



Abraham Kuyper

**SPHERE
SOVEREIGNTY**

Introduction by **Vincent Bacote**

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INTRODUCTION

Christians are called to be faithful to God at all times and in all places. But what does this mean when we consider questions of public life and politics? There are many important matters to consider. What does it look like to maintain ultimate loyalty to God? What are the roles and responsibilities of the church? How do Christians avoid the temptations of “the world,” such as power? And what exactly does a distinctly Christian participation in non-church domains look like? Every Christian tradition addresses these questions with varying degrees of sustained attention. At the time I write this, we face a world where some Christians are eager to propose forms of triumphalism, doubling down on the battles of the culture wars, while others call for a weaning process from public and political aspirations. What is the path of faithfulness?

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) is an important figure whose work can help us in our own pursuits of public faithfulness. While he has been best known among Dutch Reformed circles, in the last several decades his influence has expanded more broadly. Endowed lectures, research institutes, educational institutions, and international conferences bear his name. This resurging interest in Kuyper and the ideas he developed stems from a renewed desire for thoughtful public engagement. Christians from a wide variety of Protestant traditions are finding Kuyper’s ideas helpful.

Of course, there is another challenge we face whenever we engage with great contributions from our forebears. It is often tempting to use a tradition or figure

as a kind of sponsor for our own ideas and commitments. This can happen all too easily and often, and even unintentionally. Reading and repurposing words with care and integrity is especially important when considering matters of public life, which have far-reaching implications for our actions in the world. Therefore, I encourage you to ponder this *Reading* with the careful discernment it deserves.

Abraham Kuyper: Scholar, Minister, Journalist, and Politician

Abraham Kuyper was born in 1837 in the Dutch town of Maasluis into the family of Jan Frederick, a minister in the Dutch National Church. Abraham and his five siblings were homeschooled until the family moved to Leiden in 1848; at age 11 Abraham enrolled at the Leiden gymnasium (a secondary school that prepared students for university, with an emphasis on humanities and languages). As the son of a minister, Kuyper was less affluent than his peers but had a strong appetite for education, earning his baccalaureate from Leiden University in 1858 and his doctorate in theology in 1863. When he returned home from the university, he often continued to study until midnight or later. This relentless work ethic would be characteristic of Kuyper throughout his life.

At Leiden, Kuyper was strongly influenced by his doctoral mentor J.H. Scholten, a professor who was a pioneer of modernist theology in the Netherlands. “Modern” in this context indicated a Christian faith suspicious of supernaturalism which instead viewed Christian theology as the best allegory for human development. Though a modern theologian, Scholten modeled for Kuyper an emphasis on the logical development of ideas from root principles and an orientation to the primary ideas of the Reformation, such as the sovereignty of God and the role of the Holy Spirit as a witness to the truth of Scripture (even if these ideas were regarded as matters of history instead of faith). Kuyper embraced modern theology, and became a minister in the national church.

His first pastorate was in the rural town of Beesd. It was there Kuyper experienced a conversion to Reformational Christianity. This was the result of two influences. The first was Johanna Schaay, who eventually became Kuyper’s wife.

In 1863 she sent him Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, a novel that had been popular among many ambitious and earnest men (like Kuyper). The novel contrasts two cousins, one more humble and the other a domineering social climber, and Kuyper saw in their reversal of fortunes his own need for a conversion from arrogance to a heart humbled before God. The second influence for Kuyper was his first parishioners. Those who held to traditional Reformed orthodoxy would not come to Kuyper's church because he still preached modern theology. Intrigued, Kuyper began visiting them, and these people who met in their homes were the gateway to Kuyper becoming an adherent of orthodox faith in the Reformed tradition. Some refer to these turning points as two conversions: the first a moral heart transformation and the second a theological conversion.

Kuyper stepped away from the pulpit and entered political life in 1874 but remained active in church life. He had been interested in public concerns at least as early as his first sermons in 1863, and when he decided to run for office and won, the law required him to leave the pastorate. In 1879 he helped form the confessionally orthodox Anti-Revolutionary Party, and served as editor for the party's weekly paper (*De Heraut*) and daily (*De Standaard*). In the Netherlands, amid tides of secularization and more liberal forms of Christian faith, "Anti-Revolutionary" referred to an approach to politics and society rooted in Christian principles, in contrast to the atheistic pursuit of a free society that characterized the French Revolution. In 1886 Kuyper led the *Doleantie* (meaning "the grieving"), a schism from the national church due to concerns about excessive theological liberalism, and in 1892 Kuyper's group merged with the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands to form the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

The highest political post for Kuyper was his role as Prime Minister from 1901-05. He had been the leader of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, and in the 1901 election his coalition (which included more conservative Protestants and those from Roman Catholic parties) won a majority in Parliament. During his tenure he began to advance his aims on education with a Higher Education Bill, though to some he is more well known for the strong measures he took in crushing a rail strike in 1903. In the next round of elections in 1905 his coalition lost the majority. Though he remained a prominent leader until his death in 1920, he was now past

the pinnacle of his career.

Kuyper was a prolific writer whose bibliography runs to 223 items, including some multivolume works and excluding some of his political columns. In his words and his actions, we encounter a committed and public Christianity. He can truly be considered a “walking public theology.”

God in the Public Square

It is impossible to read Kuyper without encountering his efforts to delineate a faith that is both deeply committed to God and public in impact. As a politician and educator, these questions were not merely theoretical for him. In 1898 Kuyper gave the Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary, which presented Kuyper’s development of Calvinism (later labeled neo-calvinism, initially a pejorative that became an accepted label) as a system which yielded a comprehensive view of life and reality. In addition to the concept of “sphere sovereignty” that you will encounter more extensively in the pages to come, the lectures highlighted Kuyper’s dual emphases on the “antithesis” and common grace. The antithesis, as Kuyper uses the term, refers to the difference in perspective that results from being born again and is used to emphasize Christian distinctiveness from non-Christians. Common grace, on the other hand, is divine restraint in creation that allows for positive contributions from all humans, Christians and non-Christians alike. Because God’s common grace can be found in every facet of life, including the public square, Christians are therefore compelled to engage it.

Kuyper never resolves the tension between these two emphases. In fact, in his writing he never regards common grace and antithesis as points of tension. For him they were both important to emphasize depending upon the point he wished to make on a given occasion. Given his sizeable bibliography, it is not a surprise his legacy includes those who emphasize one or the other as central to Christian participation in the world. There are some who are concerned that enthusiastic participation in the world rooted in common grace could lead to secularization—a fear that Christians would be too worldly and less attentive to church and Chris-

tian distinctiveness. There are others, of course, who find common grace helpful as a form of permission for public engagement while simultaneously finding antithesis important for maintaining Christian integrity. Kuyper wrote a lot, and readers of his canon will find reason for both enthusiasm and caution in the practice of public engagement.

