

## Heroes of the Faith #07: Abraham Kuyper

*Heroes of the Faith*

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...political cartoons in the newspapers about him in the Netherlands and called him terrible Abraham. And it is nice that his name sake shows himself to be a terror on the volleyball court because Kuyper was a winner and so this was an appropriate show of strength for the Kuyperians, especially against the Lutherans.

If you had to pick one hero of the faith from your perspective since John Calvin who you think above all others in those centuries since Calvin's death in 1564, who might you choose as your favorite hero of the faith?

Denis Johnson suggested Aimee Semple McPherson, but aside from sister Amy who might you choose?

There are no doubt a number of candidates and my personal candidate is Abraham Kuyper. And the reason that I say that is because I think Kuyper was the first Christian in a very profound way to come to grips with the fact that the world has been transformed.

You know, I suggested that our first four fold pattern of looking at the history of the Church was to see the Church formed, the Church deformed, the Church reformed and the Church transformed. And I didn't develop that theme of transformation very much so I hope to do that a little bit tonight and tomorrow morning. But what I mean by that is that the Church found itself in really quite radically new circumstances in what we call the modern, post Reformation period.

There were brand new problems and challenges, or at least new forms of problems and challenges that the Church faced.

You know, we as western historians when we look back over the history of the West tend to divide western history into three large periods: the ancient period, the medieval period and the modern period. And the modern period is said to be characterized by certain definite elements, certain new phenomenon. And that is an interesting question just by itself. What does it really mean to be modern? What sets us off as modern from, say, medieval man or ancient man?

And one of the things that is often pointed to by historians is that there are economic and

social changes. Cities are growing. Cities again become much more important. Medieval economy was basically a rural agricultural economy. The modern era is typified by much more industry and commerce, by a growing middle class.

One of the things that they always used to joke about in history courses is that in the modern era the middle class is always rising and the aristocracy is always falling. It still seems for most of the time the aristocracy had all the money. But nonetheless the middle class was always rising. There was a new class. The Middle Ages didn't even have a word for middle class. In the Middle Ages there were noblemen, clergymen and peasants. But the lives of the city began to create this new class. They weren't noble. They weren't clergy, but they weren't peasants out working on the farms either. They were this new thing, a middle class.

Now political changes increasingly at least in Western Europe, countries began to become more democratic. There was more pressure for Democracy and some measure of social equality. And also in terms of the minds of men something dramatic began to happen in the modern period. And the most important thing, perhaps, is that modern man looked towards the future with expectations that the future will be better than the past.

Medieval man and ancient man always thought that there was a golden age in the past that at most the present could hope to equalize or approach to again. But there was no real answer to patience that people in the present could ever really get ahead of what had come before. The past was the standard. The past was the best.

But modern man, modern western man begins to change that pattern of thought and modern man somewhere in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century begins to face, the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps, begins to think, we really can make progress beyond anything that has come before. And the elements of our study that particularly encourage that kind of thought, was, of course, modern science. Modern science and modern technology clearly made dramatic advances over anything that had come before.

Oh, for a time still in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were defenders of Aristotle's physics. There were those who said, "Nobody could ever think more profoundly and more truly about physics than Aristotle. He is the golden age of Greek thought. You can't get further than Aristotle got."

But they did. And those sorts of advances began to encourage modern man to think that the future will be better than the past, began to encourage them to think the present is already better than the past and the future is out there waiting for us.

This kind of attitude was organized into a kind of ideology at the time of the enlightenment when western man began to feel that he really was in some profound sense in control of his own destiny and that he was able to create his own future and that he would be able to build a new world for himself by the progress that he was making.

This came to be, in many ways, a revolutionary world view, epitomized for many people by the events of the French Revolution, that French Revolution that came with the bold declaration, “We will here and now create a new world.” And many leaders of the French Revolution declared, “We have no more need of a god.”

Voltaire, one of the intellectual heroes of the French Revolution declared about Jesus Christ, “Down with the scoundrel.”

They wanted to be liberated from all of that medieval, false confining kind of thinking.

