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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DR. ABRAHAM KUYPER FOR REFORMED THEOLOGY

IN the next fall the Free University of Amsterdam, the only thoroughly Reformed University in the world, will celebrate its semi-centennial. At the head of its founders is the name of Dr. Abraham Kuyper—1837-1920—not only famous as the name of a great statesman, but before all as the name of a theologian, to whom all churches of his homeland and abroad are indebted. His mighty personality and his powerful word have aroused the reformed people of the Netherlands to undergo the great sacrifices needed by the creation and maintenance of such an institution. It was he who impressed the thought of a Christian and Reformed *Universitas litterarum* upon the hearts of his simple people, in order to get men qualified to act as Christians in all spheres of life. His ideal was not a theological seminary only for the service of the Church, but a University with all possibilities for training capable teachers in low—and high—schools, lawyers, doctors, journalists, politicians. From very small beginnings the University has grown up into an efficient factor in the Dutch national life and has well deserved the respect that competent judges are paying to the work done by its professors and students. When Dr. Kuyper passed away to his Lord on the 8th of November, 1920, he left a rich heritage of blessing to his mournful, pious people, the "Kleine luyden," as he used to say.

I am not contemplating a description of the whole life and work of Dr. Kuyper as a statesman, as pastor, as writer, or as founder of a strong political Christian party. For those of our readers, who want to learn more from him, I mention the biography, *Abraham Kuyper*, by J. C. Rullmann, in the Dutch language, and in the German language, *Dr. Abr. Kuyper, Ein Lebensbericht*, by the writer of this article. It is my purpose, to give here a short summary of his work as a theologian, and to throw some light on the significance he has had for his homeland and Reformed Theology in general.

I

THE WORD OF GOD

The theological thinking of Dr. Kuyper has its point of departure in his strong belief in the Sovereignty of God and in

the absolute authority of His Word. When a student at the University of Leiden, 1855-62, he came under the influences of the rationalism and criticism prevailing there in those days, and personified in the person of his learned teacher, Prof. Dr. J. H. Scholten. Higher and Destructive Criticism of the Bible, and the adoration of the human reason as the supreme authority in all matters, were the principal features of that rationalism, as they are still today. The spiritual conditions in the congregations of the "Dutch Reformed Church" (the Established Church) were corresponding to the situation in the Universities: either a superficial rationalism or a dead orthodoxy or a degenerated and weak pietism. Especially the upper ten in the intellectual and commercial world were wholly alienated from the life of the Church of their fathers.

After having finished his theological studies, and after having, with great honours, gained the degree of a Doctor of Divinity, Dr. Kuyper was appointed to his first pastorate in the small rural church at Beesd in 1864. He accepted the call, as he says himself, not as a modern man in the vulgar meaning of the word, but with an unregenerated heart and proud of his talent and his scholarship, and unacquainted with the gospel of saving grace. But the quiet village became his Damascus. Through God's providence a simple farmer's daughter must be the instrument, which by her words and prayers brought the young doctor to conversion. And his conversion was a thorough-going one, leading his heart and his head into a full surrender to the will of God. "The obedient servant of Christ, and the firm defender of our Reformed Creed, sanctified by the blood of numberless martyrs in the history of his people, was born in one and the same hour. The miracle is performed, Kuyper sees the light, and with one all-embracing movement he casts himself, giant intellect and all, thoroughly bound and captive, before the cross of the newly-found Christ." (Dr. W. Burggraaff, in *The Evangelical Student*, 1930.) The pious and simple-minded people in the Netherlands, hitherto without a spiritual leader, who was also equal to the task of fighting against the enemies of the Reformed faith efficiently, began eagerly to listen to the mighty voice God had raised for them.

