kuyperiana page of this website. Published also on: www.lulu.com and www.ccel.org, 2014.

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