

## Common Grace and "Spiritual" Stewardship: Guidance for Development?

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DOES Abraham Kuyper's legacy encourage technological development? To rephrase Tertullian's question, we might ask: "What does Jerusalem have to do with Silicon Valley?" To put it differently, does our pursuit of a path toward the New Jerusalem encourage or preclude the development of the created order? Does a vision chastened by a century of wars and technological misuse require us to refrain from development? Kuyper's doctrine of common grace provides us with a helpful perspective on this difficult issue.

### KUYPER ON COMMON GRACE

Abraham Kuyper articulated his doctrine of common grace in the Stone Lectures of 1898 as follows:

[Calvinism] 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 development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator.<sup>1</sup>

In this statement on common grace, Kuyper is concerned to show the clear distinction between a grace directed exclusively toward the elect and another which extends to the entire creation. The emphasis on relaxation of the curse expresses the recognition that while the world has been altered and even distorted due to sin, it is not "lost" in the sense that requires escape from rather than engagement with the created order and hence the public realm. This description in the Stone Lectures, given in a context of lauding Calvinism over against other worldviews, also emphasizes development, a central factor in Kuyper's public theology.

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton* (New York: Revell, 1899), 30-31.

It is in relation to the potential for the creation's development that Kuyper articulates the relationship of common grace and history. As a result of the constancy of common grace, history becomes possible. In making reference to history, Kuyper has the intent of encouraging the development of creation. In fact, he speaks of it as inevitable and beneficial:

... common grace opens a history, unlocks an enormous space of time, triggers a vast and long-lasting stream of events, in a word, precipitates a series of successive centuries. If that series of centuries is not directed toward an endless, unvarying repetition of the same things, then over the course of those centuries there has to be constant change, modification, transformation in human life. Though it pass through periods of deepening darkness, this change has to ignite ever more light, consistently enrich human life, and so bear the character of perpetual development from less to more, a progressively fuller unfolding of life.<sup>2</sup>

Common grace makes progress possible. There is a constant, preservative aspect of common grace which leads to a progressive aspect. Such a view of progress was apparently rare among Christians, as Kuyper criticizes Christian resistance to social-architectural development in society. Rather than opposing progress and engagement in society and culture, Christians should play a central role in directing the development of life, helping to construct a society which operates in accordance with the divine ordinances of creation.

Kuyper also argues that the development of humanity is part of the divine plan. History, the development of life, has a significance and purpose because God works in and on the horizon of centuries past, present, and future. If God is not at work in history, then, Kuyper suggests, one has to credit the development of society to the work of Satan or humans.<sup>3</sup> To support this perspective he argues that it is supported biblically. "Scripture speaks of 'the consummation of the ages' (Matt. 13:39-40), a term that does not mean the centuries will terminate at some point but that they are directed toward a final goal and that everything contained in those centuries is linked to that final goal."<sup>4</sup> The divinely ordained telos of creation history reveals the import and larger purpose of ongoing development.

If common grace is God's work in the world so that the potential of creation is realized, how does this occur? It occurs through the means of

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace" in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 174-175. This quotation reveals Kuyper as a man of his time, particularly in his enthusiastic view of progress.

<sup>3</sup> Kuyper, "Common Grace," 175.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

social-architectural construction, through cultural and technological development. In spelling this out, Kuyper again reflects on the telos of creation, and states that the development of creation, the terrain of common grace, has a distinct and separate goal from salvation.<sup>5</sup>

The entire project can be understood as a social-architectural task which aims to improve the conditions of life. Again, Kuyper understands this as separate from the task of salvation, though he argues that God is directly involved through common grace:

The supreme Artisan and Architect will want all that has gone into his design to be realized and stand before him in a splendid edifice. God will take delight in that high human development. He himself will bring it about and into view. Then he will seek in it his own glorification. The control and harnessing of nature by civilization, enlightenment, and progress, by science and art, by a variety of enterprises and industry will be entirely separate from the totally other development in holiness and integrity; indeed, that *exterior* development may even clash openly with an *interior* development in holiness and become a temptation to the believer. Still, that exterior development in holiness has to continue and be completed to bring the *work of God* in our race to full visible realization.<sup>6</sup>

From Kuyper's perspective, it is mandatory that the purpose of common grace reach fulfillment. If fact, he credits common grace with making the primary creation ordinance an attainable goal. Though there is the circumstance of a fallen created order, common grace enables humans to achieve

