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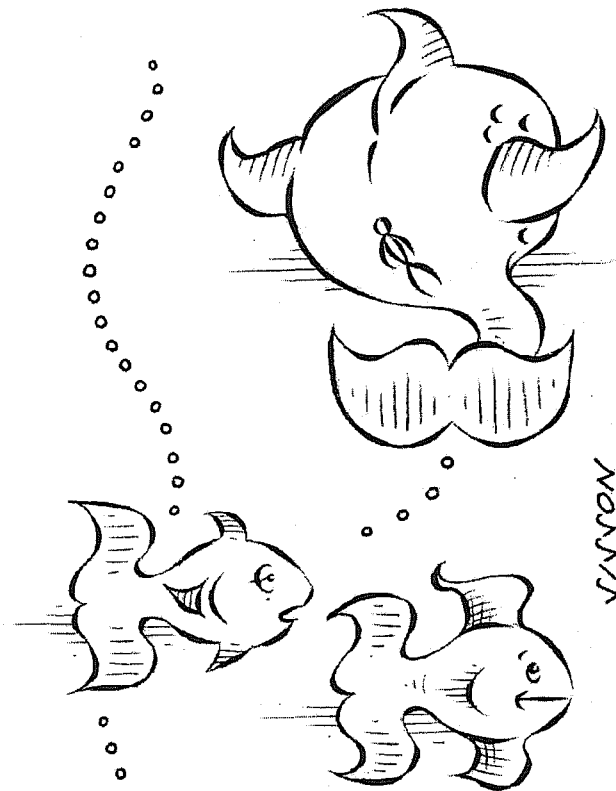
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Abraham Kuyper and the Christian Cultural Consensus



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OH LOOK — A CHRISTIAN FISH.

Culture plays a powerful role in human life. The artifacts, institutions, and conventions with which we surround ourselves, and in which we are inescapably immersed, serve to help us define, sustain, and enrich our lives and experience. Culture influences the way we view the world and the use we make of it. It shapes our outlook and affections, facilitates our work, conveys our understanding and convictions, variously delights and edifies or threatens and dismays us, and provides a legacy for future generations. Culture often divides us, but it can also serve as a meeting-ground for common concerns. Our present so-called culture was remind us that, as Christians, we cannot afford the luxury of a studied neutrality with respect to so potent a subject.

The Christian community today is divided about the place of culture in the life of faith. No consensus exists among the followers of Christ concerning how to approach and make use of the artifacts, institutions, and conventions of culture in a decidedly *Christian* manner. We see this in at least six ways.

CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO CULTURE

The first we may call *cultural indifference*. Perhaps the vast majority of contemporary Christians hardly give culture a second thought, at least as it relates to their faith in Christ. Their

tastes, habits, manners, and cultural preferences have largely been absorbed throughout the normal course of life, and, for the most part, reflect the cultural standards and preferences of the society around them. While most Christians will not condone the more extreme expressions of sensuality, violence, or relativism in the culture at large, still, the culture to which they incline—i.e., in their tastes in fashion and entertainment, their political inclinations, how they spend their time and money, their topics of conversation—differs but little from that of their non-Christian friends and associates. They just don't think about culture that much, at least not from the perspective of their Christian faith.

A second way in which our division is manifest is what we might call *cultural aversion*. For some, especially ultra-conservative Christians, culture is a pox to be avoided, an evil in which we must not participate. Culture is of this world, and anything of this world has the potential to undermine Christian faith. The best approach to culture is, therefore, to avoid it, to keep away from it, lest it contaminate your faith. The only legitimate cultural activities are those that relate to the necessities of survival and the mission of the gospel, or those that can be safely entered into within the confines of family and the community of faith.

A third expression of cultural division on the part of Christians might be called *cultural trivialization*. Christians who hold to this approach want a distinctively Christian cultural expression but tend to limit that to popular forms and artifacts, the bulk of which partake of a tiresome sameness. This category includes Christian pop music and other forms of "bookstore culture"—plaques and posters, knickknacks and gewgaws, jewelry and junk, tee shirts and trivia—that keep most Christian bookstores afloat. Besides Christian rock and praise music, this culture frequently consists of folk art forms adorned with Bible verses, cutesy Bible characters, and familiar Christian symbols adapted for use in the home or on one's person. In the area of contemporary Christian music, musical forms popular in the secular world are adapted for Christian audiences, with themes and lyrics reflecting primarily pietistic concerns.

Culture is trivialized in this approach by narrowing both the range of cultural forms—music and crafts—and the themes of those forms such that they have no larger social or cultural significance beyond the merely personal.

