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Every Inch for Christ: Abraham Kuyper on the Reform of the Church

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When the Free University of Amsterdam opened in 1880, its founder, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), declared in his inaugural address: "There is not an inch in the entire domain of our human life of which Christ, who is sovereign of all, does not proclaim 'Mine!'"¹

In making this assertion, Kuyper committed himself and his colleagues to operate Europe's only truly Christian university on the principle that all truth is God's truth and that every area of human endeavor must submit to Christ, the King of Kings. Kuyper founded the Free University as a major means to promote the reformation of church and society, i.e., to achieve the "restoration of truth and holiness in the place of error and sin."² The evils he had in mind had permeated the Netherlands broadly and deeply, hastened by the French Revolution of 1789. The Dutch nation, that had once been a bastion of biblical faith, had largely succumbed to the secular humanism that French intellectuals had generated in the eighteenth century and Napoleon's armies had disseminated in lands they occupied.

By the time the French occupation of the Netherlands ended (1814), the French dictum *ni dieu ni maitre* (neither God nor master) had become a common point of view among the country's academic and intellectual elite which controlled the universities, where ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church obtained their education. A vague supernaturalism existed which was agreeable to the tastes of reason portrayed as an example of love and kindness but ignoring sin, guilt and God's gracious provision to save sinners.

Even before the arrival of the French rulers, some powerful forces had been leading the Dutch Reformed Church away from its historic allegiance to Scripture. Modernists had been attacking the Bible and the traditional confessions of faith derived from it, while *ethical* theologians deprec-

ated supernatural features of Christian belief and stressed moral principles as the essence of faith. Skeptical university professors denounced John Calvin and extolled Renaissance humanists such as Desiderius Erasmus.

In November 1814 William, Prince of Orange, returned to Amsterdam, ending eighteen years in exile. City officials welcomed him jubilantly as “Sovereign Prince of the Netherlands.” The former Dutch republic became a constitutional monarchy by action of the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), which restored legitimate rulers in lands liberated from Napoleonic control.

The new King of the Netherlands was a highly authoritarian leader who styled himself an enlightened monarch and desired a strong central government that included state authority over the Dutch Reformed Church. Since the king endorsed the prevailing liberal theology, he used the agencies of the state to promote a broad church to embrace almost all Protestants without regard to doctrine. A national Synod had final authority over affairs of the Reformed Church, but it was in session only two weeks per year, and the king could veto its decisions. A state Department for Reformed Worship controlled the synod’s executive committee.

Protests against the new church government and the defection from orthodox beliefs led to a secession from the National Church in 1834. This occurred at a time of *reveil* (revival) in several parts of Europe. The *reveil* was, for the most part, broadly evangelical rather than Reformed in character, but it had the effect of stimulating a resurgence of Calvinism in the Netherlands. Hendrik de Cock, a former modernist pastor converted through the study of the Bible and Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was a pioneer in the effort to purify the National Church. He incurred severe criticism from pastors and ecclesiastical officials who resented his demand that they uphold the doctrines

affirmed in their church’s confessions of faith. De Cock and pastors who supported him suffered suspension from the ministry, which convinced several congregations to withdraw from the Dutch Reformed Church. This separation, known in Dutch as the *Afscheiding* (secession), produced a new denomination—the Christian Reformed Church—which held its first synod in 1836.

The Dutch government reacted swiftly to suppress the seceders. It denied that the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion applied to them, and soldiers appeared in Ulrum and Appeldorn, where they were billeted in homes of orthodox believers who supported the *Afscheiding*. Law courts almost always ruled against the seceders and imposed heavy fines upon them. Failure to pay led to confiscation of their properties. De Cock spent three months in prison. Leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church encouraged the state to persecute seceders by applying articles 291-294 of the criminal code, which prohibited meetings of more than twenty people without permission from the government. Reformed believers in other lands appealed to King William I to end the persecution, but he ignored their pleas. Leaders of the *Afscheiding* offered to return to the National Church if it would reaffirm the Reformed confessions and return to its historic character, but the progress of modernism within that body made that impossible.

Persecution of orthodox Protestants continued irregularly until the accession of William II in 1844, when the state relaxed repression of dissenters. Meanwhile thousands of Reformed Christians emigrated to the United States and Canada, where they enjoyed full freedom of worship. In 1857 they formed the Christian Reformed Church in America, a body in fellowship with the *Afscheiding*.

During the period of persecution the seceders found a champion in Dr. Guillaume van Prinsterer, a distinguished lawyer and historian and a secretary of state in the king’s

cabinet. Although Groen disapproved of the secession and remained within the Dutch Reformed Church, he defended the separatists and criticized his own church for departing from its foundations. He blamed indifference toward truth in the National Synod for the schism of 1834 ff., and he strove valiantly to encourage orthodox people within the Dutch Reformed Church to demand its allegiance to biblical doctrine as expressed in the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dordt*, its official statements of faith. The efforts of Groen and others of his conviction were, in the end, unable to stem the tide of infidelity in their church, so a second secession, much larger than that of 1834, was the consequence. Abraham Kuyper became leader of this movement.