In opposition to a theology that had lost the Word of God, Dr. Kuyper dared to proclaim the absolute authority of the Bible as the revelation of the living God. "Very improperly

the Scriptures have been represented as only the formal principle of the Reformed confession. The conception of genuine Calvinism lies much deeper. The meaning of Calvin was expressed in what he called the *necessitas S. Scripturæ*. This *necessitas S.S.* was for Calvin the unavoidable for the all-dominating authority of the Holy Scriptures, and even now it is this very dogma which enables us to understand why it is that the Calvinist of today considers the critical analysis and the application of the critical solvent to the Scriptures as tantamount to an abandoning of Christianity itself. In Paradise, before the Fall, there was no Bible, and there will be no Bible in the future Paradise of glory." "But in our present condition immediate communion with God, by means of nature and of our own heart, is lost. Sin brought separation instead, and the opposition which is manifest nowadays, against the authority of the Holy Scriptures, is based on nothing else than the false supposition that, our condition being still normal, our religion need not be soteriological. For, of course, in that case, the Bible is not wanted, it becomes indeed a hindrance, and grates upon your feelings, since it interposes a book between God and your heart." "When there are no mists to hide the majesty of the divine light from our eyes, what need is there then for a lamp unto the feet or a light upon the path? But when history, experience and consciousness all unite in stating the fact, that the pure and full light of Heaven has disappeared, and that we are groping about in the dark, then a different, or if you will, an artificial light must be kindled for us—and such a light God has kindled for us in his Holy Word." (*Calvinism, Six Stone lectures*, by Dr. A. Kuyper.)

In no way does Kuyper favour a mechanical conception of the Bible and its inspiration, and he has a still stronger hatred for the useless efforts of the supra-rationalism of his age, to substantiate the statement of the divine authority of the Bible by reasonable arguments. That advocacy of the Bible, he exclaims, allows to the enemy, to prescribe the rule of proceeding to the defender. A true reformed theologian has never to act as a defender of the Christian truth, but only in assailing the foe is he in his element. "For the Calvinist the necessity of the Holy Scriptures does not rest in ratiocination, but on the immediate testimony of the Holy Spirit. Our theory of inspiration is the product of historical deduction and so is also every canonical declaration of the Scriptures. But the magnetic power with which the Scripture

influences the soul, and draws it to itself, just as the magnet draws the steel, is not derived, but immediate. All of this takes place in a manner, which is not magical, nor unfathomably mystical, but clear, and easy to be understood. God regenerates us—that is to say he rekindles in our heart the lamp sin had blown out.” “The regenerate begins to guess the identity of what is stirring in the depths of his own soul, and of what is revealed to him in Scripture, thereby learning both the inanity of the world around him, and the divine reality of the world of the Scriptures, and as soon as this has become a certainty to him, he has personally received the testimony of the Holy Spirit.” “We put no shackles on science. If a man wants to criticise, let him criticise. Such criticism even holds the promise, that it will deepen our own insight into the structure of the scriptural edifice. Only no Calvinist ever allows the critic to dash out of his hand, for a moment, the prism itself, the Bible, which breaks up the divine ray of light into its brilliant tints and colours.” The old principle of Luther and Calvin: “The Word and nothing but the Word,” was grasped with new force by Dr. Kuyper and became his lifelong watchword for his thinking and working, notwithstanding the indignation he had to meet with among the mates of his student days, who could not understand that a man of his learning and abilities should fall in line with the handful of the despised “mystics,” as they were called. Instead of the dogma of liberal theology, that we have the Word of God “in the Bible,” he maintained the testimony: the Bible is “the eternal Word of God,” and thus far he was a precursor of the most recent theology of a K. Barth and an E. Brunner.

What in the days of his youth Dr. Kuyper had begun to see he did never cease to confess with all the power of his heart and his mind. The beloved pastor at Utrecht and Amsterdam, the much praised journalist and politician, the university-teacher and finally the prime-minister of his country, bowed before the Word of God with no less reverence than the pastor of the rural church at Beesd, and was never tired of teaching the readers of his papers and the students in his academic lectures, that the infallible Word will give us the light on all paths of our life. The Bible was to him the living Word the Holy Ghost brought to him in every moment. He said: “The same Spirit that caused the Scripture to be written, is also the only one by whom to read and to hear its meaning.” “The testimony of the Spirit is not an outward

testimony by proving from some sentences of Flavius Josephus, that a certain Jesus of Nazareth must have lived centuries ago—no, to be convinced of the truth, is a spiritual process, the purport of the Gospel enters our soul, we feel the contrast between that Word and our own soul, until we finally comprehend; not the Scripture must yield to me, but I must make way to the Scripture.”