A fourth evidence of the division among Christians over matters of culture we might call *cultural accommodation*. Many Christians seem to regard it as the duty of the faithful to make room in their beliefs for whatever new expressions of culture may appear. These members of the community of faith espouse a pluralistic and nonjudgmental approach to culture, a kind of live-and-let-live approach to matters of taste, preference, and practice in the cultural arena. Cultural preference is regarded as a matter strictly of personal choice, qualified by the determination to extend this privilege to all, while seeking to preserve the dignity and well-being of others.

A fifth approach to culture that can be found among members of the Christian community we might call *cultural separation*. Proponents of this view tend to hold a broad view of culture, but they work the hardest in culture matters for the sake of constructing Christian alternatives to the existing culture, alternatives which are for their own use and that of their Christian friends and neighbors. They adopt forms of alternative schooling to keep their children free of the influences of secularism, decorate their homes and persons with decidedly Christian cultural artifacts, and create Christian sports leagues for competition within the safe confines of the believing community. They publish and use forms of a Christian "Yellow Pages" in an effort to ensure that their toilets and sinks are kept clear by only Christian plumbers. They listen to Christian radio, watch Christian television, and even go to Christian night clubs when they can find one. Their cultural interests are broader than the culture trivializers and more clearly Christian than the accommodationists, but they have little influence in culture matters beyond their own narrowly Christian spheres.

A final approach to contemporary culture we might refer to as *culture triumphalism*. There are those Christians who expect too much of culture, who believe that by voting for the

right candidates, changing laws, securing the right judges, suppressing one aspect of culture while promoting another, and seeking to impose their own cultural practices on others through legislative, judicial, and ecclesiastical processes is the best way to advance the kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy. While we may admire the zeal for culture expressed in this approach, and want to gloat with the proponents of this view over every indication of some victory (however small), still, this approach to culture matters demands more than culture can perform. And it tends to alienate people from all places on the cultural spectrum by what often appear to be exclusivist, outrageous, and unrealistic demands.

It is obvious from these six approaches to culture that no consensus on the use of culture exists among the members of the community of faith. While these differing approaches to culture may overlap at various points and among individual believers, none of them has as yet provided a viable approach to cultural activity for uniting Christians in common cultural endeavor. Thus a number of important questions remain to be answered: Does culture matter? If so, why? And how are we to approach it? What are we to make of it? How does culture fit in with the mission of the church and its calling to make disciples? Is it possible to achieve even the beginnings of a renewed Christian consensus on culture?

It can be helpful in seeking to discover some aspects of a common approach to culture to look to our Christian past, where we can examine the thinking and practice of our forebears in the faith, as they expressed their understanding of such matters. Many potential candidates and eras might be referenced in an effort to ferret out aspects of a Christian approach to culture that could serve us in seeking a renewed Christian consensus on this important matter. In the realm of cultural thinking and engagement, few Christian leaders can claim as much experience or achievement as Abraham Kuyper, the nineteenth-century Dutch theologian-journalist-politician-educator. His *Lectures on Calvinism*, delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898, and still in print today, raises a standard for a Christian approach to culture

from which many have benefited. In addition to this, the record of his life and insights from his many writings and speeches can be useful to help us get our bearings in the roiling seas and amid the dark clouds of cultural change that characterize our own day.

This paper will address some of the key issues relating to the involvement of Christians in matters of culture by examining the career and views of Abraham Kuyper. My purpose is to identify some talking points for renewing discussion toward a Christian cultural consensus on a more broad-based and more self-conscious approach to this important subject than is currently in evidence among Christians. After a brief introduction to the nineteenth century and to Kuyper himself, I will proceed to an overview of his cultural activities and views before concluding with some observations from his example for Christians today. My overriding purpose in this paper is to generate discussion on the role of culture in the life of faith, with a view to identifying some common ground on the subject among those holding differing views concerning a Christian approach to culture.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BACKGROUND

The nineteenth century was a time of great intellectual, social, and cultural ferment in Europe. Kuyper spoke and wrote often on what he referred to as “the anti-Christian character” of the century. The fruit of Enlightenment humanism was beginning to be born in the philosophical, theological, political, and cultural arenas in Kuyper’s day, and Christianity was declining as a factor in many people’s thinking and lives.