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 178-179. A couple of things are important to note here. First, one can ask if Kuyper's statement about the temptation of exterior development gives considerable pause to those who find public engagement a questionable enterprise. If it is a temptation, is it not possible that it could lead many well-intentioned Christians to a faith so focused on public concerns that the gospel of special grace is ignored? Clearly, Kuyper's view is that public engagement is a task that must be performed, though with sobriety, and with a view of God's glory as primary. Second, it is also important to point out that for Kuyper, the teleology of creation requires not only positive development, but it is also necessary for evil to flourish in its development, so that the Antichrist can appear and then the consummation of the ages. "At the moment of its destruction Babylon—that is, the world power which evolved from human life—will exhibit not the image of a barbarous horde nor the image of coarse bestiality but, on the contrary, a picture of the highest development of which human life is capable. It will display the most refined forms, the most magnificent unfolding of wealth and splendor, the fullest brilliance of all that makes life dazzling and glorious. From this we know that 'common grace' will continue to function to the end. Only when common grace has spurred the full emergence of all the powers inherent in human life will 'the man of sin' find the level terrain needed to expand this power. Only then will the end be near and judgment come over him suddenly, on a single day, in the span of a single hour." Ibid., 181.

dominion over nature. Indeed, he argues that without common grace, human development over history does not make much sense.<sup>7</sup>

Kuyper's goal was to motivate his constituency to public engagement with the doctrine of common grace as a theological foundation and motivation. Common grace restrains sin, enables development and progress, and makes a positive view of creation possible. Common grace enables and encourages the social architectural task. As S. U. Zuidema has said,

Common grace supplies the believer with the material for fulfilling his calling to be culturally formative and to fight the battle of the Lord in the world of culture. The sphere of common grace . . . is the area where Christian scholarship, Christian politics, Christian social action and individual Christian activity are to be developed. Common grace provides the platform, as it were, on which these cultural tasks are to be acted out. Common grace is *the presupposition of the possibility of Christian cultural activity*.<sup>8</sup>

Kuyper's approach is not free from critical engagement. Cornelis van der Kooi raises concerns related to sociocultural development in his appraisal of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace. While acknowledging that Kuyper's doctrine affirms human cultural activity, van der Kooi reflects an ambivalence toward development. "Two world wars, various outbursts of genocide, threats to our natural environment by unrestrained economic growth have tempered the optimism and kindled distrust of the faith in progress that was so characteristic of Kuyper's worldview."<sup>9</sup> Though one might affirm the place of culture and the centrality of divine action in the life-affirming aspects of development, an attitude of caution is required. Rather than adhering to Kuyper's view that all of the potentials of creation necessitate fulfillment, van der Kooi suggests that we accept the positive aspects of development as gifts of God, while also considering the vulnerability of humans and the world. In this regard, it is important to recognize that some technological developments, for example, can be undesirable because they may reach the peak of their destructive power. With this perspective, it is still possible to view life in the world as meaningful, yet without unbridled optimism.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>8</sup> S. U. Zuidema, "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper" in *Communication and Confrontation*, (Toronto: Wedge, 1972), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelis van der Kooi, "A Theology of Culture. A Critical Appraisal of Kuyper's Doctrine of Common Grace," in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of his Life and Work*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 100.

## THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CREATION: THE MISSING LINK

Abraham Kuyper viewed Christ as the root of common grace, yet it is also possible to demonstrate that the work of Holy Spirit in creation is equally essential to his theological rationale for public engagement. The language that Kuyper uses to describe the Spirit's activity in the biophysical order overlaps with his description of the operation of common grace.

Kuyper describes three aspects of the Spirit's activity in creation. First, the Spirit performs a perfecting function in the creative act. In terms of the biophysical order, as the Father spoke and produced the material of creation, and the Son formed and ordered creation, so the Spirit's role is that of bringing the potentialities of creation to their most complete end, which is the glory of God.<sup>10</sup> A central purpose of the Spirit's cosmic work is to be immanent in creation and to promote the progress and development of the created order toward its proper *telos*.

Second, Kuyper views the Spirit as the animating principle of all life, saying

How intangible are the forces of nature, how full of majesty the forces of magnetism! But life underlies all. Even through the apparently dead trunk sighs an imperceptible breath. From the unfathomable depths of all an inward, hidden principle works upward and outward. It shows in nature, much more in man and angel. And what is this quickening and animating principle but the Holy Spirit? . . . This inward, invisible something is God's direct touch. There is in us and in every creature a point where the living God touches us to uphold us; for nothing exists without being *upheld* by Almighty God from moment to moment. In the elect this point is their spiritual life; in the rational creature his rational consciousness; and in all creatures, whether rational or not, their life principle. And as the Holy Spirit is the Person in the Holy Trinity whose office it is to effect this direct touch and fellowship with the creature in his inmost being, it is He who *dwells* in the hearts of the elect; who *animates* every rational being; who sustains the *principle of life* in every creature.<sup>11</sup>