Robespierre, one of the great masterminds of the French Revolution even organized a great parade in Paris with great paper statues of Jesus and the saints and of Mary and he led them down into the center of the city and he set them on fire and as they burned up they revealed underneath statues of equality and fraternity and liberty, the guiding virtues of the French Revolution, *liberte, egalite, fraternite*. One of the wits on hand observed that Robespierre’s virtues seemed a little singed in the process. But nonetheless there was this determination to make a new world. They even decided they would have a 10 day week, away with the Jewish Christian seven day week that testified about a Creator and a Redeemer. We will have a rationale week with 10 days.

They wanted, you see, in a radical way to tear down, to destroy the old world and build up a new world. They wanted a view of culture and of society that was man centered, progress centered and proud of itself. And with that new kind of cultural phenomenon, that new kind of outlook, that thing that seemed so very modern and progressive that was the new situation that the Church had to face and had to respond to. And it was to that situation, I think, that Abraham Kuyper gave some remarkably profound thought in his life and work. And part of the reason that he could be so profound in his understanding and in his reaction to the modern world as it was developing humanistic secularity, was the fact that he had lived it and known it for a time from the inside.

Abraham Kuyper was born in 1837, the son of a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, the state church in the Netherlands. His father was what was known as mildly orthodox. That is, he was orthodox, but not too pushy or militant about it. You mustn’t be too pushy. And he sent his son off to school as one who was rather in harmony with what he had been taught at home.

He went off to the university of Leiden, one of the finest universities in Europe at the time and the pride of the Dutch in terms of their universities. He majored in literature. He was always fascinated with great literature. And his studies in literature helped train him to be a great speaker and writer. He was a forceful master in the use of words and in communication and that would serve him well when later he came to serve the cause of Jesus Christ.

As a student he had very regular habits. He arose every morning promptly at 10:30. But he regularly worked late at night until about two or so. He said after he had been in the university about a year and a half studying he embraced the starkest intellectual

rationalism. He gave in to the spirit of the day. He embraced that enlightenment philosophy that said that man was the measure of all things, that man's mind must stand as the man's mind must stand as the judge of all things and he rejected the theological Christian traditions in which he had been raised by his parents and determined that his mind would decide all things.

Nonetheless he was still interested enough in theology that after he got his B A degree he enrolled in the school of theology at the University of Leiden to hear some of the bleeding liberals of the day lecture there at the theological school.

And Kuyper said he remembered so vividly the day when one of his theological professors stood up and said that he utterly rejected any belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Kuyper said he remembered how the student body had broken into applause and he had joined in the applause for the modernness and the boldness and the intellectual courage of this man to reject all of this false Christian past.

Kuyper was one who knew the enlightenment spirit from the inside. But he confessed later that his own experience there at the school also began to plant the seeds of doubt that would eventually lead him away from his undoings. He said he remembered so vividly the first year he was there in the theological school that professor Skolten, one of the great notable professors in the Netherlands of his day, stood up to lecture on the gospel of John and in 1858 professor Skolten told the class that the gospel of John was written by the beloved disciple and a reliable source of historical knowledge about Jesus Christ.

The students all carefully wrote that down I am sure. You know, us students do that.

The old story about the Harvard students when the professor comes in and says, "Good morning," supposedly they say, "Good morning."

At Yale I am told when the professor comes in and says, "Good morning," the students just stare at him.

At Stanford when the professor comes in and says, "Good morning," they all write it down.

They all wrote that down. Kuyper wrote it down. The gospel of John was written by John a reliable source of historical evidence about Jesus Christ.

In 1861 this same professor Skolten again lectured on the gospel of John and he began his lecture by saying that John's gospel contained no word of the apostle John and gave no reliable historical evidence about the historical Jesus.

And Kuyper said even while he was still himself a modernist, he came to the conclusion that there didn't seem to be anything very scientific about this approach to literature or the study of the Bible. It seemed to him radically subjective. And so he began to find

gnawing in his own heart a real question about these proud claims made by the minds of men about what they could accomplish.

He graduated from the school and was ordained to the ministry and received a call to a small village where he served his first pastorate. And he revealed himself very quickly as a man who was a powerful communicator, an effective speaker. But he said that writing sermons was terribly difficult because he really didn't know what to say. He could say it very well, but he really didn't know what he wanted to say. He was torn between some of the appeal of the old faith in which he had been raised and the rationalism that he had embraced while at school.