Politically, revolution—or at least the fear of it—against the established social and political order was pervasive. Liberal representative governments sought to increase state control over people’s lives while, at the same time, accomplishing a shift in civil power to themselves from the old ruling classes. Radical political philosophies were in the air, challenging the established order and calling for social and political upheaval. Rationalist philosophers exalted the achievements of human wisdom above the unchanging truths of

Scripture, and subjectivist theologians turned the focus of religion away from the knowledge of God to the knowledge of self. Romantics in all genres of art celebrated the experience of emotional liberation. Darwin and Marx reduced history to mechanics and humankind to biology, and, together with new technologies and advances in all the fields of science, held out the prospect of progress on a grand scale for the human community. The new cultural revolutionaries—Goethe, Beethoven, Garibaldi, Marx, and, later, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Freud—heralded an end to former ways, challenging Europeans to break away from the herd and press on toward a new humanity and a new social order.

This revolutionary thinking found its way into theology as it was taught and practiced in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. While theologians holding to historic Reformed views were still holding forth, their position in the Dutch Church was being steadily eroded by Christian humanists, ethical theologians (religious subjectivists), and outright modernists.¹ Abraham Kuyper, raised in a traditional Calvinist home, embraced more liberal views during his period of training and carried those views with him into his first pastorate. Only after his conversion to historic orthodox Christian faith during his ministry in Beesd in the 1860s did he begin to understand the revolutionary nature of his times and to think about the great and pressing issues of the day. It was during this period that he became acquainted with the anti-revolutionary sentiments and convictions of such powerful figures as Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, and began to develop his own thoughts and positions concerning the application of biblical truths to the pressing concerns of culture and society.

Upon becoming pastor of the great church in Amsterdam, Kuyper entered the cultural fray with a vengeance. Here his strong convictions lead him to become active in journalism, politics, and education on behalf of the kingdom of God. The rest of his life would be devoted to speaking, writing, and working through government and the private sector in the hard rows of Dutch cultural life.

CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Kuyper's activities in the Dutch culture of his day are well known and have been fully presented elsewhere.² Here we may only summarize his achievements in order to establish a platform from which to examine more carefully his views on the role of culture in the Christian life.

Kuyper's first involvement in the culture of his day was as a *scholar*. His treatise on the reformer John a Lasco earned him widespread recognition and his doctoral degree in 1860. Kuyper would keep his hand in the work of scholarship throughout the rest of his life, ultimately producing such respected tomes as *Sacred Theology*, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, and *Lectures on Calvinism*.

His scholarly preparations fitted him, secondly, for service in the Church, which he entered as a pastor in the 1863. He served churches in Beesd, Utrecht, and Amsterdam, and gained a reputation as a persuasive preacher. Kuyper would remain a pastor until his entrance into politics in 1874. Thereafter, he continued to serve the Church as a ruling elder. Beginning in 1867, and extending throughout the 1890s, Kuyper played a leading role in the reform of the Dutch Church, and in the creation of the new denomination, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, in 1892.

His involvement with the institutions of Dutch culture continued to expand when, in the 1860s, he began to write devotional and theological material for the weekly journal, *The Herald*, of which he became editor in 1871. In 1872 he founded and edited the daily political journal, *The Standard*. Thus, in the third place, he was now fully engaged in the world of Dutch *journalism*, in addition to his roles in church and home.

Fourth, at about this time Kuyper began to take an active role in Dutch politics, and was elected a member of Parliament in 1874. In this setting he was thrust into leadership of the Anti-revolutionary Party, which he led in seeking social reform in a wide range of areas. For his brilliance and proven leadership in these efforts, Kuyper was elected prime minister

of The Netherlands, in which office he served his country from 1901–1905.

Education in general, and higher education in particular, became, in the fifth place, passionate interests for Kuyper from 1860 onward. He led the movement for free schools in the Netherlands and was instrumental in founding the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880 (“free” in the sense of being separate from state control), where he served as instructor and rector.

Finally, throughout his career, Kuyper excelled as a man of letters. He wrote devotional material, scholarly books, cultural and political criticism, and speeches and sermons on a wide range of subjects. In his writing and speeches we may discover what are perhaps the four key cultural ideas that pervade his life and work, that of *antithesis*, of *sphere sovereignty*, of the absolute *lordship of Christ*, and of the *freedom of the conscience*. We must examine each of these briefly.

