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CALVINISM

FOR A



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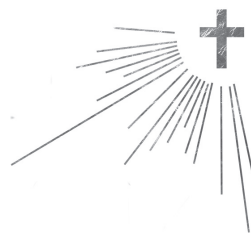
A TWENTY-FIRST-
CENTURY READING OF
ABRAHAM KUYPER'S
STONE LECTURES

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
RICHARD J. MOUW,
DEBORAH HAARSMA,
VINCENT BACOTE,
AND OTHERS



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KUYPER AND LIFE-SYSTEMS

RICHARD J. MOUW

WHAT DID KUYPER SAY?

One of my students once thanked me for assigning Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* in the course he had taken from me. Reading these lectures, he said, was a great experience for him. But then he added a mild complaint about the first of Kuyper's lectures. "I think there should be a 'warning label' right there at the beginning. There is a bit of an arrogant spirit in the way he makes Calvinism look good and the other perspectives—including the Christian ones—look bad. And then he makes you wade through a lot of technical stuff as he is making his points. I was glad to get on to the next chapters, which I really liked!"

I was not surprised by his complaint about getting started in reading the Stone Lectures. I have gone through them many times over the years, and even though I understand the points that Kuyper is making, I don't find it easy reading. And like the student, I find some of Kuyper's references to other Christian traditions to be a bit too polemical in tone. Kuyper gets more interesting for me when he turns to specific areas of cultural engagement in the subsequent chapters, showing how Calvinism can help us understand why God cares about religious beliefs and practices, politics, science, and the arts.

Still, important topics are covered in these early pages, and it is good to get a sense of why Kuyper finds it necessary to contrast Calvinism with these other perspectives before he moves on to more specific areas. And it also helps to know why his tone is a bit strident as he sets up his overall framework.

Kuyper was well aware that the Presbyterian folks who attended these lectures at Princeton—mainly pastors and professors—were feeling beleaguered by attacks on the traditional Calvinism that had long characterized the theology at Princeton Seminary. And Kuyper himself had recently gone through some theological struggles back home in the Netherlands, resulting in a serious division in the ranks of the Dutch Reformed there. So, he wanted to offer words of encouragement to his hearers. He wanted to assure them that the defense of Calvinism is no lost cause—indeed, Calvinism provides a very exciting overall perspective on how we are to live our lives as people who want to serve the Lord in all things.

To make his case, Kuyper explained to his audience that he was going to explore some new dimensions in Calvinism, ones that often were not given adequate attention by those who, over the past centuries, professed loyalty to the theology of John Calvin. Kuyper made it clear that his intention in discussing Calvinism in these lectures was “not to restore its worn-out form”; rather, he was going to show how Calvinism, as a system of thought that flows from a deep “life principle,” fulfills in an exciting way “the requirements of our own century.”¹

It may not have been the wisest thing for Kuyper to talk about not wanting to rehabilitate Calvinism in “its worn-out form.” He certainly wasn’t meaning to reject the Calvinism of the past, and it probably would have been better to assure his audience about that. Kuyper clearly endorsed the basics of the Calvinist portrayal of how an individual can get right with God. We were created to live in an obedient fellowship with God, but in rebelling against our Creator we have become deeply

¹Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 41.

stuck in our own sinfulness. If we are to be rescued from our depravity, it has to happen from God's direction. And God did move toward us by sending Jesus into the world to take our sin on himself. So we are saved by grace alone.

Kuyper firmly believed in all of that, including all of the traditional Calvinist formulations about election and predestination and the "eternal security" of the believer. His intention in these lectures was to show how Calvinism offers us all of that—but also a lot more. Yes, God saves us from our helpless sinful condition. But what does he save us *for*? And here is where the bigger Calvinist picture begins to unfold. We are saved—as members of a community of believers—to show forth the lordship of Christ over all things.