Against the superficial assertion of liberal theology, that our evangelical faith must be independent of the written Bible and of historical facts, Dr. Kuyper taught his people to cling to the facts and to believe in a Lord who saves sinners not by thoughts, nor doctrines, but by mighty deeds. Therefore he opposed the current opinion, that theology is the science of the development of religion and has as its object the religious sentiment of men or the manifestations of human devoutness. Nothing but the revelation of God can be the object of Christian theology, not the mode of existence of God, unknown to us, but his revelation, the *revelatio ectypa*.” Without that very object of theology it should lose its independent character. A Christian theologian will pay no heed to the danger, that theology, as it is the case in the public universities in U.S.A. and in the Netherlands, may be banished from the number of the acknowledged sciences and may not be ranked with the medical or natural or historical sciences. “Such theologians, who tried to rehabilitate theology by begging for the recognition of the scientific world, have been punished for their pusillanimity by being forced through the non-theological science, to cut away the heart of theology and to transform it into a department of study adapted to the frame of the naturalistic sciences.” Laying stress upon the character of theology as fully dependent on the divine revelation in the Holy Scripture, Dr. Kuyper saved to it its freedom and its self-consciousness.

II

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The obedient acceptance of the Bible is the first point to be noticed, if we are asking about the significance of Dr. Kuyper for Reformed Theology. In this respect he has anticipated many considerations of the dialectic theology of today. The influence of the Bible led him back to the old forgotten confession of his Church. As soon as he heard the voice of God in His Word, he

also heard the voice of the history and of his Calvinistic forefathers, bringing to him the mighty testimony of the Sovereignty of the Almighty God, whose loving hand had seized hold of him and had bowed him before the Cross of Calvary. At once he became a Christian and a disciple of the great reformer of Geneva with his message of sovereign Grace. It was in the teachings of Calvinism, that his soul found its resting-place. It was the world-wide historic force of Calvinism, that filled him with enthusiasm and inspired him with the ideals which he always had to plead for. In Calvinism Dr. Kuyper saw not a peculiar doctrine, but an all-embracing system of principles, without exception deduced from the first principle: the Sovereignty of God. But that principle is not a mere theological one, but the general cosmological principle in the Calvinistic world-view, that "puts its impress upon every department of human life." Calvinism is a life-system. Whereas "Luther's starting point was the special soteriological principle of a justifying faith, Calvin's starting point, extending far wider, lies in the general cosmological principle of the sovereignty of God." "The persuasion, that the whole of a man's life is to be lived as in the Divine Presence, has become the fundamental thought of Calvinism." Outside of Calvinism religion is but partial and confined to sentiment and ethics. Liberal theology and philosophy have made feeling and practical activity the only touch-stone for testing the religious gold, and have excluded the authority of religion from the domain of science and public life. Kuyper with Calvinism on the contrary, reminds us of the commandment of God: "Thou shalt love God not only with all thy heart, but also with all thy mind." Apart from any limitation we have to recognise Him as our supreme Lord and to render homage to Him in all manifestations of our life. *Soli Deo Gloria!* That was Calvin's aim of life, it was also the fundamental thought of Dr. Kuyper.

Our relation to the supreme Lord must logically determine the relation of man to man. "If Calvinism places our entire human life immediately before God, then it follows, that all men or women, rich or poor, weak or strong, as creatures of God, and as lost sinners, have no claim whatsoever to lord it over one another, and that we stand as equals before God, and consequently as man to man. Hence we cannot recognise any distinction among men, save such as has been imposed by God Himself, in that He gave