While in that church he was a faithful pastor. He visited. He found one group in the church, a rather small group were kind of standoffish. They didn't seem to want to have much to do with the young pastor. And he talked to some of the elders in the church and he said, "What is the matter with these folks?"

And [?] said, "Oh, don't worry too much about them. They are... they won't have anything to do any of the ministers they come here. They think they know everything. They think they are so pious and so orthodox, they don't want to have anything to do with ministers. They don't trust the ministers. Just sort of ignore them."

Well, Kuyper just didn't feel that that was right as a pastor. And so he tried faithfully to visit these folks and at first they were very sort of standoffish. The Dutch minister, after all, had a quite prominent social place in life. He was the *domini* and they felt some funniness about having an important person like that in their homes anyway and they didn't trust him theologically.

But gradually he got them to open up a little bit and he found that these folk were reading the old writers, they called them. He said, "Well, who are these old writers?"

And they said, "Well, they are Dutchmen who wrote long ago."

"Oh, what Dutchmen who wrote long ago?"

"Well," they said, "People like John Owens, Richard Baxter, Perkins, Ames, lots of Dutchmen."

What these pious folk had preserved from their forefathers were Dutch translations of Puritan writers and through decades and even centuries by this point, they had nourished and preserved their faith by feeding on these Puritan authors whom they no longer had any knowledge were Englishmen to begin with, but had preserved these Dutch translations of their works and had preserved to themselves an orthodox, vital religion.

And as Kuyper got to know these folks better he began to see that there was something really very moving about their lives. There was something very genuine about their commitment. There was something very attractive about their way of relating to God.

And through their very simple and quite unlearned testimony, Abraham Kuyper said he came back to Christ.

For the rest of his life, for all of his brilliance, for all of his learning, he always loved the simple folk in the Church, because he realized that they had known much more than he had and that where he had had knowledge, they had had wisdom and were able to bring him to Christ.

He said one of the things he began to do when this truth finally came home to him again was avidly to reread Calvin and he had read Calvin in college, but he hadn't made much of an impression upon him. But now suddenly the Calvinistic system began to live for him and profundity of Calvin's insight into the Scripture gripped him and he was determined to serve in every way he could the cause of Jesus Christ. And he became a reformer in his own day, a reformer institutions. The brilliance of his preaching that now was linked to the power of the gospel itself gained him quickly a reputation and he received calls first to Utrecht, one of the leading cities, then to Leiden and finally to Amsterdam.

But as he moved into these important centers of the life of the Church and of the culture generally, he became increasingly concerned about the unbelief and the doctrinal laxity and almost total absence of discipline in the Church. And he reached a point where he said to his friends and colleagues, "We must rebuild or move out. We cannot forever tolerate a Church in this state."

He himself continued to labor hard to reform the Church, first as a pastor, then as we will see later he was [?] from the pastorate but continued to serve as an elder in the Church laboring to see reform in the life of the Church.

One of the areas where he was very much concerned was the matter of doctrinal conformity. The best church in theory subscribed to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. But the form of subscription had been weak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All a minister had to promise was hearty accord with the doctrinal standards. And Kuyper could see that that phrase in its ambiguity was being used by modernists left and right to come into the Church.

But in 1883 things got even worse. A new form of subscription was adopted for the state church and this form of subscription declared, "I as a minister promise to promote the interest of the kingdom of God in general and especially the interests of the state church."

Now that is about as vague a subscription as it is possible to imagine. And Kuyper was dismayed.

Even more he felt if we can't get the broad church reformed quickly, at least we have to be faithful in the conduct of our office on the local scene. Just when he was serving as an elder in the church at Amsterdam and one of the things that they as elders and ministers together agreed that was that they would only let into membership in the church people

who could make a really credible profession of their faith, who knew something about the Bible and were willing to testify they believed the Bible and had accepted Christ as their Savior.

The state church through its boards began to put more and more pressure on the elders saying that they couldn't take such a hard nosed and inflexible attitude, that they had to accept into membership everyone who had finished their catechism classes whether at the end of catechism they believed anything they had been taught or not.