The Free University & Sphere Sovereignty

Before the Stone Lectures, Kuyper developed these theological ideas and others in his inaugural address at the opening of the Free University of Amsterdam. Delivered on October 20, 1880, and excerpted in this *Reading*, the “Sphere Sovereignty” speech, as it is often called, contains the most prominent concerns of Kuyper’s very public faith.

From the beginning of his political career, Kuyper advocated for educational access for all social classes, as well as for the inclusion of an orthodox Christian worldview in education. At the time, it was not controversial to have education influenced by religion; this was a country with a national church. The point of tension was whether there would be schools that reflected more than one type of Protestant perspective (there were also secular and Roman Catholic schools) and which schools would have funding by the government. Recognizing the realities of pluralism, Kuyper, for his entire career, pursued funding for education for the different branches of Reformed theology as well as secular and Roman Catholic worldviews.

In 1876, the Higher Education Act turned theology faculties at state universities into departments that taught from a “neutral” or “scientific” perspective, while also providing opportunities for the national church to fund and fill positions for the training of clergy. This was frustrating to those like Kuyper who desired education informed by a more theologically conservative foundation. But there was another opportunity at hand. The act also allowed any private party to found an institution as long as they had three faculties and an endowment. This set the stage for the pursuit of a private Christian university—the first in the country. By

August 1879, the Free University of Amsterdam was announced.

Kuyper's inaugural address makes the case for a private Christian university that is free of both government and church control, but its ideas have implications far beyond the realm of education. Kuyper's main argument emphasizes the liberty that comes through the ultimate supremacy of Christ. Because Christ is sovereign over all, no other actor, including the state, has the authority to interfere unnecessarily with the distinct domains of life. This sets free the social domains God has placed in the world, and each is thereby able to develop without interference from others. More specifically, freedom in the domain of education opened the door for a school, like the Free University, to provide education from an orthodox Reformed worldview.

Kuyper uses the term "sphere" to refer to the social domains inherent within all of human life and calls the concept "sphere sovereignty" or "sovereignty within the sphere." The independence of each domain, whether family, church, guild, government, or industry, is part of the original created order of the world. This way of thinking is distinct from the purely secular model in which all authority rests in the state and the other spheres have, as Kuyper puts it, "rights and liberties no more generous than the state allows them, out of its weakness, or allots them, by dint of its supremacy." But it is also distinct from the model that marked medieval Europe, in which all authority rested in the Church, and all other spheres, including the state, were subject to its control.

Christian participation and engagement in the various spheres (education, government, family, etc.) will differ. Just as a church is not a business is not a law firm, each domain has what Kuyper calls "ordinances" which are discerned not only from Scripture but significantly from thoughtful participation within each sphere. Put another way, for Christians, the goal is not to turn every sphere into a church but to discern what God intends within each domain. This is very important for Kuyper, and it may seem a different way of understanding how Christians pursue faithfulness to God in every area of life. The distinction Kuyper makes between spheres is a kind of pluralism with sovereignty in each domain derived from God; each is to have its own integrity.

There is another pluralism to observe in this address that comes from the

Christian identity: a worldview pluralism can occur within each sphere. Kuyper argues for not only Christian schooling but also Christian political parties, media, and more. This is the antithesis at work. Kuyper is making a case for distinct institutions like the Free University. This educational institution rooted in a specific worldview is not advocating to be the only kind of university, however, but to be part of a public where various worldviews (including secular, Roman Catholic, liberal Protestants, and others) are also represented.

Kuyper's Legacy & Relevance Today

Though Kuyper speaks in the context of the Dutch nation here, there are lessons for Christians in any context. Readers are invited to consider not just what Kuyper meant for his time, but also how we narrate the unfolding of our times. How do we speak about the trajectory of history and the possibilities for Christian formation in society? How does Kuyper's address help us in our pursuit of public faithfulness? Among the most important things to consider while reading this speech is the way that Kuyper clearly gives significance to the ministry of the church while also proposing a path for Christian presence and influence in all domains of public life. Many Christians wonder how to have some kind of public influence that avoids the impression that local churches or denominations are taking over the domains of law, public policy, medicine, etc. This address provides one way of helping us to see that Christian presence can occur in domains outside of the church without needing the direction of a pastor or elder board or pope-like figure. It is important to see how Kuyper makes possible Christian participation without church control. Many struggle to envision options besides a secular and purportedly naked public square or some version of a Christian marriage to the state. Kuyper helps us imagine other possibilities.

Kuyper's Princeton lectures have been assigned in many Christian colleges and seminaries, and the central themes of this address have been quoted (in good and bad ways) by many who are striving toward a publicly engaged faith. In considering modern applications for his ideas, some use the label "Kuyperian" and others

(including me) modify it to “neo-Kuyperian.” For me, the latter label is a way to indicate both appreciation of Kuyper’s work as well as an aspiration to work with and modify what comes to us in Kuyper’s stream. For certain, Kuyper’s ideas have been a subject of debate on topics such as the relationship between church and politics, holistic discipleship, and ecclesiology.

One cannot read Kuyper without recognizing that he wanted orthodox Christian faith to guide and influence society. Yet his words have sometimes been misinterpreted. This is particularly the case with the most famous quote from this address: “...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!’” Some have interpreted this to mean that the sovereignty of Christ over all of human existence means that we should strive to claim and take over all the domains of human activity. This is a big mistake; Kuyper was the leader of a minority movement who surely desired Christian faith to guide all of society, but this was to occur by a Christian presence in all domains of life as a leavening influence, not as a top-down imposition of the faith. Christians who use this quote in support of triumphalist aims are using Kuyper to sponsor an approach he could not take nor would have taken had it been possible.

This is not the only misuse of the ideas we find in this address. Some Christians who supported South Africa’s policy of apartheid defined spheres based on racial identity and invoked Kuyper in this regard. Without question, Kuyper’s views of Africans and those of African descent reveal his greatest blindness and failure to live up to the best of his own theology (in which, for example, he argues that race-mixing advances society and that the Reformed tradition provides a basis for the equality of persons). And it is true that during the Boer war in the 1890s, Kuyper affirmed efforts to prevent mixed marriages between whites and Black Africans. This racism is, of course, abhorrent, but it alone does not make him a father of apartheid. Kuyper argued for a voluntary approach to distinct institutions on the basis of religious identity and, unlike the architects of the apartheid policy, never defined spheres by race. Unfortunately, Kuyper was not alive to police this translation of his legacy, which was implemented 28 years after this death. As South African theologian and philosopher Craig Bartholomew has argued in *Con-*

tours of the Kuyperian Tradition, Kuyper still bears partial responsibility because of his affirmation of the Boer treatment of Black Africans, but the misuse of sphere sovereignty by apartheid supporters bends Kuyper's idea to a purpose he never articulated and likely never intended.