To put it in simple terms, in these lectures Kuyper wants to portray Calvinism as a big-picture perspective on the Christian life. This is why he gives so much attention in this first lecture to the importance of seeing Calvinism as a "life-system."² If all we have is a theology about individual salvation, we can easily be taken in by the answers to the broader questions about human well-being generated by what he sees as the four other life-systems providing influential guidance for human living at that time: paganism, Islamism, Roman Catholicism, and modernism. To resist these competing influences, he argues, we must be clear about what Calvinism has to teach us about what he identifies as the "three fundamental relations of all human life": how we human creatures relate to God, how we relate to our fellow humans, and how we relate to the larger world in which we find ourselves.³

Foundational to all of this for Kuyper is our understanding of who God is. The supreme authority of the God of the Bible is basic to Kuyper's understanding of reality. As the Creator of all things, God is distinct from all he has called into being. God did not have to create a world in order to be fully God. That view stands in stark contrast to the

²Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 9-40.

³Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 19.

pantheistic understanding, which equates the divine with the “all” of the universe. Kuyper was passionate about that classical conception of the Wholly Other-ness of God.

The denial of this vast “being” gap between the Creator and his creation is at the heart of human sinfulness. God alone is worthy of our ultimate trust, and when we put that trust in something less than God—something creaturely—we are engaged in idolatry, and this is the root of all sin. By turning our ultimate allegiance toward something within the creation, we mess up those “three fundamental relations of all human life.”⁴ By refusing to honor God’s authority, we cut ourselves off from the blessings of living in fellowship with our Creator, and this in turn disrupts our relations with our fellow humans as well as with our ways of relating to the nonhuman world.

What’s at stake in all of this for Kuyper is the insistence that Christian faith is more than a purely “personal” matter. It is not less than that, of course. We human beings got into the mess that we are in because our first parents made the very personal decision to trust the serpent’s promise that if they would disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit, they themselves would “be like God” (Gen 3:5). But that personal act of rebellion has wide-reaching consequences for human life—which is why Kuyper goes on in these lectures to explain how restoring our personal relationship with God through Christ’s atoning work has profound implications for how we view church, politics, science, and artistic endeavors.

Before getting into the details of those specific areas of Christian service, though, Kuyper wants us to see how the life-system he sets forth differs from other major life-systems that are at work in the world. He is especially concerned about one of these in particular. In present life, he says, it is modernism and Christianity that “are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat.”⁵ He sees a close connection in this regard

⁴Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 19.

⁵Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 11.

between the modernist life-system and the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century.

Two decades earlier Kuyper had founded the Anti-Revolutionary Party, of which he had served as the party's leader in the Dutch Parliament. In choosing "Anti-Revolutionary" for the name of his political party, he signaled his conviction that the ideology of the French Revolution was diametrically opposed to Christian life and thought. The revolutionaries in France were committed to abolishing everything associated with belief in God. Central to their thinking was the insistence on the radical supremacy of the independent human self. In that sense, the ideology of the French Revolution was the philosophical expression of the serpent's promise that human beings can be their own gods, with human reason functioning as the ultimate source of meaning and value.

As Kuyper explains the modernist perspective in more detail in this first lecture, he introduces some complications. In addition to the French atheistic themes, he sees some "pantheist" German philosophical ideas at work in modernism, particularly the ways that the traditional Christian belief in divine providence had been incorporated into evolutionistic thought, with the conviction regarding the inevitability of human progress. For our purposes here, though, we do not need to follow the philosophical details of Kuyper's exposition as long as we grasp his basic point, which is that modernism is a life-system that seeks to eliminate all the influences of Christian faith from human life and thought.

While that modernist project clearly remains a major challenge to the Christian faith in the twenty-first century, Kuyper's other two non-Christian life-systems are still very much in the picture for our Western culture—more so than they were in Kuyper's time. He was thinking globally, and for him, paganism and Islam were a major presence primarily in other parts of the world. As he put it, the pagan understanding of spiritual things could be seen in both "the lowest Animism" and "the highest Buddhism." What every form of paganism has in common, he observes, is an understanding of the divine that "does not rise to the

conception of the independent existence of a God beyond and above the creature.”⁶ In that sense, paganism is a presence in our current surroundings, not only in popular “New Age” thinking but also in the outlook expressed in the popular motto, “I’m not religious at all, but I do consider myself to be quite spiritual!”

And, of course, Islam has become a highly visible presence in Western cultures. When I was growing up, what we knew about Muslims was mainly from what returning missionaries told us when they visited our congregations to report about their ministries in Arab countries. Now I see Muslims daily, in supermarkets and schoolyards.