The majority of the elders and ministers refused to do that. And as a result they were suspended from their office and locked out of their church. This was the point at which there was a great and general rebellion against that kind of oppressive and tyrannical church life and over 300 congregations withdrew from the state church with a membership of over 100,000 protesting this action on the part of the church.

And that movement continued to grow calling itself the Church of the [?] which means in Dutch the church grieving. They said, "We don't want to leave. We don't want to leave the church of our fathers. We have been thrown out. And we leave grieving and hoping that one day the church will come to its senses, reform itself so we can come back.

But Kuyper had said, "We must rebuild or move out," and that is finally what they had to do. They had to move out for the sake of faithfulness to the gospel.

Well, that wasn't the only area where Kuyper felt reforms needed to take place. He felt there needed to be reform in the society generally. And so he began to work not only as a pastor, but as a newspaper editor and then after he became an elder he continued that newspaper work. He became editor of a religious weekly called *The Herald* and then he became the editor of a more daily newspaper, a political commentary newspaper daily in 1872 called *The Standard*. So he was a churchman. He was a newspaper editor. And in 1874 he decided if he really wanted to try to get things changed, he had better get involved in the government. And in 1874 he was elected to parliament representing the party known as the anti revolutionary party. Another one of those negative Calvinists.

But, you see, the principle of this party was that the great modern threat was the kind of ideals epitomized in the French Revolution. And we as Christians are those who stand against the revolution, who stand for Jesus Christ. And Abraham Kuyper showed himself to be a most remarkable politician. He really organized the anti revolutionary party into being a mass movement in the Netherlands, the first political party really organized to involve the people in that party. He labored hard to get the franchise extended so that more and more people could vote. The liberals also wanted to get the franchise extended. That was part of their principle. But they were dismayed to find that the more they extended the franchise to the common people, the more votes the anti revolutionary party was getting, because the little people, as they were called in the Netherlands, a lot of them were reformed and looking for a good Christian leader.

One of the great rallying cries of the anti revolutionary party was the issue of education. Kuyper said the state has a stranglehold and a monopoly on education and the state is educating our children into Modernism. It is tyrannical. It is unjust. It is oppressive to us as Christians. Why should they take our tax money and erect schools of which we cannot approve and then force us to send our children there? It is against any standard of justice or rightness. We demand that we as Christians should be allowed to be given money from the state that has been collected from us to build our own schools so we can fulfill our responsibility to God to educate our children in the fear and knowledge of the Lord.

Now I know these historical themes seem so irrelevant to our own times. But that cry became a great rallying force for the Calvinists and, interestingly, for the Roman Catholics as well who also felt the oppression of this humanistic education.

And Kuyper said, “Well, we can never unite with the Roman Catholic political party. We can cooperate on a common objective.” And Kuyper said, “I am all together willing to let the Roman Catholics have their schools to educate their children because I believe that parents have the responsibility to educate their children as they see best. Nobody has the right to tell the parents how they must educate their children,” Kuyper said. “And so we could work together so that Roman Catholics can build their schools we Calvinists can build our schools and the Humanists could build their schools. That is only fair,” Kuyper said.

He saw other areas, too. He began to work for fair pensions, fair insurance for unemployment and workman’s compensation and other things that were considered very modern at the time. And because of this platform of genuine Christian social concern, whether you agree with all the particular ingredients of it or not, from this platform in 1901 Kuyper was elected prime minister of the Netherlands and for four years had an opportunity to guide the country, to bring into law some of the things that Christians were most concerned about including the right of equality of education. In fact, Kuyper even got a law past or the Anti Revolutionary Party did, that said that even at the non Christian universities, independent organizations could appoint professors who would present the point of view of that organization and the state would pay their salaries.

Again, an idea not too relevant to our own times, but, you see, they wanted to at least have an opportunity to have a testimony even in a school that was committed to a very different point of view.

But Kuyper felt they needed to go further than that. He said it is wonderful that we are making progress in having Christian grade schools and Christian high schools, but we need a Christian university. We need a Christian university where Christian young people can study from a consistently Christian point of view all aspects of life, not, Kuyper said, because we are trying to protect our children as if we put them in a monastery. Children will receive the very best kind of education if God is taken into account. If God has made this world, if God is the source of all knowledge and wisdom, then God must be taken into account in our education or you don’t have a good education.



