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Abraham Kuyper: A Pictorial Biography (Book Review)

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In contrast to a typical biography with lots of words and few pictures, this is the story of a great man's life, told primarily through pictures. Jan de Bruijn's pictorial biography contains 400 pages of illustrations with captions. The illustrations include photographs, editorial cartoons, manuscripts of speeches, title pages of books, personal letters, and other physical artifacts of Abraham Kuyper's life.

It is a beautiful book—inside and out. From the feel of the dust jacket to the wide array of fascinating illustrations, it is a first-rate production throughout. The pages of the book even smell good. It is written by a professor of political history at the Free University of Amsterdam (VU), an institution founded by Kuyper. One small criticism of the book is the paucity of information in the index. Regrettably, it covers only personal names, with no concepts, groups, or places listed.

In addition to being mainly pictorial, this Kuyper biography is set apart from many Kuyper books by depicting, without excuse, less-flattering aspects of his life. The book may leave the reader with the impression that while Kuyper was a great man, he was not always a likeable man. The reader learns that Kuyper had a strong personality that charged ahead, sometimes oblivious to the nuances of human behavior, that he held grudges, that he often had a blind spot when seeing how others may view things, and that he sometimes held others to a higher standard than the one to which he held himself (27, 219, 253, 269-70). Sometimes his efforts on behalf of righteous causes may have been tainted by self-righteousness.

The book's approach cuts both ways. It is useful to learn the unvarnished truth about some of Kuyper's weaknesses. We can learn from the mistakes of others, and it is good to be reminded that even heroes are imperfect. On the other hand, when pulled out of context, human imperfections can leave the wrong impression about the larger significance of the person. The captions in this book are informative, but in their brevity they tend to emphasize style over substance.

One strength of de Bruijn's book is the light it

sheds on the fulsome career of Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper's fame within certain parts of the American Reformed tradition, especially the Christian Reformed Church, has led to his name becoming a cliché. This is in some ways unfortunate because clichés can be dismissed with a "Yeah yeah, we've heard it before." Having outworn its welcome, a cliché does not need to be taken seriously. It can be taken for granted. In this case, people assume that they know about Kuyper without actually knowing much about him. Many Christians have heard the phrase "every square inch"—an actual cliché—and maybe "sphere sovereignty." They know that Kuyper was a religious figure...a minister or theologian or some such thing. Certainly he was Dutch.

Such knowledge of Kuyper is a mile wide and an inch deep. In this case, presumed familiarity breeds indifference if not contempt. This is regrettable because Kuyper is a singular figure in church history. He founded a political party, a university, and a church denomination. He was an impressive thinker, writer, and orator. He rose to the pinnacle of political power while retaining his ecclesiastical and theological influence. His legacy within the Reformed tradition has been large, especially in regard to the worldview known variously as Kuyperian, neo-Calvinist, or Reformational. By focusing on Kuyper in his historical context—flaws and all—De Bruijn's book adds much to our understanding of who Kuyper was and what he accomplished.

Folks in the Reformed tradition mostly think of Kuyper as theologian, but during the last 25 years of his life he was primarily engaged in politics. As a multitasking leader, he remained involved with journalism, higher education, and ecclesiastical reform, but he re-entered Parliament in the mid-1890s, and his career eventually culminated in service as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905. (Technically, his titles were Minister for Internal Affairs and permanent Chairman of the Council of Ministers.) When awarded an honorary doctorate by Princeton University in 1898, Kuyper was offered either a theology degree or a law degree. Significantly, as de Bruijn notes, "Kuyper opted for

the latter as an acknowledgment for all he had done in the political field” (243).

Despite its importance and utility, the political side of Kuyper is often overlooked—yet it is highlighted in several ways in de Bruijn’s book (as I describe below). As a Christian theory allied with the subsidiarity theory of the Roman Catholic tradition, Kuyper’s idea of sphere sovereignty is foundational to modern efforts on behalf of limited government and human liberty. In Kuyper’s view, human government was never meant to wield total power, and there are other equally legitimate institutions that also report directly to God, in terms of lines of authority.