Islam presents a unique religious phenomenon for Kuyper. Muslims certainly do not confuse the Creator with some aspect of his creation. The God to whom they pray is very much above and beyond the created order. Indeed, in Kuyper’s telling, the problem with Islam is that it creates *too great* a spiritual distance between Allah and the world. It makes God’s being *so* distinct from created reality, he says, that it “*isolates God from the creature*, in order to avoid all commingling with the creature.”⁷ The result, as one Calvinist expert on Islam has put it more recently, is that

in Islam there is little room for a life of personal fellowship with God. Allah is so great and so exalted, and his will is so completely dominating, that very little is left on the human side. . . . Even the sense of personal responsibility toward him and the need for forgiveness and reconciliation, find no possibility of development.⁸

As opposed to these other life-systems, for Kuyper, Christianity gets it right in spelling out the big picture. The Bible tells us of a God who reigns over his creation, while also emphasizing the fact that God created human beings with the capacity to live in a vital fellowship with him. For Kuyper this requires that we see all aspects of our lives as

⁶Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 20.

⁷Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 20 (emphasis original).

⁸J. H. Bavinck, “Defining Religious Consciousness: The Five Magnetic Points,” in *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser, trans. James A. De Jong (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 181.

taking place before the presence of God. Kuyper regularly uses a wonderful Latin phrase to capture this reality: *coram Deo*, which means “before the face of God.” He insists that the genius of Calvinism is that it sets forth a life-system that highlights the inescapable reality of our living every moment before the face of God.

The obvious Christian alternative to Calvinism for Kuyper is the Roman Catholic view, which he likes to label “Romanism.” The key defect in Catholicism for him is the way it relies on the church as mediating our relationship to God. For the Calvinist, Kuyper argues, divine grace comes to us directly from God, and nothing must stand in the way of “a direct and immediate communion with the Living God.”⁹ More broadly, Kuyper also objects to the way the Catholic Church had long seen itself as mediating the relationship between God and the other spheres. For Kuyper, the churchly realm is just one of the areas of collective life—alongside the state, the art guild, the university, and the area of economic activity—that stands directly under God’s sovereign rule.

Kuyper sees other Christian traditions—Baptists, Anglicans, Wesleyans, and Lutherans, for example—as lacking the full life-system character of Catholicism and Calvinism. The Anabaptists receive special criticism from him for what he sees as their refusal to engage the larger culture at all.

As my student made clear, the tone of Kuyper’s depiction of other Christian groups can strike us today as much too confrontational. Fortunately, we will find him acknowledging, as he moves to his conclusions in the final lecture, the positive lessons he has been learning from Catholics—and even from modernist Protestants.

What we cannot excuse in this opening lecture, however, are the remarks he makes about traditional African culture. Kuyper credits Asia for its cultural development while also criticizing Asians for failing to contribute their cultural riches to the larger world. But Africa, he suggests, simply has not had any significant cultural development to share with the rest of humanity. In offering this assessment, he even mentions

⁹Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 21.

Noah's sons—alluding to the tradition which has taught that Ham, who was cursed by his father, was the one whose offspring populated the African continent. Such a sentiment, of course, reveals at the very least an unwillingness to expand one's understanding of culture; at its worst, it reveals something much more sinister.

Kuyper's perceptions of African culture were clearly shaped by the views of the Dutch who had settled in Southern Africa—he was closely in touch with them. Those folks would soon establish the racist apartheid structures, and the Dutch Reformed theological system which supported that regime is often thought of as drawing on Kuyperian ideas. Ironically, in this lecture, Kuyper insists that the development of a robust global culture can come only by “the commingling of blood”¹⁰—a direct challenge to the separation of the races that was foundational to the apartheid regime.

The Black South African theologian Russel Botman has acknowledged that while Kuyper did indeed contribute to apartheid thinking, he also had “a liberative influence on South Africa.”¹¹ This meant, Botman observes, that “it was the task of Black Kuyperianism to select the positive aspects and present their theological relevance to South Africa.”¹² He cites the assessment of another prominent Black Reformed theologian, Allan Boesak, who saw positive support in Kuyper's thought for the struggle for racial justice:

We believe passionately with Abraham Kuyper that there is not a single inch of life that does not fall under the lordship of Christ. . . . Here the Reformed tradition comes so close to the African idea of the wholeness of life that these two should combine to renew the thrust that was brought to Christian life by the followers of Calvin.¹³

¹⁰Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 35.