And so Kuyper along with others cooperated in 1880 in founding the Free Reformed University of Amsterdam. Free because it was free of state control. Free to pursue its own vision.

Professor, doctor [?] preached the opening sermon at the founding of the school and he preached on the text from 1 Samuel that said, “Now there was no iron found throughout all the land of Israel of the Philistines said, ‘Lest the Hebrews make them swords and spears.’”

And you can almost hear Dr. [?] applying that text. The Philistines for years have deprived us of knowledge with which to protect ourselves and fight the battles of the Lord and now, at last, we have an institution where we can learn and make swords and spears for ourselves.

Kuyper serving as an elder in a church, serving as the editor of two newspapers, serving as a member of parliament also now began to teach at the university. It was a light load. No seminary trustee should be permitted to hear this. He taught systematic theology, encyclopedia of theology, Hebrew, homiletics, Dutch language and literature and aesthetics.

And in all this work he continued to labor to try to present a basic fundamental analysis of what was going on in the society around about him and what was the responsibility that Christians had in facing this modern world.

Some of the fruits of his labors are available to us in English. His book *The Work of the Holy Spirit* which was actually a series of articles that he wrote in one of the newspapers for the laity is available to us in English. Also his [?] lectures that he presented at Princeton Seminary in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are available to us in English, well worth reading. But also several short devotional books that he wrote where he really opens his pious heart to the world and was an encourager of piety and are well worth reading are available to us.

But his great concern as a thinker was to try to analyze what is really going on in the modern world and how much a Christian responds to the modern world. And it seems to me that he came to a point where he said, “You know, the really central error of all modern thinking is very simple and it is just this. All modern thinking assumes that this world as we experience it is normal.”

This world as we experience it is normal, probably the result of a rather gradual and steady process of evolution and as time goes on things will get better and better. But there is nothing fundamentally abnormal about this world. People get old and die. That is normal. There are ravages of sickness. That is normal. People are mean to one another. It is regrettable, but normal. Maybe one day we will evolve out of it. But it is just normal.

And Kuyper says the Christian must see that his fundamental concession beginning in dialog with this modern world is to say, “This world is not normal. This world is radically abnormal. This world is fallen and cursed.”

There was nothing normal about it hardly. Death is not normal. Disease is not normal. Inhumanity is not normal. A Joseph Mengela is not normal. It is a sign of the wickedness deep in the hearts of men.

And Kuyper said, “We have to challenge that misconception, that lie of the modern world as very hard. And we have to assert that the fundamental need of all human beings is regeneration by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.”

And that therefore there exists an absolute antithesis and opposition between the regenerate and the unregenerate, between the Christian and the unbeliever. They are absolutely different in their fundamental commitment, in their fundamental relationship to or against God.

We must see the absolute antithesis, Kuyper said, between the believer and the unbeliever.

That was one of the pillars thoughts, the antithesis. The other pillar I think of his thought was the pillar of common grace. While it is true that there is an absolute contrast between believer and unbeliever, nonetheless God in mercy to this world has prevented unbelievers from following out the full consequences of their fallen state. Things are not as bad as they could possibly be. Oh, the heart of the unbeliever is radically depraved and in opposition to God, but God has restrained the unbeliever so as not to degenerate utterly. And so, Kuyper said, it is possible to find through God’s restraint still aspects and insights into the truth on the part of unbelievers.

Kuyper says, “We don’t want say as Christians that there is nothing to be learned at any point from an unbeliever.”

There may be unbelieving astronomers that are better than Christian astronomers. There may be unbelieving chemists from whom Christian chemists have to learn things. Now to be sure the unbelieving chemist has, in effect, pirated all that he knows from God, denying the Creator who made the world that he seeks to understand. But Kuyper said we need to recognize that God has preserved constantly some testimony to himself in the world and that even the unbelieving man keeps stumbling across that and having some insight into it.

And so, Kuyper said, we must avoid on the one hand so stretching the antithesis that we become sectarian and, as it were, like, perhaps, the Amish who just separate themselves physically from the world. That is a danger if we too over stress the antithesis, Kuyper said. On the other hand we must be very careful with the doctrine of common grace. Otherwise we begin simply to accommodate ourselves to the world and begin to say,

“Oh, those unfallen men really aren’t so bad after all. They are really pretty good guys. Look at all the good things we can learn.”