Kuyper’s emphasis on decentralization of human power and dispersal of divine authority is biblical and rooted in creational norms, including free will and the original lack of human government, and in the tribal, decentralist social structures found in the book of Judges prior to establishment of the Hebrew monarchy. Kuyper followed the thought of Augustine rather than Aquinas in asserting that “God has instituted the magistrates, by reason of sin.” He listed two basic theses of Calvinism about the state: (1) “sin alone has necessitated the institution of governments” and (2) “all authority of governments on earth originates from the Sovereignty of God alone.”¹

As the illustrations in this biography show, the story of Abraham Kuyper’s life is rich and fascinating, but a book review is no place for a full recounting of that life.² Instead, a few highlights contained in de Bruijn’s book must suffice. The son of a minister in Leyden, Holland, Kuyper received his education at a school there during his teen years (he was home-schooled before that) and then attended the University of Leyden (3-24).

After Kuyper became a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, a young woman in his congregation at Beesd, Pietje Baltus, played an instrumental role in Kuyper’s full embrace of orthodox Calvinism in the mid-1860s. We can see a photograph of her in the book. The “humble believers of Beesd” helped to change the intellectual young pastor through their example of faith and piety (51-53). In 1875, Kuyper was spiritually refreshed by Anglo-American revival meetings in Brighton, England (103).

Kuyper’s life was multidimensional but, in terms of emphases, it can be divided into successive periods: (1) pastoring, (2) politics, (3) university, (4) denomination, and (5) politics. As Kuyper transitioned from pastor to politician, the religious demographics of the Netherlands were roughly 60 percent Reformed and 35 percent Roman Catholic. As founding chairman of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (1879), Kuyper successfully maintained a political coalition between Calvinists and Catholics without compromising his own theological beliefs (61, 91, 114, 281). Throughout his life, he publicly declared that the Protestant Reformation—not Lockean liberalism or the French Revolution—brought freedom to the modern world (95). Kuyper’s confessional coalition in politics opposed the “paganizing,” secularizing liberals and socialists (98, 100, 235).

In 1880, Kuyper became founding rector (president) and professor of theology at the Free University of Amsterdam (124-26, 138). The university had eight students—all in theology—the first year. A cartoon in the book calls attention to this seemingly inauspicious beginning. Diplomas were not legally recognized until 1904 because Free was a private institution (131). Dr. Kuyper the theologian “was not a regular churchgoer,” using Sunday mornings instead to write devotions for his religious newspaper (139, 141). Many of his multi-volume books came from his newspaper articles, including *Common Grace* and *Pro Rege*.

Writing to his colleague (and future-adversary) Alexander de Savornin Lohman after his friend’s baby was stillborn, Kuyper showed his less-combative side: “Be a support to your wife at this time. She needs it. Pregnancy and birth demand great efforts, which seek and find a natural reaction in the joy of new life. Now that that has fallen away, much love and tenderness must compensate for it.” (143) When his own nine-year-old son died a decade later, Kuyper wrote to his wife, “I feel stunned / my poor William / God reigns” and “At eleven o’clock we will carry our small sweet darling to Zandvoort to his little grave.” The book includes photographs of little Willy and a Kuyper telegram written before his burial (204-05).

When Kuyper and his allies disagreed with the established Dutch Reformed Church about mod-

ernist theology, they were suspended as elders by the church in Amsterdam, and they broke into the consistory chamber (occupying the room for almost a year). Throughout the country, police “often had to intervene between the parties” in ecclesiastical disputes (150). The conflict culminated in the creation of a new denomination, under Kuyper’s leadership, in 1892 (173, 177).