CULTURAL IDEAS

Antithesis

Kuyper, like Augustine, came to see that a great struggle was being fought on all fronts between truth and error, light and darkness, the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men, which he regarded as enemies to the gospel. His broad involvement in cultural matters was impelled by his sense of the need to strike a blow for truth wherever its enemies seemed particularly active or vulnerable at any moment, or where the forces of truth needed shoring up. Of this antithesis, Kuyper wrote in 1898:

There is no doubt then that Christianity is imperilled [*sic*] by great and serious dangers. Two *life systems* are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat. Modernism is bound to build a world of its own from the data of natural man, and to construct man himself from the data of nature; while, on the other hand, all those who reverently bend the knee to Christ and worship

Him as the Son of the living God, and God Himself, are bent upon saving the “Christian Heritage.” This is *the* struggle in Europe, this is *the* struggle in America, and this also, is the struggle for principles in which my own country is engaged, and in which I myself have been spending all my energy for nearly forty years.³

As Kuyper saw it, this great struggle—this antithesis—had to be waged on every front where issues of truth could be fruitfully engaged, and by means of every available resource, tool, or institution. As the opponents of truth were attempting to storm the redoubts of culture in the arenas of politics, science, education, the arts, and even the church, Kuyper believed that the Christian community needed to prepare for a concerted effort to resist these assaults and reclaim the whole vast field of culture for Christ. To this end, he often supported joint undertakings with a wide range of Christian communities, including Roman Catholic.

Sphere Sovereignty

Kuyper believed that all the social and cultural spheres of human life were meant to function according to divine purpose, each by its own unique set of principles in the light of God’s Word. The great struggle of his day was to shore up those areas of Dutch life where the “Christian heritage” was under assault and sagging, and to open new fronts into areas where the light of the gospel had ceased to shine or had not yet begun to reform human life. In his inaugural address for the Free University of Amsterdam, Kuyper set forth his view of sphere sovereignty:

There is a domain of nature in which the Sovereign exerts power over matter according to fixed laws. There is also a domain of the personal, of the household, of science, of social and ecclesiastical life, each of which obeys its own laws of life, each subject to its own chief. A realm of thought where only the laws of logic may rule. A realm of conscience where none but the Holy One may give sovereign commands. Finally, a realm of faith where

the person alone is sovereign who through that faith consecrates himself in the depths of his being.⁴

Kuyper believed that the interaction of these various spheres, as they discovered and followed their divinely appointed courses, could make for a harmonious and prosperous society:

The cogwheels of all these spheres engage each other, and precisely through that interaction emerges the rich, multifaceted multiformity of human life. Hence also arises the danger that one sphere in life may encroach on its neighbor like a sticky wheel that shears off one cog after another until the whole operation is disrupted. Hence also the *raison d'être* for the special sphere of authority that emerged in the State. It must provide for sound mutual interaction among the various spheres, insofar as they are externally manifest, and keep them within just limits.⁵

Kuyper's commitment to the concept of sphere sovereignty was worked out not only in theoretical terms, but practical ones as well, as he carried his views into the various arenas of culture and attempted to define and operate on the principles he regarded as germane to each of the spheres of home, church, politics, journalism, and education. His ability to weave his views and convictions into each area, without compromising the unique limits and duties of each sphere (think of his insistence on his new university being "free"), indicates something of his ability to make sphere sovereignty an actual working principle of a Christian approach to culture.

The Absolute Lordship of Christ

Kuyper taught that every sphere of life in the great antithesis existed under the lordship of King Jesus. Ultimately, each and all must be made to serve him. Kuyper did not accept the sacred/secular dichotomy that characterizes certain aspects of social life today and of various of our approaches to culture:

Man in his antithesis as fallen *sinner* or self-developing *natural creature* returns again as the "subject that thinks" or "the object that prompts thought" in every department, in every discipline, and with every investigator. Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: "Mine!"⁶

Kuyper devoted his considerable energies throughout his life to the task of reconciling as much of his world as he could to Jesus Christ. Working in numerous cultural arenas, and through a wide range of cultural vehicles, he managed to express his belief in the lordship of Christ both cogently and with great effect.

Freedom of Conscience

In this great work of reconciliation—the struggle for a proper sovereignty of the spheres of life, which is the struggle of the great antithesis—humankind's only tools in winning its enemies to its views are reason and persuasion. Kuyper did not believe in coercing people to believe or practice contrary to their own convictions, that is, as long as social life was not imperiled. He worked for a true pluralism of worldviews where none was given legal favor over the others, but all could argue their virtues openly, leaving the outcome to sound judgment. Kuyper believed in "the sovereignty of conscience as the palladium of all personal liberty, in this sense—that conscience is never subject to man but always and ever to God Almighty."⁷ Consequently,

we must employ persuasion to the exclusion of coercion in all spiritual matters. Someday there will be coercion, when Christ descends in majesty from the heavens, breaks the anti-Christian powers with a rod of iron, and, in the words of Psalm 2, dashes them in pieces like a potter's vessel [v. 9]. He has a right to this because he knows the hearts of all and will be the judge of all. But we do not. To us it is given to fight with spiritual weapons and to bear our cross in joyful discipleship.⁸

These four convictions—the idea of antithesis, the notion of sphere sovereignty, belief in the absolute lordship of Christ, and commitment to freedom of conscience—come up over and over in Kuyper’s writings. They characterize as well all his life’s work. They mark out the broad parameters of his philosophy of culture and served to make his involvement in the culture of his day particularly powerful and lasting.