one authority over the other, or enriched one with more talents than the other, in order that the man of more talents should serve the man with less, and in him serve his God. Hence Calvinism condemns not merely all open slavery and systems of caste, but also all covert slavery of woman and of the poor, it is opposed to all hierarchy of men, it tolerates no aristocracy, save such as is able, either in person or in family, by the grace of God, to exhibit superiority of character or talent, and to show that it does not claim this superiority for self-aggrandisement or ambitious pride, but for the sake of spending it in the service of God. So Calvinism was bound to find its utterance in the democratic interpretation of life; to proclaim the liberty of nations; and not to rest until both politically and socially every man, simply because he is man, should be recognised, respected and dealt with as a creature created after the Divine likeness." Therefore Dr. Kuyper called Calvinism the warrant, the pledge of the national freedom of the Netherlands. Against the liberal theory, that the Reformation should have been a revolutionary movement, he maintained the fact, that Calvinism made no sudden break with the past. "It was not charged against William of Orange, that he was a prince of royal lineage; he was the more honoured for it. But inwardly Calvinism has modified the structure of society, not by the envying of classes, nor by an undue esteem for the possessions of the rich, but by a more serious interpretation of life." "From the holy fear of God and our united stand before His face a holier democratic idea has developed itself, and has continually gained ground." From the Bible Dr. Kuyper had learned the dreadful fact of sin, that deprives us of all glory and self-assertion, and in spite of the shallow moral optimism of his age, and praising the grace of his Saviour alone, he taught a theology that is fitted for lost sinners, the theology of the Cross of Christ.

With the acknowledgment of the Sovereign God is connected for the Calvinist Kuyper a new attitude toward the world. In the pious circles of his church he observed an unbiblical fear of coming in contact with the world and a perilous awkwardness in the judgment of the world. Kuyper in the footsteps of Calvin distinguished between the "particular" grace which works salvation, and the "common" grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator. In

Calvinism, the Church receded in order to be neither more nor less than the congregation of believers, and in every department the life of the world was not emancipated from God, but from the dominion of the Church. Thus domestic life regained its independence, trade and commerce realised their strength in liberty, art and science were set free from every ecclesiastical bond and restored to their own inspirations, and man began to understand the subjection of all nature with its hidden forces to himself as a holy deity, imposed upon him by the original ordinances of Paradise: "Have dominion over them." Instead of monastic flight from the world the duty is now emphasised of serving God in the world. "Puritanic sobriety went hand in hand with the reconquest of the entire life of the world, and Calvinism gave the impulse to that new development which dared to face the world with the Roman thought: *nil humanum a me alienum puto*, although never allowing itself to be intoxicated by its poisonous cup." Kuyper's doctrine of the Common Grace procured the good conscience to his disciples, in the fear of God to enter the world and to thank God for the benefits the Creator has bestowed on the world. "We owe it to that dogma," he justly declares, "that in our circles the most profound investigator never ceased to acknowledge himself a guilty sinner and to ascribe to God's mercy alone his splendid understanding of the things of the world."

III

THE CHURCH OF GOD

In those bygone days of his pastorate at Beesd, in which Dr. Kuyper had learned to listen to the living Word of God and to kneel down before His majesty, he had thirdly got a new vision of the Church as the mother of her children. The church, he, the son of the manse, had known hitherto, was an established church, ruled by a small body of men, who had enslaved the congregations and thrown over all Christian discipline on doctrine and morals. Every preacher had full liberty of teaching what he liked, and no Kirk-session was allowed, to censure him on account of his doctrine, or the church members in case of disorderly conduct. When Dr. Kuyper became acquainted with the writings of Calvin and with the history of Calvinism, he saw

another church very different from the church amidst that in which he lived. A church, with Jesus Christ as its head and King, arose before his eyes and caused him to begin his life-long warfare for the restoration of a true Reformed Church.