Our pursuit of contemporary faithfulness can find helpful guidance from Kuyper as we consider how to be deep in faith and distinctively faithful in the various domains of life without misusing his ideas and without pursuing forms of Christian influence that intend to transform other spheres of life into the image of the church. As Christians participate in education, medicine, law, business and more, we have the opportunity to discern how our spiritual formation can come with us, not to "churchify" each sphere but to imaginatively pursue ways to promote human flourishing. We need not heed siren songs of triumphalism or pious calls for retreat. In Kuyper we are given a better and more nuanced way. Let us read him with integrity as we develop our approaches to a faith that touches all of life.



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SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY

Address at the Dedication of the Free University, delivered on 20 October 1880 in the Chancel of the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam

ESTEEMED AUDIENCE,

THOSE WHO ARE IN CHARGE of this institution have assigned me the honor of dedicating their school for higher education by publicly introducing it to the authorities and the general public. For that task I ask your sympathetic ear and kindly indulgence. You will appreciate the earnestness of that request when you consider that I am not about to deliver a professor's inaugural address or a principal's annual report. No, the nature of my task bars me from the quiet retreat of scholarly research and drives me onto the slippery terrain of public life, where nettles burn on every path and thorns wound at every step. It is no secret, and none of us wish to hide it: we have not been driven to this work as patrons and benefactors in love with disinterested science. What impelled us to this risky, if not presumptuous, venture, rather, was a profound sense of duty that what we were doing *had to* be done—for Christ's sake, for the name of the Lord, for the sacred interests of our people and our nation. Thus our action is not all that innocuous. The public interest through good and ill report has prejudged this institution even before it received its

charter, and we are deeply convinced that today's interest in this opening ceremony does not concern our persons but stems solely from the public's impression that the Netherlands is witnessing an event that may well leave its mark on the future of our nation.

Would we have undertaken this task if a higher criterion could have induced us to acquiesce in the status quo? Our venture is a quiet protest against our current environment, along with the claim that there is a better option. This apparent presumption alone, which follows it like a shadow, makes us humble. It might offend, it might hurt, and so I hasten to reassure you—whether we look at the overwhelming power of learning, prestige, and money arrayed against us, or feel embarrassed about our own smallness and powerlessness—I hasten to reassure you that what we say here today with such confidence is not expressive of lofty conceit but only of quiet humility. We would rather have stayed in the background and enjoyed seeing others take the lead. But now that this was *not* possible, we *had* to act. So we stepped forward. Although we are far from indifferent to people's antipathy or their goodwill, we nevertheless regulate our *line of conduct* exclusively according to what we believe is demanded by the honor of our God.

Your expectation is that I will tell you about the school we are introducing as it makes its appearance in our national culture: What is its mission? Why does it brandish the cap of liberty? And why does it pore so intently over the book of the Reformed religion? Allow me to link together the answers to these three questions through the single idea of sphere sovereignty by pointing to that *sovereignty of the spheres* as the hallmark of our institution,

in its *national* significance,
its *scholarly* intention, and
its *Reformed* character.

I

In introducing our institution to you in its *national significance* is to be the first part of my address.

In our awesome century, ladies and gentlemen, our nation too is going through a profound crisis, a crisis which it shares with every nation of any importance, a

crisis that pervades the whole world of thoughtful humanity.

At stake in any crisis is a way of life that is beset by a disease which either promises a new lease on life or predicts a decline unto death. So what is the “diseased way of life” that is now under assault? Just what is at stake in this crisis, also for our nation? Would anyone want to repeat the old answers: that the contest is between progress and conservatism, between uniformity and diversity, between idealism and realism, or even between rich and poor? It has become all too clear that each of these diagnoses is inadequate, distorted, superficial. Since then, the watchword has become *clericalism or liberalism!*—as though it were a contest between those who misuse religious influence and those who wish to purge it from public life. But this curtain too has been contemptuously shoved aside, and people have come to realize what was first grasped only by the prophets of our age but then by ever wider circles: namely, that the current world crisis is not about nuances, interests, rights, but about a *living person*—that the crisis revolves around the Man who once swore that he was King and who for the sake of this sovereign claim to kingship gave his life on the cross of Golgotha.

“The Nazarene: A noble example! An inspiring ideal! A religious genius!” So people exclaimed for a long time with great enthusiasm. But history has protested that all such praise is at odds with the Nazarene’s own claims. The calm and crystal-clear self-identification coming from his divine-human consciousness was that he was no less than the *Messiah*, the Anointed One, hence the King of kings, possessing “all authority in heaven and on earth” [Matt 28:18]. The claim that was written and nailed to the cross, the crime for which he had to die, was not “hero of faith” or “glorious martyr,” but *Melek, Rex, Basileus ton Ioudaion*, King of the Jews—that is, the Bearer of Sovereignty. As in the first three centuries so again today, a debate about that sovereignty—about the presence or absence of that authority in the man born of Mary—is at the center of the crisis in the intellectual world and among the ruling elites throughout the developed world. This debate is at the core of the burning question whether the *Basileus ton Ioudaion* is the saving truth to which all people say Amen, or... the fundamental lie that all people must oppose. The question has demanded a decision ever since the life of the Nazarene and is once again causing a rift in our intellectual world, in our life as human beings, and in our existence as a nation.

What is sovereignty? Would you not agree with me that sovereignty is the authority that has the right, the duty, and the power to break and avenge any and all resistance to its will? And would you not also agree with the commonsense realization that original, absolute sovereignty cannot reside in any creature but can only be associated with the majesty of God? If you believe in him as the designer and creator of the world, the founder and director of all things, then your soul, too, must proclaim the Triune God as the only absolute sovereign. Provided—and this I would emphasize—provided you acknowledge at the same time that this exalted sovereign once delegated and still delegates his authority to human beings, so that on earth you actually never encounter God himself *directly*, in visible things, but you meet his sovereign authority in some office or other exercised by a *human being*.

Now, when God's sovereignty is vested in a human office, the crucial question arises: How does that delegation take place? Is the all-encompassing sovereignty of God transferred undivided onto a single person? Or does an earthly sovereign have the power to command obedience in a restricted orbit only, an orbit or sphere of action that borders on other spheres where someone else, not he, is sovereign?

The answer to this question will vary depending on whether you dwell in the atmosphere of revelation or outside it. For those whose minds had no room for revelation, the traditional answer for a long time was that supreme sovereignty is delegated "as far as possible *undivided*, but penetrating *all spheres!*" "As far as possible," because divine sovereignty over the things that are above falls beyond humanity's reach, over nature it exceeds humanity's power, and over fate it is beyond humanity's control. But for the rest, *in the absence of* sphere sovereignty, it was the state that was given unlimited power to command, disposing over persons, their lives, their rights, their consciences, even their religious beliefs. There were many gods in antiquity, so as a result, thanks to *vis unita fortior* ["united force yields greater strength"], the single unrestricted state seemed more imposing and more majestic than the divided power of the gods. Eventually the state itself, embodied in Caesar, became God—the divine state that could tolerate no other "states" beside itself. Hence the passion for *world* domination, under *divus Augustus*, the god-emperor, with Caesar worship as its religion. A deeply sinful notion, not worked out in a theory until eighteen centuries later in Hegel's system of the

state as “the immanent God.”