No life can be sustained apart from the Spirit's involvement, apart from divine vitalization. Further, even the rational faculties of all humans owe their normal function to the Spirit's animating work.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1900), 22-24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

The third aspect of the Spirit's role in creation is the restraint of sin. The Spirit constantly antagonizes sin and keeps creation from falling into chaos. This is a vital function as Spirit moves creation to its end of glorifying God.<sup>12</sup>

In Kuyper's theology, the cosmic activities of the Spirit are implicitly linked to common grace. As with his definition of common grace, Kuyper understands the cosmic work of the Spirit as that which seeks God's glory in a perfected *telos*, upholds and maintains the world, and resists the sinful curse on creation so that creation may develop and move toward its intended end. This aligns with the purpose of common grace, revealing the Spirit's role as the energizing force of these capacities. Kuyper also says:

there is no sun, moon, nor star, no material, plant, or animal, and in much higher sense, no man, skill, gift, or talent unless God touch and support them all. It is this act of coming into immediate contact with every creature, animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, rational or irrational, that, according to the profound conception of the Word of God, is performed not by the Father, nor by the Son, but by the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

This language reveals the Spirit to be the dynamic force of common grace.

Kuyper also understands common grace as compelling us to responsibly attend to and develop creation, saying:

for our relation *to the world*: the recognition that in the whole world the curse is restrained by grace, that the life of the world is to be honored in its independence, and that we must, in every domain, discover the treasures and develop the potencies hidden by God in nature and in human life.<sup>14</sup>

This language perfectly corresponds with Kuyper's understanding of the teleology of the Spirit's work in creation. It reveals that the Spirit's work in prompting the development of life can also be understood as a catalyst for history.

As stated above, the Spirit's cosmic activity is the dynamic element of common grace. From the statements above it is clear that Spirit can be understood as the agent of, or the one who provides the context for, common grace. While Kuyper articulated the centrality of Christ as the root of common grace, the Spirit is equally vital. Though Christ as *logos* is the source of common grace, the Spirit's life-giving, life-sustaining touch is the

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 33.

dynamic element of common grace. As such, the Spirit's work in creation can be understood as a central, yet unacknowledged force underlying Kuyper's public theology. (Hence the missing link.) In distinguishing the Spirit's work in common grace, one can articulate the conclusion that the Spirit, as the agent of common grace, is the driving force behind total engagement with the world.

#### PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND THE STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION

How does one contextualize Kuyper's legacy in a helpful manner for today's questions of technological development and ecological responsibility? One way to set forth the Kuyperian legacy at this moment is to state that the Spirit's work in creation leads to a public theology construed as the "responsible" stewardship of the creation.<sup>15</sup> The Spirit's work in making common grace available through indwelling presence leads to an approach to the creation conceived as a wide-ranging form of stewardship.

Because of the Spirit's role in common grace, all persons are called to greater responsibility as stewards of creation. How does the Spirit's work in creation and common grace lead to stewardship where nature is respected and not viewed as the object of simple anthropocentric domination? While the position here is a view of "dominion" where the world is subject to humanity, the human race is also subject to the God whom we rightly know in Jesus Christ; thus, this subjection is understood through the perspective of the loving lordship of Christ, which is far from abusive. The exercise of dominion is a "holy duty," to be performed under God in all the world in all parts of life.<sup>16</sup> In the performance of this duty, "Christian action in the domain of common grace . . . must minister to the structures of creation and the structures of common grace (which for all intents and purposes coincide)—instead of overturning them! . . . Its results can only be a 'higher development' of 'nature' and the 'natural', i.e., of the creature."<sup>17</sup> This leads to an urge toward cooperation with the Spirit in helping creation reach its potential. Creation is affirmed as good and worthy of full, responsible engagement.

Furthermore, due to common grace, "No Christian has a legitimate reason for withdrawing from the world of God's creating. That holds for the whole of creation, to its farthest reaches; that holds for 'all areas;' that holds in

<sup>15</sup> The term "responsible," while implied in the notion of stewardship, is necessary in this case, because an approach of stewardship will not necessarily be responsible. Bad stewardship is as possible as responsible stewardship.

<sup>16</sup> Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Zuidema, "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper," 72.

principle for the whole world of culture, politics included."<sup>18</sup> There is no room for a sectarian apoliticism in Kuyper's pneumatology, nor for an anti-creational opposition between technology and theology. Rather, science and politics become means of respecting creation as we transform it in a stewardly fashion to the glory of God.

Practically speaking, responsible stewardship may manifest itself in an environmental concern which may lead to various forms of social action. There is no place for callous disregard of the environment because of an other-worldly focus. Indeed, there has been much Christian neglect of the environment, and the time is now at hand to develop an orthopraxis which reflects the high ideals of responsible stewardship.<sup>19</sup> To do nothing would be to resist the Spirit and misuse common grace.