¹¹H. Russel Botman, “Is Blood Thicker Than Justice? The Legacy of Abraham Kuyper for Southern Africa,” in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luis E. Lugo (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 343.

¹²Botman, “Is Blood Thicker Than Justice?,” 344.

¹³Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (New York: Orbis Press, 1984), 87, quoted in Botman, “Is Blood Thicker Than Justice?,” 344.

All we can do, says Botman, is to acknowledge that “the real Kuyper was both these things: a praiseworthy Reformed theologian who, regrettably, held to the potentially oppressive core value of separateness.”¹⁴

WHAT DID KUYPERIANS DO?

Kuyper’s lectures at Princeton did not have the intended effect on his audience.¹⁵ While he had brought a message about a robust Calvinist vision of life that could motivate believers to take on the intellectual, political, and artistic challenges of the broader North American culture, his Princeton hearers (about forty attended each of his lectures) were preoccupied with other matters. They were feeling under attack by the increasing influence of a liberal theology that denied some of the key traditional doctrines, such as the authority of the Bible and Christ as the heaven-sent Son of God who was born of a virgin and shed his blood on Calvary to pay the penalty for human sin. While the Princeton folks certainly sensed that Kuyper was analyzing the basic threats of the modernist influences they were struggling against in their church life, they were seeing the need to defend specific theological implications of Calvinist theology rather than exploring the fundamental character of Calvinism as a culture-embracing life-system.

To be sure, the Princeton Presbyterians respected Kuyper and gave his visit positive reviews. But they took from his lectures particular ideas that would equip them for the immediate theological debates that preoccupied them in the church world.

To see how Kuyper’s influence in North America did eventually grow, we need to mention a terminological matter. In a footnote in this first lecture, he explains briefly why he chose to use the label *life-system* in his Princeton presentations.¹⁶ As we have been seeing, that label plays

¹⁴Botman, “Is Blood Thicker Than Justice?,” 354.

¹⁵For the impact of Kuyper’s lectures on his Princeton audience, I am drawing here on observations made by George Harinck in his essay, “A Triumphant Procession? The Reception of Kuyper in the USA (1900–1940),” in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of His Life and Work*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 275–77.

¹⁶Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 11n.

an important role in the way he sets up his case for Calvinism, and he sticks with it throughout. But in his final lecture, he changes terms, saying that Calvinism provides “a life- and world-view.”¹⁷ Where Kuyper’s influence took hold, that new label got shortened to, simply, *worldview* and became the standard way of describing the big-picture approach he was advocating.

Again, however, it took quite a while for this worldview perspective to have a significant influence in North American Christianity. The one place it did take hold rather quickly was in the Dutch Calvinist immigrant community, concentrated primarily in the Midwestern United States. Kuyper’s Stone Lectures—which appeared rather soon in book form—were read by the folks in that subculture. They understood Kuyper well, and his approach had a deep and lasting effect in their educational institutions, particularly at Calvin University in Michigan.

Unfortunately, though, the recent immigrants were not prepared to translate Kuyper’s ideas into active engagement with the larger North American culture. When Kuyper visited Princeton, they were still conducting most of their own religious activity in the Dutch language. And around the time that they did begin the switch to the English language—two decades after Kuyper’s Princeton visit—they became preoccupied with theological debates within their own ranks. One of those debates was about a key Kuyperian teaching, common grace, and the controversy led to a wrenching church split in the 1920s.¹⁸ Ironically, then, instead of using the Kuyperian framework for addressing the larger culture, it served as a point of division within their own community.

But the Dutch American Calvinists did at least keep Kuyper’s ideas alive within their own somewhat insulated academic culture. This was brought home to me personally in a rather graphic way when I interviewed for a faculty position in philosophy at Calvin University (then Calvin College) in the late 1960s. The final step in the interviewing

¹⁷Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 171.

¹⁸James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 93-122.

process was a meeting with the college's president. He was cordial, but he also pushed me hard on worldview issues. I had earned my own undergraduate degree at an evangelical college, and he clearly wanted to be sure that I understood what I was getting into at Calvin. At one point he described Calvin's mission in a striking manner: "We take our Calvinist theology very seriously here—but that by itself is not what makes this a Calvinist school. To put it bluntly: if on the same evening the entire theology faculty died and the chapel also burned to the ground, this would still be a Calvinist school the next morning. It's because we have a worldview that shapes everything we teach. Sociology, Chemistry, History, Literature!"