By contrast, Jehovah proclaimed to Israel through the voices of messianic prophecy: “Sovereignty shall be delegated, not as far as possible, but in an absolute sense, undivided and unbroken!” And that Sovereign, the man-Messiah, did appear, with power in heaven and power over nature, with the claim to authority over all peoples, and to authority in all peoples, even over their conscience and their religious faith. The very bond between mother and child had to yield when challenged by his call to obedience. Thus it is an absolute sovereignty over all things visible and invisible, over both the spiritual and the material, and all of it placed in the hands of a Man. It refers not to one of the world’s kingdoms, but to the absolute kingdom. “*For this purpose was I born and for this cause came I into the world... Therefore all power is given unto me in heaven and on earth... One day all enemies shall be put under my feet and every knee shall bow to me*” [see John 18:37; Matt 28:18; 1 Cor 15:25; Rom 14:11]. Such is the sovereignty of the Messiah which the prophet once announced, which the Nazarene claimed, which he began to demonstrate by doing miracles, which his apostles defined further, and which the church of Christ confesses on their authority: a sovereignty undivided but nonetheless by delegation—or rather, taken over by Christ in order to be given back again to God; for perfect harmony will one day break through when Messiah’s sovereignty returns to God himself, who will then be *ta panta en pasin*: “all in all” [see 1 Cor 15:28].

But here is the glorious principle of liberty! This absolute sovereignty of the *sinless* Messiah at the same time directly denies and disputes all absolute sovereignty on earth among sinful men. The life of humankind is divided into *distinct spheres*, each with its own sovereignty.

Human life, with its visible material foreground and its invisible spiritual background, appears neither simple nor uniform but constitutes an infinitely composite organism. It is structured in such a way that what is individual exists only in groups, and only in groups can the whole become manifest. Now call the component parts of this one great machine “cog wheels,” each propelled on its own axle by means of springs; or else call them “spheres,” each animated by its own spirit. The name or image is not important, so long as you recognize that there are in life all kinds of spheres as numerous as constellations in the heavens, and

that the circumference of each sphere is drawn with a fixed radius from a unique principle as its center or focal point, according to the apostolic *hekastos en to idio tagmati*: “each in its own order!” [see 1 Cor 15:23]. Just as we speak of a moral world, a world of science, a world of business, an art world, so we speak still more properly of a sphere of morality, a family sphere, a sphere of socioeconomic life, each having its own *domain*. And because each forms a distinct domain, each sphere has its own sovereign within the bounds of that domain.

There is, for instance, a domain of nature whose sovereign uses energy to work on physical matter according to fixed laws. Similarly, there are domains of personal, domestic, scientific, socioeconomic, and ecclesiastical life, each of which obeys its own laws and stands under its own supreme authority. There is a domain for thought where no other laws but those of logic may rule. There is a domain of the conscience where none but the Holy One may give sovereign commands. Finally, there is a domain of faith where the person alone is the sovereign who through faith consecrates himself in his innermost being.

Now then, all these spheres interlock like cogwheels, and precisely this mutual interaction and meshing of the spheres creates the rich and many-sided multiformity of human life. At the same time, however, life runs the risk of having one sphere bending its neighbor inward, causing a wheel to jerk and jolt, twisting and breaking cog after cog, and so disrupting the smooth operation of the whole. Hence the reason for the existence of still another sphere of authority, that of the state. The state is there to enable the various spheres, insofar as they manifest themselves visibly, to interact in a healthy way and to keep each of them within the confines of justice. And since one’s personal life can be suppressed by the group in which one lives, the state is also there to shield the individual from overbearance by his own group. The state is the sovereign who, in Scripture’s pithy expression, “builds up the land by justice” [see Prov 29:4], since without justice the nation will destroy itself and collapse.

Accordingly, as the power that protects the individual and defines the mutual relationships among the visible spheres, the sovereignty of the state rises high *above* them all by its right to pass laws and its right to enforce them. But *within* these spheres that does not hold. There another authority rules, an authority that

descends directly from God, apart from the state, an authority that is not *conferred* but *acknowledged* by the state. And even in defining laws for the mutual relationships among the spheres, the state sovereign must not be guided by its own will or preference but is *bound* by the choice of a higher will as this comes to expression in the nature and purpose of the spheres. The state is to see to it that the cogwheels operate as they are meant to operate. Is that not what every state sovereign would want: not restricting life or limiting freedom, but making it possible for each of the spheres to live and move freely within its own domain?

Thus, two credos stand diametrically opposed to each other.

We who live in the atmosphere of revelation, and live in it consistently, can only confess that all sovereignty resides with God and can therefore emanate from him alone. We confess that this divine sovereignty was conferred integrally on the man-Messiah and that human freedom is safe under this Son of Man who was anointed sovereign. For, not only the state but also every other domain of life enjoys an authority that is derived from him—that is, possesses sovereignty within its own sphere.

By contrast, those who do not discern and therefore deny such a special revelation insist that the question of sovereignty be kept strictly separate from religious faith. They assert, accordingly, that no sovereignty is conceivable other than the sovereignty of the state, and so they work hard to see to it that the exalted idea of sovereignty be embodied ever more perfectly in state supremacy. Hence, they can grant the other spheres of life a measure of rights and liberties no more generous than the state *allows* them, out of its weakness, or *allots* them, by dint of its supremacy.

I call these two positions “credos” about sovereignty. They are life convictions, not theories. The gulf that separates them does not lie in a different arrangement of ideas, but in a recognition or negation of *facts of life*. For us who live by revelation, the Messiah lives, Christ works, and he is seated as sovereign on the throne of the power of God in a more real sense than you are sitting here on the tombstones in this chancel. Conversely, those who do not share this confession must oppose it as an inconvenient self-delusion that stands in the way of national development, a harmful dogma, a fanciful bit of nonsense! The two confessions, therefore, are

flatly contradictory. To be sure, cowardly compromisers have time and again shoved them aside, to replace them with a broad range of hybrid systems, mixtures of more of this and less of that, or equal portions of each. In critical times, however, this unprincipled game is angrily interrupted by the two principled credos that impart some color even to these colorless systems. Representing the only true, mighty antithesis that divides life at its root, the two camps openly challenge each other to a battle of life and death, staking their lives on these credos even as they disturb the lives of others because of these credos.