Kuyper obtained his higher education at the University of Leiden, from which he received the Doctor of Theology in 1862. While a student he absorbed many antibiblical ideas that his modernist professors espoused. He related later that he had once joined others in applauding a scholar who denied Christ's bodily resurrection. Reflecting upon his time at Leiden, Kuyper wrote: "In the academic world I had no defense against the powers of theological negation. I was robbed of my childhood faith. I was unconverted, proud, and open to doubting."³

Despite doubts about the Bible, Kuyper became a Dutch Reformed pastor at Beesd, a village in Gelderland, where he stayed four years and then moved to the Domkerk, a large congregation in Utrecht. During his residence in Beesd (1863-67), Kuyper ministered to people who had remained loyal to Christ and some of whom had a remarkable knowledge of Scripture and of Reformed theology. Kuyper later said, "When I went there (Beesd) from the university my heart was empty."⁴ It did not remain empty, because believers in his congregation prayed for their pastor and sought his conversion. One in particular, Pietje Baltus, a peasant

woman in her 30s, was critical of Kuyper's preaching, and her influence altered his life forever.

Miss Baltus witnessed to her pastor about the grace of God in her life, and she explained how her beliefs differed from his. She presented him with the historic Reformed Confessions and related their doctrines to her learned minister, who allowed a peasant to teach him God's Word. She urged him to read Calvin's *Institutes*. He did so, and his conversion followed. He testified that she and others at Beesd were the agents who led him to embrace the Christ of the Gospels.⁵

In Calvin's *Institutes* Abraham Kuyper found the concept of God as the father of believers and the church as their mother. After his conversion he said, "My life goal was now the restoration of a church that could be our mother."⁶ While at Utrecht (1867-70), Kuyper became chief spokesman for a movement to defend local congregations against authoritarian, intrusive policies of the National Synod. As leader of the orthodox party within the Dutch Reformed Church, he urged congregations to choose only truly Reformed officers, and he advised churches to free themselves from financial dependence upon the state.

In 1870 Abraham Kuyper moved to Amsterdam to become pastor of the large Nieuwkerk. That cosmopolitan city had been a stronghold of modernism, but Kuyper's preaching drew large audiences, especially from the lower and middle classes, who appreciated his orthodoxy. His influence in Amsterdam made it a dynamo in the cause for reformation.

To advance the reform of the church and to prompt believers to accept their religious and social responsibilities, Kuyper in 1871 began editing *De Heraut* (*The Herald*), a weekly Christian newspaper, "The Herald of the Free Church and the Free School in the Free Netherlands," as its mast-

head proclaimed. In 1872 he founded *De Standaard* (*The Standard*), a daily paper that quickly gained nationwide readership as an organ of Reformed orthodoxy. The influence of this publication led eventually to formation of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, a Christian political movement to assert Christ's lordship over public affairs. Obtaining state recognition of the right of Christians to operate their own schools was the initial objective of the party and perhaps its most enduring success.

As leader of the orthodox party within the National Church, Kuyper declared: "The church I want is Reformed and democratic, free and independent, as well as fully organized in doctrinal teaching, formal worship, and the pastoral ministry of love."⁷

To accomplish this he summoned believers to adhere to the principle of "continuous purification and development. The Reformed Church is always reforming before God."⁸

Kuyper's specific objective was to abolish the synodal system of church government which, since 1816, had deprived local congregations of much autonomy. He believed that only a church free from state control could reform itself and thereby regain its former character; thus he called for vigorous evangelism to parallel all efforts to win freedom for the congregations. At this time (1873) he was still optimistic about the success of his quest for the reform of the Dutch Reformed Church. In Amsterdam he organized church leaders to combat liberal trends in the National Church and was able to place orthodox believers in some places of influence.

In his efforts to promote internal reform of the National Church Abraham Kuyper saw that theological education was of utmost importance, and the Free University of Amsterdam was his answer to the modernism that had infected the faculties of the state universities. He formed an Association for Higher Education on a Reformed Basis to

collect funds, and many of the most faithful contributors were people of small means who gave sacrificially. When the Free University opened in 1880, Kuyper was its rector, and he remained on the faculty until 1908. Because he believed all truth is God's truth and every inch of creation belongs to Christ, he established not only a school of theology but a university in which the entire curriculum, in all the arts and sciences, was to affirm a biblical worldview.