I got to know that president well, and he had a deep commitment to Calvinist theology, along with a warm piety. But in that statement he was expressing what it meant for a college to be true to the Kuyperian vision. While other schools in the evangelical world had long preserved their Christian identity mainly through required theology courses and regular campus worship, the Kuyperian way was for the curriculum itself to be shaped by a Christian worldview.

Again, we can be grateful that the worldview perspective had been preserved for the next half-century by the intellectuals in the Dutch Calvinist community. Right around the time when I had that conversation with Calvin University's president, though, a new awareness of the Kuyperian vision was emerging in the larger evangelical community. In the late 1960s, for example, the important evangelical theologian Carl Henry founded the Institute for Advanced Christian Scholarship in the hope of establishing a new graduate-level university whose purpose would be "the unification of all the university disciplines in the interest of a Christian world-life view."¹⁹

Carl Henry was not alone in expressing the need for this more robust approach to evangelical learning. Another important voice in this

¹⁹Quoted by Owen Strachan, *Awakening the Evangelical Mind: An Intellectual History of the Neo-Evangelical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015). Strachan is drawing here on materials in the Henry Papers at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School's Roling Library.

regard was Arthur Holmes, a philosopher who taught with a strong worldview emphasis at Wheaton College, beginning in 1951, for over four decades. His views eventually became influential in evangelical higher education, when his books—*The Idea of a Christian College* and *All Truth Is God's Truth*, published in 1975 and 1977, respectively—were widely read by evangelical faculty members and administrators.

Ministries on university campuses also began to play an important role in promoting worldview sensitivities. An obvious case in point is the publisher of this volume, InterVarsity Press, which has done much to make worldview writings available to a broad audience. A prominent example is *The Universe Next Door*, by Jim Sire, a book first published in 1976, which became a bestseller that has sold hundreds of thousands of copies over the decades. The book originally contrasted the Christian perspective with deism, Eastern mysticism, existentialism, naturalism, and the like—with other perspectives, such as Marxism, New Age, and secular humanism, added in later editions.

While Sire acknowledged Kuyper's influence on his thinking in an interview not long before he died,²⁰ he also drew on other sources in setting forth his case. Like Henry and Holmes, he saw the importance of making worldview thinking available to a broad evangelical audience without tying the issues too closely to what might be seen in a North American context as an over-reliance on Dutch Reformed doctrines and themes.

While that awareness was growing, positive things were happening among the Dutch American Calvinists, with a new infusion of active Dutch energies into the Kuyperian cause in North America. The post-World War II period brought a significant number of immigrants from the Netherlands, with most of them settling in Canada. These Calvinists had been shaped by movements in the Netherlands that embodied Kuyper's vision for specific areas of cultural engagement, and they

²⁰James Sire, interview by Fred Zaspel, Books at a Glance, May 12, 2015, www.booksataglance.com/author-interviews/interview-with-james-sire-author-of-apologetics-beyond-reason-why-seeing-is-really-believing/.

arrived in North America with an enthusiasm for carrying on this task in their new homeland. They soon organized Christian farmer groups, a movement for promoting Christian concerns in labor relations, summer conferences for promoting Kuyprian concerns, and an influential “think tank” organization, the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship (known today as the Institute for Christian Studies, in Toronto). Students from these immigrant communities also brought a new enthusiasm for the Kuyprian vision to Calvin University and other colleges and universities that had recently been established by the North American Dutch Calvinists.

One of the ironic developments in the growing post–World War II enthusiasm for Kuyprian ideas in North America has to do with two influential leaders. One was Francis Schaeffer, an American who established a study center in Switzerland and produced several widely read books promoting worldview thinking. The other was Evan Runner, a professor at Calvin University who played a key role in guiding the recent Dutch immigrants in Canada as they brought their Kuyprian sensitivities to their new cultural environment.

Neither Schaeffer nor Runner was of Dutch ethnic stock, but each was an eloquent articulator of Kuyprian thought. And here is the irony: both of them were trained in—and continued to be shaped by—the “Old Princeton” theology that had ruled the day when Kuyprian gave his 1898 lectures. The two of them saw the connections that Kuyprian had wanted his Princeton audience to grasp. Kuyprian’s vision was finally being appropriated among the descendants of those original hearers!