Sphere sovereignty defending itself against state sovereignty: that in brief is the course of world history even before Messiah's sovereignty was proclaimed. The royal child of Bethlehem does indeed protect sphere sovereignty with his shield, but he did not create it. It existed of old. It lay embedded in the order of creation. It was part of the plan for human life. It was there before state sovereignty arose. But once the sovereign state arose, it realized that the sovereignty of the spheres of life constituted its chief rival, while those spheres themselves weakened their power to offer resistance by sinning against their own laws of life. Thus ancient history shows us the shameful spectacle among nations everywhere that after stubborn, at times valiant struggle the spheres lost their freedom, even as the power of the state gained ground and turned into Caesarism. Socrates drinking the poison cup, Brutus plunging the dagger into Caesar's heart, the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices—those were the savagely heroic convulsions of a free, organic way of life that finally collapsed under the iron fist of Caesarism. As antiquity drew to a close, freedom was no more. There were no independent nations, no sovereign spheres. It had all become one sphere, one world empire under one sovereign state. Only in a drunken stupor induced by decadent affluence did mankind, sunk in disgrace, manage to drive this infamy from its heart.

But then a man arose within that iron ring of monolithic power who by the supernatural power of *faith* reintroduced a distinct, free sphere, and in that sphere a free sovereignty. That man was Jesus of Nazareth. With God in his heart, one with God, himself God, he withstood Caesar, broke down the iron gates, and posited the sovereignty of faith as the deepest pivot on which all sphere sovereignty rests. Neither the Pharisee nor his disciples understood that his cry "It is finished!" entailed,

besides the salvation of the elect, also a *sōtēria tou kosmou*, a salvation of the cosmos, a liberation of the world, a world of freedoms. But Jesus understood it. Hence that word *Basileus* above his head on the cross. Asserting himself as the sovereign, he contended with the “ruler of this world” [John 14:30], that usurper, for authority over that world. And no sooner do his followers form their own circle than they too run afoul of state sovereignty. They succumb. Their blood flows. But Jesus’ sovereign principle of faith cannot be washed away even by *their* blood. *Christ is God!* or *Caesar is God!* becomes the shibboleth that will decide the fate of the world. Christ triumphs and Caesar topples. The nations, set free, emerge again, each with its own king, and in the realms of these kings separate spheres, and in these spheres distinct liberties. And only then did that glorious life begin, crowning itself with noble chivalry, exhibiting in an ever richer organism of guilds, orders, and free communities all the energy and all the glory that sphere sovereignty implies.

Kuyper goes on to describe the intervening events of European history as a battle of sphere sovereignty against state sovereignty, including the rise and fall of the French Revolution, the authoritarian tendencies of Europe’s leaders, and the Réveil religious awakening of 1815–60. He positions himself and his Dutch antirevolutionary party—and the founding of this Free University—as part of the movement pushing back against state sovereignty and reclaiming sovereignty for the spheres.

II

YOU MAY ALSO EXPECT SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY to be the hallmark of our *scholarly intentions*. This too I take to be practical. We intend no abstract and arid scholasticism, but firmness of principle, depth of insight, clarity of judgment—in a word, sanctified intellectual power, a power to resist whatever would restrict freedom in our lives.

Let’s not forget, any state tends to look upon liberty with a wary eye. The various spheres of life cannot do without the sphere of the state, for just as one space can limit another, so one sphere can limit another unless the state regulates their boundaries. Thus the state is *the sphere of spheres* which alone among all the other spheres covers externally the whole of human life. The state is therefore mindful

to strengthen its arm in the noble sense of the word (thus not for itself but in the interest of all the other spheres) in order to resist and try to break any attempt on the part of a sphere to expand and enlarge its orbit. So it is again today. Observe the signs of the times. Did Mommsen, in the bold portrait he painted of Caesar, not suggest a return to the imperialistic policy once followed by that Caesar as the ground rule of political wisdom for our time?¹ Does Germany's chancellor look like a freedom-loving statesman to you?² Or was it perhaps the man who was so profoundly humiliated at Sedan by that chancellor?³ Freedom-loving or authoritarian: What is your impression of the people's tribune in Paris who has now replaced the man of Sedan in popularity?⁴

This was inevitable, both as a discipline and as a medicine for the craven and emasculated nations who by the atrophy of their moral energy had made this bridling of their liberty possible. The state after all is the supreme power on earth. There is no earthly power above the state that can compel the sovereign to do justice. Thus every state, either from a base lust for *power* or a noble concern for the *common good*, will by its very nature draw the iron hoops around the staves as tightly as the spring of those staves allows. In the final analysis, therefore, it depends on the spheres themselves whether they will flourish in freedom or groan under state coercion. If they have moral resilience they cannot be cramped, they will not submit to being crushed; but if they are servile they lack even the right to complain when pressed into the shackles of slavery.

But exactly here lies the problem. *Sin* threatens freedom inside each sphere just as much as state power at the margin. When a cooper wants to draw hoops tight around the staves, he lights a fire inside the circle of staves, and that fire

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- 1 In his works on Roman history and Roman law, Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) wrote favorably about the early emperors who had established the power of Rome.
 - 2 Otto von Bismarck (1815–98), prime minister of Germany, was renowned in the 1870s for his discriminatory laws against the Catholic church and repressive measures against the socialists.
 - 3 Bismarck provoked France in 1870 to declare war on Germany, leading to the defeat of Emperor Napoleon III (1808–73) at the Battle of Sedan and the dissolution of the French Second Empire.
 - 4 Following its disastrous war with Prussia, France's political leaders campaigned for re-establishing the French Republic under the leadership of the popular, charismatic, and strong-willed Léon Gambetta (1838–82).

on the inside, more than the blows of his hammer from the outside, causes the staves to bend and shrink. So it is with our liberties. At the heart of every sphere burns a fire, a flame of passion from which the sparks of sin fly upward, and this unholy fire undermines moral strength, weakens resilience, and in the end bends the strongest staves. In any successful attack on freedom the state can only be an accomplice; the *chief* offender is the citizen who neglects his duty and whose sins and sensual pleasures sap his moral fiber and rob him of the power to take initiative. In a nation that is healthy at its core and whose people continue to guard the health of the various spheres, no state can remove the proper landmarks without encountering the people's moral resistance with the help of God. Not until all self-discipline had vanished and affluence had crept in and sin had turned brazen was the theory⁵ able to bend what had grown slack and was Napoleon in a position to trample what had moldered away. And if God had not time and again, in part through oppression, poured fresh energy into those lifeless spheres so as to transform atoms into dynamos (as the latest philosophy of nature would have it), the last sovereign sphere would long since have broken down and nothing would have been left of our freedom but an inscription on its tomb: *sic transit gloria mundi*, thus passes the glory of the world.

Now then, one of the means, a most prominent means, with which God has endowed more cultured nations for defending their freedoms is higher learning, science, scholarship. Among the spokesmen of the Holy Spirit was a highly educated man from Tarsus; and was it not from the intellectual gifts of Paul, rather than from the pensive John or the practical James, that Luther laid hold of the freedom of the Reformation? I am well aware that higher learning too can betray liberty and has more than once done just that, but that was despite its sacred mission, not by dint of it. Taken in its authentic form, God sent it to us as an angel of light.