Much to the regret of Kuyper and his orthodox supporters, efforts to cleanse the Dutch Reformed Church failed. It refused to accept pastors educated at the Free University, and the government would not accredit its degrees unless recipients passed qualifying examinations at state universities. By 1883 Kuyper had become pessimistic about prospects for church reform, although he continued to strive for it. In that year he published *Tractaat van de Reformatie der Kerken* (*A Pamphlet on the Reformation of the Churches*), which he had been preparing for ten years. His concept of reform featured the belief that defenders of orthodoxy should stress their continuity with the sixteenth-century Reformation and the historic creeds of their church. Secession should be a last resort. Kuyper had criticized the *Afscheiding* because its leaders had not pursued reform of the National Church long enough but had engaged in schism.

In Kuyper's view the preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments are the marks of the true church. Although no Christian body maintains these marks perfectly, false churches discard God's Word, pervert the sacraments, and oppose lovers of truth, as the National Synod had been doing. Separation from such a church is necessary when it prevents its members from obeying God. Believers must refuse to support any ecclesiastical action that involves such disobedience.¹⁰ Kuyper warned, "Satan creates a church for Antichrist by subverting existing Christian churches."¹¹ When it becomes neces-

sary for believers to leave an apostate church, they must try to persuade others to do the same. Godly pastors especially have this duty, and pastors and laymen must then form a true church, if one does not exist in their area.¹² Christians must not, however, leave a church just because it is imperfect.

Just because your church is sick or crippled, you may not withhold from her your love. Just because she is sick, she has a greater claim on your compassion. Only when she is dead and has ceased to be your church, and when the poisonous gasses of the false church threaten to kill you, do you flee from her touch and withdraw your love from her.¹³

“One may not leave his church unless one is certain it has become a synagogue of Satan.”¹⁴

Although Kuyper estimated that about 500 congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church were still preaching the Word and rightly administering the sacraments, he concluded by 1886 that the National Synod had become incurably corrupt, and separation was necessary. Degeneration in the national Church had begun with laxity about doctrine and proceeded to evil behavior of its members. When officials of that church discarded the requirement that pastors subscribe to the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dordt* and tried to impose that policy upon orthodox congregations, Kuyper led a protest. The National Synod then removed Kuyper and seventy-four elders in Amsterdam. This convinced affected local churches to join with others that had already seceded. The separatists called themselves the *Doleantie* (grieving ones) because they sorrowed over the necessity for withdrawal.

The Dutch government and the National Synod reacted to their orthodox critics by seizing their church properties, sometimes by force. About 200 congregations of 170,000 members formed *De Doleerende Kerk* (The Sorrowing

Church), and many more local churches followed suit. In 1892 most of the congregations of the *Afscheiding* merged with Kuyper's group. By then the new Reformed Church of the Netherlands had about 700 congregations and 300,000 members. Known by its Dutch name *Gereformeerde Kerk*, the new body restored traditional church polity and affirmed allegiance to the historic Reformed confessions. Such were the accomplishments of the reformation of 1886-92, as orthodox believers took the painful but necessary steps to maintain their loyalty to the Savior, who is entitled to rule every inch of His creation and preeminently His church. As Abraham Kuyper declared, “to esteem God as everything and all people as nothing is the Calvinistic *credo*.”¹⁵ Orthodox Christians in every land and every era must be constantly vigilant to preserve the purity of Christ's church, for “Satan sets himself over against God and imitates in the desperation of his impotence, all that God does, to see if he is able to succeed in destroying God's kingdom with God's own instruments.”¹⁶

- 1 Abraham Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring (Sovereignty in Its Own Sphere)*, tr., Wayne A. Kobes (Amsterdam: J. H. Kruyt, 1880), 35.
- 2 Abraham Kuyper, *A Pamphlet on the Reformation of the Churches*, tr., Herman Hanko, collated from *The Standard Bearer*, vols. 54-63 (1877-86) by Randall K. Klynsma, section 51.
- 3 Abraham Kuyper, *Confidentie: Schrijven aan den Weled. Heer J. H. Van der Linden (Confidential Writings to Mr. J. H. Van der Linden)*, tr., McKendree R. Langley (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Zoon, 1873), 35.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 5 A vivid account of this matter appears in an article by Kuyper's daughter. See Catherine M. E. Kuyper, "Abraham Kuyper: His Early Life and Conversion," *International Reformed Bulletin*, 5 (April 1960), 19-25.
- 6 Kuyper, *Confidentie*, 48.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 9 *De Heraut*, April 20, 1884, 330.
- 10 Kuyper, *Pamphlet on Reformation*, section 56.
- 11 *Ibid.*, section 49.
- 12 *Ibid.*, section 58.
- 13 *Ibid.*, section 59.
- 14 *Ibid.*, section 63.
- 15 Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit*, 38.
- 16 Kuyper, *Pamphlet on Reformation*, section 49.

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