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

As I noted earlier, early on in his first lecture to his Princeton audience Kuyprian said that his concern was to show how the “life-principle” set forth in Calvinism was to meet “the requirements of our own century.” He made that observation just as the twentieth century was about to begin, and now we are well into the twenty-first century. So, it is

important for us to ask what we need to do with Kuyper's vision in order to meet the challenges of our own day.

One obvious thing that needs doing, or so it seems to me, is to get Christians to understand the central concerns of worldview thinking without requiring them to grasp and accept all the theological and philosophical issues that Kuyper explores in his first Princeton lecture. The vast majority of the followers of Christ should be able to wrestle with worldview topics and challenges today without being able to articulate the technical issues raised by, for example, pantheism, or the philosophy of the French Revolution, or the Muslim understanding of divine transcendence. I don't mean to disparage those topics—I think about them a lot. But for fellow Christians who are farmers or computer programmers or hair stylists, those technical matters are not of great importance.

Nor do such folks need to grasp all the sophisticated theological aspects of Kuyper's Calvinism—even though here too I take what he says with utmost seriousness. At the heart of what Kuyper is getting at in his worldview discussion, though, is that God is the sovereign Ruler over all of life and that we need to shape our patterns of living and acting in the light of what God has revealed to us about his purposes in the world. These are the important central truths, and once we have grasped them we should be able to resist the ways that alternative worldviews encourage us, for example, to see the human person as the highest authority in the universe or to tempt us to devote our lives to satisfying religious impulses that require no recognition that we are sinners who desperately need a heaven-sent Savior.

In suggesting that we simplify our formulations about worldviews, I do not mean to be “dumbing down” these topics. Wheaton College's Arthur Holmes, whom I mentioned earlier, nicely distinguished between what he labeled “theologians' theology” and “philosophers' philosophy,” on the one hand, and “world-viewish theology” and “world-viewish philosophy,” on the other. The first two ways of thinking, he wrote, deal with the kinds of topics that professional theologians and philosophers talk

about when they discuss matters with their scholarly peers, while the “world-viewish” varieties deal with topics that scholars wrestle with when they address questions that arise out of practical real-life contexts.²¹

Holmes certainly respected the more technical scholarly pursuits in philosophy and theology. But in teaching students who were preparing for many different areas of kingdom service, he wanted to provide careful guidance for intelligent Christians to think clearly about fundamental questions that bear on a variety of vocations and life-situations: topics such as sexuality, technology, work, leisure, friendship, and politics.

Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton did an excellent job of making world-viewish topics available to a general audience in a book they authored together. Their own thinking on the subject is indebted to Kuyper, but they make their case in fairly nontechnical—and quite practical—terms. A worldview, they say, whether Christian or otherwise, is made up of a set of answers to these questions: Who am I? Where am I? What’s wrong? What is the remedy?²² People don’t always explicitly ask these questions, but human beings typically approach life with some grasp of how those questions are to be answered. And the answers we take for granted do guide our lives.

The “Who am I?” question has to do with a person’s basic understanding of what it means to be a human being. “Where am I?” is about how I view the human person’s place in the larger scheme of things. “What’s wrong?” gets at the widespread sense that our lives, individually and collectively, are often clearly dysfunctional. And “What is the remedy?” addresses what we look to as the fundamental solution to the problems of our human existence.

Those questions cover the same territory as the life-systems discussed by Kuyper in his first lecture. Take, for example, the ideology of the French Revolution. In that worldview human persons are seen as free

²¹Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 31-32, 34-40.

²²Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 35.

and rational beings who exist in a universe that is ultimately fully knowable by the proper exercise of our rational capacities. The fundamental problem of human existence is that we do not trust our reason, but regularly give ourselves over to irrational—even superstitious—beliefs and practices. The remedy, then, is collectively to overthrow the oppressive religious institutions and forces that keep us from following the dictates of reason alone.