For what robs a lunatic, a psychopath, a drunkard of their human dignity? Is it

5 By "the theory" Kuyper means the ideology of the 18th-century Age of Reason and Enlightenment, which weakened the intermediate bodies of civil society and so prepared the democratically supported tyranny of the French Revolution and the despotism of the populist Napoleon, who developed into the dictator of a highly regimented nation.

not precisely the lack of a *clear mind*? And to acquire a clear mind, not only about ourselves but also about that which exists outside ourselves, is that not exactly what science is all about: thinking God's thoughts after him, grasping what he has thought prior to us and about us and in us, what he infuses into the consciousness not just of a single person but of all mankind across the ages! This ability to grasp what exists, and to capture in our reason what is reflected in our consciousness, is an honor that God has bestowed on humanity. To possess wisdom is a divine trait in our being. Indeed, the power of wisdom and knowledge has grown to such an extent that the course of things mostly does not run according to reality but according to how people conceive of reality. How can people say that ideas are not important? Ideas shape public opinion; public opinion shapes the public's sense of what is right; and that sense either thaws or chills the currents of intellectual life. That is the reason why anyone who wants his principles to have influence cannot stick with woolly sentiments; he will make no headway by appealing to the imagination and will get only halfway by professing his beliefs. He will not gain hold of the public mind until he attains to authority in the intellectual world and succeeds in transferring his intuition—the *Deus in nobis*, the “God in us”—from what he *senses* to what he *knows*.

Provided—and I adhere strictly to this—provided scholarship remains “sovereign in its own sphere” and does not compromise its character under the guardianship of church or state. Scholarship too forms a distinct sphere of its own. Here truth is sovereign. Under no circumstance can a violation of science's law of life be tolerated. That would not only dishonor science but also be sin before God. Our consciousness is like a mirror in us, reflecting images from three worlds: from the world *around* us, from the world of *our own being*, and from the invisible, *spiritual* world. Reason therefore demands (1) that we allow each of these worlds to reflect these images according to their distinct nature, or *aisthesis*, that is, by observation as well as apperception; (2) that we apprehend those images with a clear eye, or *noesis*, that is, with our cognition or understanding; and (3) that we gather what has been apprehended into a harmonious coherence, or *gnosis*, that is, by comprehending the images as necessary and beautiful. In other words, reason requires mirror images, reflection, not speculation. Truth brings knowledge that makes wise, that

draws from life to benefit life, and that ends in adoration of the only wise God!

A scholar such as Spinoza understood the sovereignty of the sphere of science, whence we admire his character as high as we esteem the faint-heartedness of Erasmus low.⁶ To be sure, Spinoza's method, and therefore his observations, were deficient; hence his conclusions could only be erroneous. Yet, given what he saw and how he saw it, he steadfastly refused to lend himself to an infringement of the sovereignty of science. That is something no Reformed person finds fault with; rather, the Reformed place it high above the unsteady wavering that has seduced more than one person (who now knows what Spinoza never knew) to endorse unprincipled compromises. We must therefore resist tooth and nail any attempt by the church of Christ to impose her lofty position on science. At the very real risk of suffering harm at the hands of science, the church should herself urge scholars never to allow themselves to be enslaved but to maintain the sovereignty due to them within their sphere and to live by the grace of God. There is, to be sure, the satanic danger that some scholars will degenerate into devils of pride and tempt science to arrogate to itself what lies outside its domain. But, to begin with, one can't climb a tall steeple without at the same time running the risk of a steep fall; and, in the second place, what we discovered just now about the tyranny of the state applies equally to the tyranny of science: it cannot arise unless the church is in decline. But it is also true that after going through a spiritual revival the church will address the science that came to chastise her in the name of God and push it back inside its proper boundaries.

Almost the same can be said of the state. I say "almost" because the state remains the *exousia architektonike*, the architectonic power that was given the authority to define the legal boundary also for science the moment science manifests itself as a visible organism in schools. Only, before it crosses that boundary to enter the domain of science, the state must respectfully remove its sandals and renounce any sovereignty that would be out of place in that domain. Scholarly learning in the

6 Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) was expelled from the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam for his rationalist criticism of the Old Testament, which he refused to recant. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) began by endorsing Luther's criticism of the church, but when Luther was excommunicated Erasmus reaffirmed his loyalty to Rome.

service of the state [...] is a self-demeaning prostitution that forfeits any valid claim to moral influence. But even if, as in our jurisdictions, the state is animated by a nobler disposition, and even if scholars, as in our country, are too proud to bend, still it will benefit and do credit to our academic life if the universities reaffirm their own root and grow and develop their own distinct life and so outgrow the guardianship of the state. That is how the schools of the prophets in Israel and the wisdom schools in Jerusalem held their own: they stood in the heart of the nation, free and independent. That was the free activity of the ancient philosophers in Greece and their imitators in Rome, and that was the independence enjoyed by the scholars of the early church. That was the liberty enjoyed by the medieval universities of Bologna and Paris: not as training schools for civil servants, to pour knowledge into their heads, but as centers of learning that carved out a place for themselves amid society. It was in that free form that the university was able to contribute to the liberating movement of the Reformation, and it was not until the close of the eighteenth century, when that free framework was transformed as if by magic into a “branch of the civil service,” that the new-fangled university as an institution of higher learning allowed itself to be riveted to the state.

This did not come about as a result of someone’s personal decision but because of the press of circumstances and the general exhaustion of the peoples. Today it would border on the absurd to demand that the state should suddenly withdraw from the world of the university. At present the public shows too little enthusiasm for higher learning, the well-to-do too little generosity, and alumni too little energy to hazard the attempt. For now, the state simply has no choice but to continue its support, provided—and this we must insist upon—provided efforts are directed at emancipating the university and seeing science itself embrace again sphere sovereignty as its ideal.

Is it then “unscholarly” that our school should venture a first timid step in this direction? At the public universities so many drawbacks encumber the scales of equity. Money, it cannot be said often enough, creates power *for* the one who gives and power *over* the one who receives. That is the reason why the arts (with the exception of music), because they rely on funding, were never able to raise the emancipation of the masses to higher levels. Who shall calculate the influence that state

funds have had on our country's future and its academic development by the single appointment of a Thorbecke, or a Scholten, or an Opzoomer?⁷ Where is the intellectual-spiritual criterion that can guide the state when making such influential choices for these higher, crucial disciplines? Moreover, to force Jews and Catholics to help pay for theology departments that are in fact and by law Protestant—does that not grate somewhat upon your sense of justice? So when the law of the land recognizes our right to establish a school and [...] the Crown grants a charter to our institution which is not encumbered with those drawbacks, does then the founding of a university supported by the common people not prophesy a bright future for higher learning and our national life?