CULTURE MATTERS

The primary lesson for Christians today that emerges from the example of Abraham Kuyper’s involvement in the culture of his day is that culture matters, and, because it matters, Christians should seek to articulate and practice an approach to culture that is consistent with their heritage and views. Culture cannot be ignored and must not be regarded lightly. It has the potential to make an important contribution to the work of God’s kingdom and the progress of his truth, as Kuyper’s example shows. Culture matters, and that for four reasons.

God Rules Over Culture

First, culture matters because God rules over it. Concerning Calvinism, Kuyper wrote:

In this also, placing itself before the face of God, it has not only honored *man* for the sake of his likeness to the Divine image, but also *the world* as a Divine creation, and has at once placed to the front the great principle that there is a *particular grace* which works Salvation, and also a *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 [*sic*] development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator.⁹

As part of the divine creation, and, in particular, of the way human beings, the image-bearers of God, express themselves in the world, culture falls under the cope of God’s sovereignty and the principle of his common grace, and should

serve the purposes of his glory. Thus we may not treat culture with *indifference*, because God does not. Nor may we simply *ignore or avoid* it, for it is central to our existence in the world. And we must not *accommodate* to whatever cultural expressions come along, as some of these shall surely be found to be contrary to divine purposes. Instead, Christians must work for a culture which expresses their unique self-consciousness as the redeemed of the Lord, and their mission of reconciling all things in the world back to their Creator. But that culture must be neither trivial nor narrow; rather, it must reach out in the grace and truth of God to embrace all that falls under the divine lordship.

At the same time, we must remember that while culture is a primary way that we as believers express our existence *coram deo*, before the face of God, it is not the primary means whereby the truth of God and God’s kingdom rule make progress on the earth. That is the particular task of preaching (which itself, however, can be regarded as a cultural activity: 1 Corinthians 9:19–23; Acts 14 and 17). At best, culture can provide a backdrop against which the work of preaching and making disciples can go forward with greatest benefit; as well, culture serves the followers of Christ as a way to express their loyalty to him as Lord. But culture is not the primary means of advancing the gospel, and should not be used as such.

Kuyper shows us that culture must matter to us, because it matters so much to God, whom we serve. God’s rule over all of life includes all culture as well. As the vice-gerents of God (Genesis 1:26–28; Psalm 8), Christians must pay careful attention to the culture that they embrace, as well as the culture that confronts them as they carry out their kingdom mission in the world, always seeking forms and expressions of culture that honor God as Creator and Lord and support and further his purposes among humankind.

THE TENDENCY OF CULTURE TOWARD SINFULNESS

Second, culture matters because it is so often turned to sinful purposes, purposes which oppose the progress of the gospel and would rob God of his glory. Kuyper summarized

this tendency as he observed it in his own day:

In place of the worship of the most high God came, courtesy of Humanism, the worship of *man*. Human destiny was shifted from *heaven* to *earth*. The Scriptures were unraveled and the Word of God shamefully repudiated in order to pay homage to the majesty of *Reason*. The institution of the church was twisted into an instrument for undermining the faith and later for destroying it. The public school had to wean the rising generation away from the piety of our fathers. Universities have been refashioned into institutions at which Darwinism violates the spiritual nobility of humanity by denying its creation in the image of God. Hedonism replaced heaven-mindedness. And *emancipation* become [*sic*] the watchword by which people tampered with the bond of marriage, with the respect children owe their parents, with the moral seriousness of our national manners. This went on until first Philosophy, then Socialism raised its voice. The former replaced *certainty* in our hearts with *doubt*; the latter, logically developing upper-class liberal theory, applied to the *money* and *goods* of the owners what the liberal already had the audacity to do against God and his anointed King.¹⁰