That is a bit too quick as a summary, but it does get at the basics of what guided the worldview that shaped the French Revolution. In our own time, however, the perspective that formed those events of the final decades in eighteenth-century Europe shows up in the lives of many people who have no knowledge of French history. “I have to do it my way” and “I’ve got to be me!” are popular contemporary expressions of the “autonomous self” celebrated in the French Enlightenment philosophy. The same for the conviction that we can solve the pressing problems of humankind if only we would promote better education, or rely on what science teaches us, or be more “attentive” to our deepest rational promptings.

On one level, the Christian worldview’s answers to those questions are fairly straightforward. Who we are is children of God, fashioned in the divine image. We live in a universe called into being by the living God who calls us to glorify him in all that we do. The problem is that we are sinners, and we cannot save ourselves. But God has provided the amazing remedy by sending his only Son to redeem and restore the likes of us.

Each of these answers, though, points to a variety of underlying topics. And in some cases we must, in dealing with those concerns, not only go further than Kuyper did in his thinking but even go back and correct some of his views. His racial views are an obvious case in point. Who are we? We are human beings of many races and ethnicities who nonetheless possess a shared dignity that is grounded in our being beloved creatures of God. And we together face cultural forces these days

that require us to reflect deeply—and act, urgently—on our convictions about our shared humanness. We have, more than Kuyper did in his day, a global awareness of injustice, religious persecution, the plight of refugees and other homeless persons, the blessings and curses of social media and “artificial intelligence,” and much more.

The “Where are we?” question takes on special significance because of environmental concerns. The biblical mandate to human beings to “have dominion” over the rest of creation was not a call to dominate nonhuman reality, but to be caretakers (persons who take care) of the creation. To be properly aware of the scope of our human task in this regard is also to recognize the reality of the larger—the structural and “systemic”—dimensions of the cursedness of our sinfulness. This requires (and here Kuyper sets the right sort of tone for our explorations) that we see Jesus not only as our Savior and our Lord but as the King, the sovereign Ruler over all of created reality.

I realize that in setting forth Kuyper’s overall perspective, I have emphasized the challenges and problems he wants us to face. This can easily come across as yet another version of gloomy Calvinism. But that would be misleading. Yes, God calls us—mandates us—to take on the complexities of Christian discipleship. But there are joys to be experienced in doing so. In the lectures to follow, Kuyper clearly wants to commend the Calvinist worldview as promoting human flourishing. He will encourage us to grow in grace as mutually supporting members of the body of Christ. He will tell us about the benefits that we can receive by living in a well-ordered society, where the government encourages and supports a rich variety of cultural spheres. He wants us to engage the world of ideas, actively promoting Christian learning. He points us to the importance of the arts in nurturing human well-being.

In some of my own speaking and writing in recent years I have been emphasizing the importance of an active *worldviewing* rather than the more static notion of “having” a worldview. I think Kuyper encourages that more dynamic picture when he tells us that we need a Calvinism

that is not just a repetition of past ideas but a reappropriation of the best from the past in articulating an exciting vision for the present. And in our present time we walk new paths on our faith journeys and encounter new realities.

There still is at least one important reason not simply to give up talking about the noun *worldview*, however. As we view the new realities along the way, it is crucial that we be continually aware of the big picture of the world Kuyper was advocating. In the Bible “the world” sometimes refers to the sinful patterns of human thought and practice. It is in this sense that the apostle John rightly warns us not to “love the world or anything in the world” (1 Jn 2:15). But that same apostle tells us in his Gospel account that the God who “so loved the world” sent his Son into the world, not “to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (Jn 3:16-17). The Greek word for *world* there is *kosmos*, referring to the created order that God originally proclaimed to be good.

That is at the heart of Kuyper’s understanding of worldview. God loves his creation and has refused to allow our sinful rebellion to cancel his original designs for all that he has made. The world that God still loves includes the patterns and products of human culture—family life, politics, the arts, business activity, academy, medical research, athletics, and more. God wanted all of that to unfold in his creation, and he calls us to be agents of that continuing work of engaging in that which glorifies him. This certainly means work on our part, of course. But it also means enjoying that which others have accomplished—including what has been produced by persons who do not acknowledge the divine source of the talents they possess.

All of this gives us an exciting way of understanding what the psalmist meant when he wrote that “the earth is the LORD’s, and everything it” (Ps 24:1). Kuyper is inviting us into a way of life that allows us to flourish in the creation that is being prepared for the day when all things will be made new in Jesus Christ.

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