[...]

III

WE HAVE SEEN HOW SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY is the stimulus that has given birth to our institution. We have frankly avowed that for us, too, sphere sovereignty is the prime condition for any science that would flourish. It now remains for me to defend our disputed claim that sphere sovereignty also be granted as our *principle*—I mean our *Reformed* principle. In using that name I hasten to correct any chronic misunderstanding and dispel any suspicion as though by “Reformed” we mean anything other or anything less than the pure, authentic Christian religion. [...]

[...] In so doing we do not reject our Lutheran brothers. To look down on other Christians would make us blameworthy. All we ask is that we not be forced to exchange what is finer in our eyes for what is less fine, and that we be allowed to build again in the unadulterated Reformed style the Reformed temple that has fallen into ruin.

This has been my aim also in the present address. And so, as demanded by

7 Earlier in the century, Crown appointments in the University of Leiden had gone to J. R. Thorbecke, who worked out a liberal constitution for the country, and to rationalist J. H. Scholten, who introduced orthodox students (including young Abraham Kuyper) to Modernist theology. Positivist C. W. Opzoomer was appointed to a philosophy chair in the State University of Utrecht, where he developed into an influential philosophical atheist.

Scripture and modeled by Calvin, I have placed in the foreground the *sovereignty of God*, because it alone stimulates life at the root and helps overcome all fear of men, even of Satan himself. And if anyone wonders whether sphere sovereignty is really derived from the heart of Scripture and the treasury of Reformed life, I ask him, first of all, to consider that Scripture's *principle of faith* runs very deep, and then to note the decision of the tribes at Hebron to crown David king, to note Elijah's resistance to Ahab's tyranny, the disciples' refusal to submit to a police ordinance in Jerusalem, and, not least, the word their Lord laid down about what is God's and what is Caesar's. As to Reformed practice, have you never heard of Calvin's "*magistratus inferiores*"?⁸ Is not sphere sovereignty the basis of the entire Presbyterian church order? Did not virtually all Reformed countries lean toward a confederative form of government? Do civil liberties not flourish best in Calvinist nations? And can it be denied that domestic peace, decentralization, and local autonomy are, still today, guaranteed most securely in the lands of Calvin's heirs?

It is entirely in line with the Reformed spirit, therefore, that we insist on sovereignty for our Reformed principle in our pursuit of science and scholarship as well. We cannot enter into a pact of neutrality and participate in a university together with those who live from another principle. I do not deny that among non-Christian governments there still is found a fear of God and his justice, a fear that Calvin honored even among pagan tyrants. Nevertheless, such a pious trait is little more than a foundation bearing at most a section of wall but lacking a roof or windows. Or if you would like a still better metaphor, what use a tower that lacks a steeple, hence a carillon, a clock, and a weathervane—in short, everything for which it was erected? If we were meant to participate in an existing university, a different proposal would be more acceptable, namely, a large state university for which the government would furnish only lecture halls and laboratories, with the right for every scholar to teach there and the right for every social group to install scholars there. It would be a sort of scientific "central station" where all lines converge but each with its own philosophy and its own administration.

Yet even then the right of each principle to enjoy "sovereignty in its own

8 That is, the "lesser magistrates," who may lead the people in revolt against a tyrant.

proper sphere” would still be infringed on both sides. Does not history show that the scholarship practiced by every social group with a distinct principle ends up looking quite different? There was once a form of Greek, of Arabic, of Scholastic learning, forms that may not speak to us yet were thought fully developed by giant intellects in whose shadow none of us could stand. Likewise, after the Middle Ages learning looked rather different in Catholic and non-Catholic universities. The succession of philosophers who have been active since Kant have produced schools of thought that are mutually exclusive, depending on whether they stress the subject or the object. How would you wed a monist to an atomist? Indeed, so compelling and so dominant is the strength of a principle that Hegel’s intellectual power, every one concedes, generated a wholly distinct system in the fields of theology, law, physics, in fact in every field, so that anyone studying criminal law in Hegel’s school and civil law in the school of Herbart will inevitably find his conception of justice totally confused.

If it is clear that weaving the same cloth together is impossible when there is a difference in *intellectual* principles, how much more is sphere sovereignty imperative when different *life* principles are involved! As the example of Fichte has shown, if a merely intellectual principle is involved it is always possible to return to what was initially rejected. But that is not possible in the case of a life principle. A life principle is rooted in *facts*. Or stronger still, in the case of the Christian principle it is rooted in a *living person*—in a person whose coming precipitated a crisis in the midst of the world, at the center of world history, in the heart also of the intellectual world. Just ask this living person, ask Christ, ask his authorized spokesmen, and what do you learn? Does the rabbi from Nazareth declare that his knowledge is wedded to the knowledge of earthly sages? Do his apostles tell you that continuing your studies in Jerusalem or in Athens will gradually and automatically lead you to the higher knowledge that is his? The exact opposite! That rabbi will impress upon you that his treasure of wisdom is hidden from the wise and the prudent and revealed unto babes. And the academically trained Paul draws a wide gulf between the knowledge formerly acquired by him and the life principle now implanted in him, a gulf so wide, so deep, so impassible, that he contrasts the *foolish* mind of the one with the *wise* life of the other [see 1 Cor 3:18–19].

Shall we then pretend that we can build together on the selfsame basis what according to the express pronouncement of Jesus' divine self-consciousness is built on entirely different foundations? We shall not venture it, ladies and gentlemen! Considering that a principle marks a starting point and that a distinct principle therefore marks the start of something distinct, we shall defend sovereignty for our principle as well as for the principle of our opponents throughout the sphere of thought. That is to say, just as they employ *their* principle and its corresponding method to erect a house of knowledge that shines brilliantly (though it does not entice us), so we too from *our* principle and *our* method will grow our own plant whose stems, leaves, and blossoms are nourished with its own sap. We happen to claim that we perceive and observe something that our opponents label self-deception. So be it; we cannot but pass as fools for that reason, just as we cannot refrain from quoting the proverb that "the godless also in our days do not understand knowledge" [see Prov 29:7]. Not because they are inferior to us in knowledge—they may well be our superiors—but because they say that it is *not* a fact what is for us an assured fact in Christ, and because they declare that they have *not* found in their soul what we consciously grasp in our soul. Belief in the Word of God, objectively infallible in the Scriptures and subjectively offered to us by the Holy Spirit: there you have the line that separates. Not as though the knowledge of others rests on intellectual certainty and ours merely on faith. All knowledge proceeds from faith, of whatever kind. A person relies on God or he proceeds from his inner self or he holds fast to his ideal. The person who believes nothing does not exist. At least, he who has nothing that he accepts as self-evident would not be able to find a starting point even for his thinking; and how would a person whose thought lacks a starting point ever be able to investigate anything *scientifically*?