He might have been describing our own day. The institutions, artifacts, and conventions that make up any culture are not neutral instruments designed only to enhance survival or the enjoyment of life. They are part and parcel of a world view which, in the antithesis between the kingdoms of light and darkness, cannot possibly occupy some middle ground. Either culture will be consciously developed and employed for the advancement of the kingdom of God, or it will fall into the hands of those who seek nothing more than the fuller realization of the next human agenda or scheme. *Indifference* to culture therefore is tantamount to abandoning the high ground to the adversary. *Avoidance* of it is impossible. *Narrow selectivity* in the creation of a distinctively Christian culture leaves the most powerful aspects of culture in the hands of God's enemies. Cultural *accommodation* to contemporary cultural forms can be tantamount to community

betrayal. A self-consciously biblical approach to culture is required, one that looks to God, speaking in the Word of God, to guide us in thinking about how best to put culture to use for our benefit and his glory. But such an approach to culture cannot stand alone; it must support and give way to the preaching of the kingdom of God as the centerpiece of the church's mission, and must not lose sight of the fact that the kingdom of God, while intimately associated with culture, is greater than culture nonetheless, as we shall see.

Kuyper shows us how much can go wrong when culture falls into the hands of sinful people who promote an agenda contrary to that of the kingdom of God. For this reason, we must see that culture matters.

THE CALLING OF THE REDEEMED

Third, culture matters because it is central to the calling of the redeemed of the Lord. Ours is no *merely* spiritual calling; rather, it is a spiritual calling intended to affect every area of human life and interest. Kuyper wrote that in a fallen, sinful world, people are called "to struggle valiantly against the powers that would destroy [them]. . . . God commands [them] to work, to labor, to struggle with nature."¹¹ He was committed to the belief that "the duty is now emphasized of serving God *in* the world, in every position of life."¹² Every Christian is called to engage in the great work of subduing the earth and all the culture in it, so that God may be glorified in the works of our hands as though they were God's own:

Live within the will of God, doing your work according to His will—not because the law demands it, nor to earn your daily bread as if your livelihood depended upon it; but for God's sake, always motivated by the desire to honor Him. Let your life be one of continuous service of love, a service which never grows irksome, a service which will hallow even the smallest task. Seek not the external, the visible, that which the world chooses as its goal. But that which is invisible, the hidden power behind the things which we see—in short, seek the Kingdom of God, where God is enthroned and self is denied; seek

all that is right, all that is in conformity with His righteousness; seek these things not only in seasons of prayer and meditation and worship, but always, in every situation, in every daily task.¹³

REDEEMED CULTURE PROMOTES HUMAN WELL-BEING

Finally, Kuyper shows us that culture matters because redeemed culture—culture used under the lordship of Christ—is most conducive to promoting the well-being of people and the glory of God. Kuyper wrote of the potential of various aspects of culture to accomplish this twofold good. Of science he wrote that it had the potential to

attain unto that high, dominant and prophetic character by which it not only liberates itself from the cosmos, but also understands it, enables its devotees to take active part in it, and partially foresee [*sic*] its future development.

Hence, it is not enough that the knowledge of God, which, as a flower in the bud, is hidden and covered in the Scripture, is set forth by us in its excellency; but that bud must be unfolded, the flower must make exhibition of its beauty, and scent the air with its fragrance. This can be done spiritually by piety of mind, practically by deeds of faith, aesthetically in hymns, parenetically in exhortation, but must also be done by scientific exposition and description.¹⁴

Kuyper also believed that the arts held great potential for bringing honor and glory to God and much blessing to people. He regarded art “as one of the richest gifts of God to mankind.”¹⁵ He particularly appreciated the art of the Dutch baroque period, which showed the beauty and love of God in the simplest and meanest of subjects.¹⁶

His high regard for such aspects of culture as scholarly endeavor, journalism, government and politics, and education is revealed in his own career. What he wrote of government could be equally applied to all these, and to all other aspects of culture as well:

Therefore, in the affairs of the nation, as well as in all other spheres of life, the Christian is called upon to fight the fight of faith, to be a soldier of Jesus Christ. . . . So then everyone who believes in Christ as the sovereign Ruler over our country *must*, if he has true patriotic love, rise to the defense of the honor of Christ in our politics. So long as we do this with all resolution, wisdom, and our combined strength, the possibility still remains that the spirit of apostasy can be arrested. . . . The magistrate is an instrument of “common grace,” to thwart all license and outrage and to shield the good against the evil. But he is more. Besides all this he is instituted by God as *His Servant*, in order that he may preserve the glorious work of God, in the creation of humanity, from total destruction.¹⁷

Given the great potential of culture to serve both God and humankind, all Christians, whatever their approach to culture, must be willing to begin seeking together a more comprehensive, consistent, practical, and consensual philosophy of culture than currently exists within our community.