The starting-point of Kuyper's church-view is the important Calvinistic persuasion that the Church has its centre in heaven, or as the Westminster Confession declares: "The Catholic or Universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be, gathered into one, under Christ the Head, thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all." The Church on earth does not send up its light to heaven, but the Church in heaven must send its light down to the Church on earth. That Universal Church has its form of manifestation here on earth in the different local congregations of confessors, endeavouring to live together in subordination to Christ as their King. "For Calvin the Church is found in the confessing individuals themselves—not in each individual separately, but in all of them taken together, and united, not as they themselves see fit, but according to the ordinances of Christ." As for the government of the church, Dr. Kuyper says that it, like the Church itself, originates in heaven, in Christ. "He most effectually rules his Church by means of the Holy Spirit, by whom He works in His members. Therefore, all being equal under Him, there can be no distinctions of rank among believers, there are only ministers, who serve, lead and regulate, a thoroughly Presbyterian form of government, the Church power descending directly from Christ Himself, into the congregation, concentrated from the congregation into elders and ministers, and by them being administered unto the brethren. So the sovereignty of Christ remains absolutely monarchical, but the government of the Church on earth becomes democratic to its bones and marrow, a system leading to this other sequence, that all believers and all congregations being of an equal standing, no Church may exercise any dominion over another, but that all local churches are of equal rank, and as manifestations of one and the same body, can only be united synodically, i.e., by way of confederation." For to understand Kuyper's idea of the Church on earth we must especially pay regard to the idea of the Covenant that is at the very bottom of his doctrine of the Church. "Believers who meet together do not thereby sever the natural bond, that binds them to their

offspring. On the contrary, they consecrate this bond, and by baptism incorporate their children in the communion of their Church, and these minors are kept in this Church communion until, when of age, they become themselves confessors, or sever themselves from the church by their unbelief. This is the all-important Calvinistic dogma of the Covenant, a prominent article of our confession, showing that the waters of the Church do not flow outside the natural stream of human life, but cause the life of the Church to proceed hand in hand with the natural organic reproduction of mankind in its succeeding generations. Covenant and Church are inseparable."

In untiring efforts Dr. Kuyper endeavoured to line out the picture of the Church the Bible and the history of his people had implanted in his heart, and to impress it on the minds of the believers. Already in his student days he had carried off the first prize with a well-grounded essay on the church-ideals of Calvin and a' Lasco, and one of his first publications had been the everywhere appreciated edition of the writings of John a' Lasco, the Polish reformer. He longed for a Church unfettered by the State, governed by Christ its king and living according to His Word. On the purpose that has been assigned to the Church in its pilgrimage through the world, we read in *Calvinism and Religion*: "That purpose cannot be human or egoistic, to prepare the believer for Heaven, nay upon earth the Church exists merely for the sake of God," that He might be glorified by the preaching of the Gospel and the conversions of sinners. Moreover, from "this solemn purpose originates the severely spiritual culture which Calvinism tried to restore in the services of the Church." "Sensual church-services tend to soothe and flatter man religiously, and only the purely spiritual service of Calvinism aims at the pure worship of God and at adoration of Him in spirit and in truth." "The same tendency leads our church discipline, that indispensable element of every genuine Calvinistic church activity," instituted to preserve the sanctity of the Covenant. Finally we have the service of "Church philanthropy, in the Diakonate which Calvin—in distinction from Luther and Zwingli—alone understood, and restored to its primordial honour." "But, in this Diakonate, also, the lofty principle must prevail that it may not glorify those who give alms, but only the name of Him who moves the hearts of the people to liberality. The Deacons are not our servants, but servants of Christ, who through

his deacons, purposes to make it manifest that for the whole of life He is the *Christus-Consolator*."

That Church, Dr. Kuyper fought for, must be a free Church, not a creation of the secular government. "Her position in the State is not assigned her by the permission of the government, but *jure divino*." "The government bears the sword which wounds, not the sword of the Spirit, which decides in spiritual questions." In particular it seemed to Kuyper, that no really free church can exist, as long as the State is supporting it by its financial means. A Church of Christ, worthy of its name, must be a self-supporting Church. The Word of God, the Sovereignty of God, the Church of God! behold the three great thoughts Dr. Kuyper propagated by his numerous books, by his paper for Sunday, *De Heraut*, and his daily paper *De Standaard*, and by his oral teaching. A struggle of forty years was needed, till the seed brought forth its fruit, and in 1886 a strong Free Church severed from the Established Church, united with the Separated brethren of 1834, and is now gloriously known in the world as *De Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland*. Above all, it is for most due to his work that we meet today an influential group of theologians in the Netherlands, in South Africa, and in the Dutch speaking parts of the U.S.A., who stick firm to our Reformed Confession and to the truth of the Bible and who in their testimony before the churches and in their scientific theological investigations, are renewing the old glorious theme, that "God our Lord is God indeed."

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