Kuyper was invited to speak at Princeton Theological Seminary at a time when the institution was still in orthodox Calvinist hands under the leadership of B.B. Warfield. His Stone Lectures at Princeton, given in 1898, are his “most widespread and translated work” (242). When he toured the United States, his itinerary included western Michigan; Pella, Des Moines, and Orange City in Iowa; and cities on the East Coast. He expressed pleasure at having visited Grand Rapids but liked Holland, Michigan, even more, calling it the Dort of America.

During Kuyper’s years as head of the Dutch government, he generally handled foreign affairs himself, as the foreign minister was weak. Colonial policies became less exploitative, but the Dutch East Indies and other possessions remained in imperial hands (277-80). Although Kuyper had a long-time interest in social reform and his party opposed Conservatism in the 1890s, as prime minister he disappointed some progressives by cracking down on striking railway workers, as political cartoons in the book show (77, 209, 282-91).

Kuyper hoped to return to power after his government fell in 1905, but his return did not happen. When his party regained ascendancy in the parliament, he was not asked to lead and was kept out of the cabinet. By 1908, he was over 70 years old, he was a polarizing figure in public life, and his term in office had become tainted by a scandal about alleged corruption (the decorations affair). His political enemies used salacious insinuations about Kuyper’s involvement with a woman—without any proof—to tarnish him. The book includes a political cartoon of the woman without clothes (301-02, 322; 339). Yet Kuyper remained popular with the rank-and-file of his party (359). He resigned as party chairman in 1918 and stepped down as active editor of *De Stan-daard* newspaper the next year (395, 399).

In later years, Kuyper was a vegetarian for health reasons (364). He also exercised in the nude, which

led to embarrassment in Brussels. The book includes a hostile newspaper’s story calling gleeful attention to Kuyper’s experience of having been “gearresteerd” for his exercise (he was questioned by the police) (357). He supported Dutch neutrality during World War I but was pro-German—partly because of his hostility toward the British Empire emanating from the Boer War and partly because he vacationed each year in Germany (376). Kuyper died in 1920. According to a friend who was present when Kuyper died, “He did not suffer, was clearly accepting, and passed on peacefully without the slightest struggle” (406). The book includes photographs of his deathbed, funeral, and death mask.

De Bruijn notes that Kuyper’s “own father called him an ‘*animal disputant*’ because he liked to be difficult” (27). The Dutch envoy to Russia publicly addressed Kuyper in print: “The incense of admiration that wafts towards you from lower spheres has gone to your head, has suffocated your sense of piety, has led to the germination of pride and has brought you to the brink of the dreaded and incurable disease one calls ‘megalomania.’” (253) Refusing to join Kuyper’s cabinet, Lohman expressed distrust of his personal character in a private letter: “Kuyper leaves his best friends when *he* thinks it is necessary; he leads us to where *he* wants to go, but hides his plans, lies if it suits him, *uses* people, and always sees to it that *he* always ends up on top.” (269)

To his credit, de Bruijn gives colleagues and opponents of Kuyper opportunities to speak for themselves; their words sometimes cast Kuyper in an unfavorable light. This is not necessarily a bad thing because even saints—in the biblical sense of the word—are still humans with imperfections. However, highlighting criticism of Kuyper, even when accurate and deserved, without giving space to Kuyper’s side of the story and without framing the criticism with the actual words and deeds of Kuyper, can lead to a misunderstanding of his role in history. In the end, it was not about Kuyper the man but rather Kuyper the statesman and Kuyper the man of God.

At the peak of his power and fame, as prime minister of the Netherlands, Kuyper’s accomplishments were modest. His time-and-place-transcendent ideas were much more important. Abraham Kuyper served as a symbol of inspiration for mil-

lions of people and continues to do so. When Jesus prayed, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven,” he meant, among other things, God’s will for government and society. How amazing that we are able to help fulfill, in some measure, the Lord’s prayer. We do so even as we also pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

Endnotes

1. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (New York: Cosimo Classics, c1931, 2007), 81, 82.
2. In addition to the de Bruijn book, the best place to start for biography is James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013).