APPLICATIONS

In conclusion, we can identify three applications from Kuyper’s example showing us that culture matters for our own situation today. There are at least three steps that Christians can begin to take that can help them to experience a fuller and more powerful approach to culture together, and to begin to articulate a more powerful Christian consensus on culture than presently exists.

Accept the Inevitability and Potentiality of Culture

First, as a community, we must accept both the inevitability and the potentiality of culture. We can never escape nor avoid culture; it is essential to our existence as human beings. At the same time, we must neither take culture for granted nor isolate the distinctively Christian element of our culture to some narrowly defined focus. Culture is as broad as life, encompassing all the artifacts, institutions, and conventions that make up our experience in the world, and by which we

both define ourselves and sustain and enrich our lives. Culture defines our lives at home, on the job, in our communities, churches, voluntary associations, and avocations. It includes the language through which we communicate, the work ethic that characterizes us on the job or in school, our political convictions, as well as our daily routines, tastes in fashion, manners, even the decor of our homes and our personal habits. Culture is expressed by our preferences in music, entertainment, and personal enrichment. We are immersed in culture and cultural activities all our waking moments. We cannot avoid culture, and we must strive to make certain that, whatever cultural activity we are involved in at any given moment, we are doing it unto the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Thus Christians must work together to articulate a more thoroughly Christian and more consistently practical approach to culture than we have heretofore worked out. Our experience in this generation reveals little to set us off as a people distinguished in all the areas listed above as holding to a unique view of our lives in the world. Christians must begin to expect of their leaders—pastors, educators, church officers, Bible teachers, as well as theologians and philosophers—more consistent and concrete instruction in a more consistently Christian approach to culture. For those uninstructed in such thinking, Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* would be a good place to start. Here we can begin to train our minds in how to think about cultural matters from a more consistently Christian perspective. Certainly we will not agree with all that we find there, and much of it will be out of date. However, the principles articulated in Kuyper's seminal work can at least provide a platform for beginning to think more consistently together concerning culture matters from a Christian point of view. From there, additional studies in other works on Christian culture, but especially in the Bible itself, will prove rewarding. As church leaders grow in their understanding of a biblical approach to culture, their sermons, lessons, and writings will begin to help the other members of our community to understand what is required of and promised to them in this

important undertaking. Together we may begin to learn that our daily interactions and involvement with culture can be a means of demonstrating a more consistent witness to God and his kingdom.

Paying Attention to Contemporary Culture

Second, we must, as a community, begin to pay more attention to the times in which we live and to the state of the great antithesis as it exists in our day. What Kuyper observed about the spiritual polarization of his time is, if anything, even more pronounced today. Only as we are careful to assess the state of culture around us will we be able to see where the battle lines are being drawn and to engage the adversaries of God's kingdom more fruitfully.

This may prove to be the greatest challenge for members of the Christian community, for it will certainly require of us more and more that we "come out from among them and touch not the unclean thing" (2 Corinthians 6:17). We cannot expect to embrace a more consistent Christian pattern of cultural involvement if our lives in culture are entirely taken up with the views and practices of the world. Yet we shall not be able to determine the areas where we are, in effect, cooperating with the enemy until we begin the hard work of assessing the culture around us, and then, of evaluating from a Christian perspective what we are reading, watching, or listening to; the extent to which our work, manners, and habits reflect worldly rather than eternal convictions; or the true nature of our aspirations, commitments, and entertainments. As we begin to examine together the culture of the world in the light of our growing, Christian understanding of culture, we will be better able to determine those areas in which our own thinking and practice must begin to change.

This means that we cannot entirely separate ourselves from the culture of the world or from those for whom that culture is home. Christian leaders must study to understand the times in which we live and to interpret those times for the people they are called to serve (1 Chronicles 12:32). All members of the community must have at least enough under-

standing of the culture of our day to be able to avoid being tossed about and carried about by every wind of doctrine or taken captive by vain philosophies (Ephesians 4:14; Colossians 2:8). And we must use our understanding of the times to help us in determining both how to construct a culture that is distinctly kingdom-like in its expression, as well as how best to reach for Christ those who are yet captive to the culture of our day.