Rather, Kuyper said, we have to keep these two things in balance where we appreciate the fundamental difference between Christian and non Christian even appreciating the occasional insight into the truth of the unbeliever.

Now that basic insight of Kuyper he felt needed to be supplemented with one more basic concern of his and that was his teaching on skew sovereignty. This was a theme that I think tends to be rather misunderstood today.

What Kuyper saw in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the danger of what we would call Totalitarianism. He saw that one of the great dangers facing modern man was the claim of one institution to be able to rule and dominate all of life. And Kuyper said the institution that threatened us that way today is the state.

In that regard we could say very nearly that Kuyper was a prophet, anticipating both Marxism and Fascism as 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomena. The great danger today is state totalitarianism, the thought that the state has a right to determine and run all aspects of life in the society.

Kuyper said that is what is behind the state’s claim to be able to run a monopoly of education. The state thinks it has a right to run everything so it has a right to run the schools.

And Kuyper said that is contrary to a Christian world view that needs to see that God had formed this world so that there are various institutions in society each with their own sphere or realm of responsibility and that each of those institutions is directly responsible to God for the way in which it conducts itself as an institution.

There is the institution of the state that has responsibility before God to administer justice. But there is also the institution of the Church that has a responsibility before God to preach the gospel. Now the Church isn’t responsible to the state for preaching the gospel and the state isn’t responsible to the Church for administering justice, but Kuyper says they are both responsible to God.

And then as the institution of the family, Kuyper said, which has a responsibility of faithfully raising children. And in that duty it is not... the family is not directly responsible, immediately responsible either to the state or to the Church, but to God.

Now Kuyper and he thought there may well be other spheres as well, education, business, but those were the three foundational ones in a sense. And he was not at all saying that these spheres are somehow absolutely cut off from one another. No there are points at which they overlap.

If parents physically or sexually abuse their children, for example, they can't say, "Well, we are parents. We are responsible to God. You just can't interfere with us."

No, the Church could discipline them if they were confessing Christians. The state could send them to jail for being unjust. So there are ways in which these spheres relate to one another. They are not cut off from one another, but what Kuyper saw I think absolutely right is that unless one sees some basic responsibility in each institution directly to God, there is no real way of avoiding Totalitarianism.

One institution, then, will claim the right to run all of society.

Kuyper said in the Middle Ages the Church tried to do that and that was wrong. And in the modern world the state is trying to do it and that is wrong. And what we need to recognize, Kuyper said, is something of the multiplicity of institutions that God has created and for each institution to be faithful to God.

Kuyper said we, as Christians, have to try to see that every area of life honors God, that our political life will honor God, that our church life will honor God, that our family life will honor God, that our schools will honor God.

Kuyper, near the end of his life engaged in a great writing project that he entitled *pro rega*, for the king. And in that series of articles trying to inspire Christian people he made one of his most famous comments when he said, "In the total expanse of human life there is not a single square inch of which Christ who alone is sovereign does not declare, 'That is mine.'"

And Kuyper said that in this modern world as we struggle against unbelief, as we struggle against Totalitarianism, as we struggle against the heresy of normalcy, he said we have to be defending the claim of Jesus Christ to be King of kings and Lord of lords over every part of our life.

And whether we fully embrace the vision of Kuyper or not, I think he remains one who is alert in a profound way to the challenge of this modern world and to the revolutionary modernist spirit of this world and challenges all of us as contemporary Christians to think through for ourselves how can we see the claims of Jesus Christ over every inch of our lives and over every inch of our influence in this world.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank you for those who have had such remarkable talents and genius and opportunity in times past, who understood the times in which they lived and spoke a powerful Christian witness to it. We pray, oh Lord, that you would bless us with insight into the ways in which we need to serve and proclaim Jesus Christ. We pray that you would raise up for us leaders who can provide the kind of analysis of our times that Kuyper provided for his and that we, as your people, might be faithful whether we are*

*little people or great people in the opportunity to serve Jesus Christ our great King. Hear us for we pray in his name. Amen.*