While it is easy to see how the Kuyper-based view of the Spirit's work in creation leads to responsible ecological stewardship, how is it that the Spirit's involvement in creation leads to "responsible" cultural/technological development and political involvement? How is it that the Spirit's indwelling, life-giving, and sustaining presence in creation prompts a response to the cultural mandate? A good way to understand this relation is to inquire about the function of culture and politics. If we understand both politics and culture as activities in which we "work with" the material of creation, or if we view these activities as our acting "upon" creation, then it follows that both areas require responsible stewardship. Drawing it into the realm of human care, the development and transformation of the potential in nature is the task of creation stewardship.

This discussion of the Spirit as the ultimate driving force behind ecological, political, and cultural responsibility eventually leads to the question of appearances. What forms will technological progress, ecological plans, political philosophies, or cultural norms and values take if there is true reciprocity and cooperation with the Spirit's enabling, sustaining, and developing power? What should this cooperation look like? Should it look like Calvin's Geneva mediated through Kuyper's Amsterdam? Hardly, as the contemporary context is not identical to either era, and has its own unique opportunities and challenges. As they did, we need to discern where the works of responsible stewardship lie in the natural and cultural cities of our day.

One answer to the question of social forms could be that, while one might not rigidly call for a specifically Christian, universally applicable type of

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> In this regard, see Calvin B. DeWitt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

ecology, politics, and culture, there should be certain common characteristics among all attempts to be responsible stewards of creation. What are these characteristics? At the very least, there should be a climate of service and nurture, a climate of justice, an attitude of humility, and a zeal for creative development—characteristics which are encouraged by common grace. Moreover, although I am arguing for the value of the common grace paradigm, I am not necessarily arguing for Kuyper's application of that paradigm (or that of his followers). Some may disagree with Kuyper's political and cultural views in various degrees, yet one need not adopt his positions in order to appreciate, utilize, and develop his work.

At this point it is significant to present one particular point Richard Mouw addresses in his recent work on common grace. Mouw speaks of "common grace ministries" to describe cultural engagement. While encouraging political activity, Mouw, inspired by Kuyper, extends the response to common grace to every area of life, and speaks of ministries not often considered in discussions of common grace.<sup>20</sup>

The Christian psychologist who encourages her non-Christian clients to honor commitments, the Christian literature professor at a secular university who highlights themes in a novel that celebrate faithfulness and telling the truth, the Christian corporate manager who instills the will to serve in employees, the Christian farmer who employs specific agricultural methods that demonstrate respect for the integrity of the creation—all of these promote the goodness associated with common grace. We should not confine our attention, then, to how unbelievers on occasion perform those deeds that better the lot of other human beings. We should also think about the ways in which we ourselves, in performing righteous acts that affect the lives of unbelievers, can promote the gifts of common grace.<sup>21</sup>

Mouw's intent is to highlight the broad ways in which the response to common grace can be observed and emulated. All of his examples typify an approach of responsible stewardship over the creation. The use of the term "ministry" is important and strategic for the conception of stewardship of the creation rooted in common grace. If public theology is understood as a kind of ministry, then it could possibly facilitate fruitful discussion with those who perceive of stewardship as the destructive domination of the created order. Additionally, it contributes to the posture of humility that Mouw encourages

<sup>20</sup> Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 81.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–82.

when responding to common grace and engaging in social architectural activity. Mouw urges his readers to cautiously evaluate the ideas and attempts at social improvement in a way that neither uncritically accepts nor dismisses the object of observation as bearing marks of the Spirit.<sup>22</sup> Wrestling with the reality of common grace requires continual refinement in our understanding and continual revision in our attempts at coherent presentation of this Spirit-based reality which prompts responsible stewardship.

Pneumatologically-derived responsible stewardship provides an impetus and rationale for engagement with the myriad, complex issues which impact society. It is important to recover a proper understanding and application of the stewardship paradigm, and a Kuyper-based approach can be quite helpful. In seeking to systematically complete the picture of the Spirit's role in creation and the vital implications which follow, one could do far worse than to incorporate the essence of Kuyper's approach. The Spirit's sustaining and developing power rouses us from our neglect of the environment and our lack of substantive progress in political and cultural/technological development. If this "call of the Spirit" is heeded, then the stage may be set for significant, transformative contributions to the issues of the day. What then is the answer to our restatement of Tertullian's question? The answer is: "Yes, Jerusalem has quite a bit to do with Silicon Valley and Redmond, Washington and all of the 'technological capitals' of our society. We must engage the task with vigor, but always proceed with a caution born of humility and the recognition of our own limitations."

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.