Pursuing Culture for the Glory of God

Finally, we must resolve to use our involvement in culture solely for the glory of God and the progress of his kingdom. We can no longer afford the luxury of petty self-indulgence as a motive for cultural activity, whether that indulgence takes the form of indifference, avoidance, narrowness, accommodation, over-burdening, or transformation. Christians must discover ways of working toward a new consensus on culture, one that includes at least some elements that all participants can embrace. As we have seen, the stakes involved in the Christian community's continuing to be divided over matters of culture are simply too high. In particular, we should make three observations concerning our involvement in culture as it relates to our lives in the Kingdom of God:

First, culture is critical in *expressing our kingdom citizenship*. If all that we do is consciously designed to reflect the glory of God, and if we are consistently seeking the kingdom and his righteousness as our first priority in all things (Matthew 6:33), then our cultural activities, preferences, and practices will necessarily reveal us to be a people different from those around us in the world. The nature of the kingdom of God—its righteousness, justice, peace, and joy—will begin to come through more clearly and consistently in all our involvement with culture. Sometimes this may not be as pronounced and obvious as at other times; however, at all times a greater consistency of kingdom-consciousness in our cultural activities will contribute to our being more readily identifiable as a people for God's own possession, as we, in all aspects of our lives, declare by our culture the many excellencies of the One

who has called us out of darkness into his glorious light (1 Peter 2:10).

Second, such kingdom-consciousness in our cultural activities cannot help but *advance the kingdom of God* in this world. This will happen in two ways. First, in our own lives we can expect to see greater evidence of the rule of God's righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17), as we lay aside the works of darkness and take up our new life in Christ in a more consistent and comprehensive manner. Second, as people are exposed to our good works through various interactions with our kingdom culture, we should expect many of them to inquire as to the reason for the hope that they see in us (1 Peter 3:15), and for some of them to join us in this life of glorifying God and enjoying him forever (Matthew 5:16). Thus the kingdom of God, the rule of righteousness, justice, and peace, will continue to increase on earth until he comes (Isaiah 9:6).

Third, *we must not, however, make the mistake of thinking that in our cultural activities we can exhaust the kingdom of God*. The kingdom of God is greater and more expansive than culture.

This is so, because, in the first place, it is an internal kingdom, accomplishing its transformational rule first of all in the hearts, minds, and consciences of men and women. The affections and understandings that people bring to bear on their cultural and other tasks are the fruit of the work of God ruling in their hearts. These cannot be manufactured as one makes culture; rather, they are prior to culture and essential for it, and depend on the faithful preaching of the Word of Christ, and abiding in that Word. As we seek the kingdom of God through the practices of spiritual transformation, God works within us to will and do of his good pleasure, shaping our hearts and minds so that they, in turn, can fit us for lives of kingdom obedience (Philippians 2:12, 13). Thus the work of God's kingdom within us equips us for the work of expressing and advancing his kingdom through our cultural activities in the world.

Furthermore, our cultural involvement does not exhaust

the kingdom of God, for that kingdom will not come to its full fruition until King Jesus returns to take unto himself his kingdom citizens, to vanquish his remaining enemies, to make a new heaven and a new earth, and to establish his glorious reign with his saints forever. In this respect, our cultural activities can only *foreshadow* the kingdom in its final state and give us a *foretaste* of it. Yet, in so doing, they strengthen our blessed hope, excite us concerning the full inheritance that awaits us, and inspire us to ever greater achievements for the glory of God and God's kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Christians must not neglect culture in their work of making disciples of all the nations, but must explore ways of working together for a more effective cultural consensus. Our present state of division concerning culture requires that we begin to seek a more consistent, more powerful, and more consensual approach to culture than is currently in evidence. As we undertake this important task, Abraham Kuyper can serve as a guide and example of cultural involvement from whom we can benefit. From his life and work, we learn that culture matters. Thus the more care and attention we pay to culture matters, and the greater our diligence and consistency in applying what we learn, the more we can expect that our approach to culture will bring honor to God and will serve the purposes of his kingdom in this world.

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Notes

1. See L. Praamsma's excellent summary of these various positions in *Let Christ Be King: Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1985).
2. In addition to Praamsma's little book, see also McKendree R. Langley, *The Practice of Political Spirituality* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1984); and Frank Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper* (St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1978). What follows is summarized primarily from these three works.
3. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 11.
4. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 467.
5. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 467, 468.
6. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 488.
7. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 107.
8. Kuyper, "Maranatha," in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 219, 220.
9. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 30.
10. Kuyper, "Maranatha," in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 212.
11. Abraham Kuyper, *The Practice of Godliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 29.
12. Kuyper, *The Practice of Godliness*, 30.
13. Kuyper, *The Practice of Godliness*, 116, 117.
14. Abraham Kuyper, *Sacred Theology* (Wilmington: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 19, 250.
15. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 143.
16. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 166, 167.
17. Kuyper, *The Practice of Godliness*, 42; "Maranatha," in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 214; *Lectures on Calvinism*, 82, 83.