Thus our intention indeed is to build next to what others have built, with nothing in common except the terrain outside and the view from the window, with a printing press to maintain, like a mail carrier, the exchange of ideas. For we do agree that a battle of ideas back and forth is possible and necessary, but only about points of departure and schools of thought. For once a school of thought is defined and your point of departure is fixed, when these are consistently followed the direction of your research is set; and in the measure that you stand at the left or are

found on the right, everything appears different to you and every objection argued against your position lacks the power to persuade. Anyone who thinks organically is therefore right to scoff at the individualistic pretension that everybody, growing up, must personally think through all systems, search through every confession, and then opt for the one he considers the best. No one can do that, and no one does. No one has that kind of time or that mental energy at his disposal. Only a naïve person, one who does not yet understand what higher learning entails, can fancy that he has done so, or may think that others have done so. That so-called sampling of any and all systems merely fosters superficiality, destroys clear thinking, corrupts character, and renders the brain unfit for more solid work. Believe me, one does not enhance one's knowledge of building construction by nosing about in house after house, but only by a careful study of one well-built structure, basement to attic.

Accordingly, our scholarship will not be “free” in the sense of “detached from its principle.” That would be the freedom of the fish on dry land, of a potted plant uprooted from its soil, or if you will, of a day laborer taken from his hamlet on the moors and suddenly plunked down on Broadway or Times Square. We bind ourselves in our own house strictly and inexorably to a fixed regimen, convinced as we are that a household thrives best under set rules. The most generous academic freedom is found only in the rule that whoever wants to leave should find the door open, plus the rule that no outsider may enter your house to lord it over you; but also, that others are just as free to build on the foundation of *their* principle, in the style of *their* method, displaying the results of *their own* research.

Finally, if you ask whether we desire such separate development not only for theology but for all the disciplines, and if you find it hard to suppress a smile when you hear scoffing references to “Christian medicine” and “Christian logic”—then hear our reply to that objection.

Given that we have professed God's revelation—reformed, after its deformation—as the starting point of our project, do you really think that we would have only theologians drink from this fountain and for the rest spurn this source for the study of law and medicine and philology? Do you view the world of science, properly so called, as separated into rigid compartments?

What do people mean when speaking of a *medical* faculty? They are not sick mammals that medical science seeks to benefit, but human beings created in the image of God. Judge for yourselves, then, whether it makes a difference if you view man as a moral agent with a higher destiny for soul *and* body and as a creature bound to God's Word. Should a medical doctor tell a dying man of his approaching death, or should he keep it from him? Should he recommend anesthesia for a woman in labor, or advise against it? Insist on vaccination, or leave it to free choice? Urge young men to practice self-control or indulgence in his passions? Join Malthus and curse a mother's fertility, or join Scripture in calling her blessed? Treat the mental-health patient psychically by counseling him, or physically by drugging him? Or, to name no more, condone cremation, permit vivisection without restriction, and halt the spread of syphilis by the most detestable of medical examinations at the cost of degrading public authority and disgracing human dignity?

What shall I say about the law faculty? Does it not make a difference if I view man as a self-improving product of nature rather than as a condemned sinner—if I view the law itself as a functionally developing organism of nature rather than as a jewel that comes down from God himself and is bound to his Word? Will that not determine the purpose of criminal law and afford a guideline for international law? When the Christian conscience, quite apart from the science of law, rises in protest against the dominant school of political economy, against prevailing business practices, against the predatory relationships among the social classes—when in civil society all our Christian people are urging a return to decentralization by way of sphere sovereignty and under current law are establishing separate Christian schools at a rate of three to one—then can you name me one chair in the law faculty that is not affected by the contrast in starting principles?

As for our natural scientists, I grant that if they strictly confined themselves to what can be weighed and measured, the wedge of starting principle would not be able to penetrate their field. But who operates that way? What scientist works without hypotheses? Who does not pursue his science as a human being and not as an impersonal measuring instrument? Who does not see what he sees through subjective lenses, and who does not extrapolate beyond what he can see, always according to his subjective opinion? Can someone properly assess the value of your

printed book, pamphlet, hymnal, who only figures out the cost of paper and ink required to print them? Is the value of the finest embroidery exhausted by the cost of thread and fabric? Or better still, is not all of creation before the eyes of the natural scientist like one grand painting, and is then the value and beauty of that work of art really to be judged by the gilded frame around it, the yards of linen underneath it, and the pounds of paint upon it?

Why go on to speak to you about the faculty of letters? Of course, learning how to read words and conjugate verbs has nothing to do with being for or against the Messiah. But if I take you further and unlock Hellas's palace of art or enter Rome's world of power, does it then not make a difference if I resurrect the spirit of those ancients for the purpose of banishing the spirit of Christ or instead for subordinating that spirit to the spirit of Christ in accordance with both human and divine standards? Does the study of Semitic languages not change depending on whether I regard Israel as the people of *absolute* revelation or at most as a people with a genius for religion? Does philosophy stay the same if it continues to pursue "Ideal Being" or instead joins us in confessing Christ as the ideal "incarnate"? Will the study of world history arrive at the same result no matter whether it brackets the cross with the cup of Socrates or instead regards the cross as the center of world history? [...]

Ladies and gentlemen, how could it be otherwise? Man, be he a fallen sinner or an evolving product of nature, shows up in every department and every discipline as "the subject that thinks" or "the object that invites thought." Not one segment of our intellectual world can be hermetically sealed off from the others, 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 call out: "Mine!"

We declare that we too have heard this call and it was only in response to that call that we made preparations to take on this great task—a task that is really far too big for us. But we had heard the complaints of our brothers about their tragic impotence when their knowledge proved inadequate for defending their principle with the kind of force that does justice to it. We had listened to the sighs of our Christian people who in their humiliating embarrassment had learned again to pray for leaders to lead them, for pastors to feed them, for prophets to motivate them. We

realized: the honor of Christ cannot be allowed to remain like this, trampled under taunts and sneers. As surely as we loved him with the love of our soul, we had to *build* again in his name. And it mattered not if we compared our weakness to the strength of those who opposed us, nor considered the absurdity of undertaking so bold a venture: the fire kept on burning in our bones. There was one mightier than we who spurred us on. We could not remain idle. In spite of ourselves we had to go forward. That some of our brothers advised against erecting a structure of our own at this time and preferred to stay under the roof of humanism was a very painful cause of disappointment for us. But it merely reinforced that inner urge, seeing how the future of our life-principle appeared even more precarious, now that men such as these wavered.

And so our little school was born, embarrassed to the point of blushing with the very name *university*. Poor in financial resources, most frugally supplied with scholarly manpower, and more lacking than luxuriating in public sympathy. What will be its course, how long its life? Oh, the thousand questions that arise in connection with its future, they cannot crowd your skeptical minds more than they have raged in my heart! Only by keeping constantly in mind our sacred principle every time the waves crashed over us did we bravely raise our weary heads again. If this cause were not from the Mighty One of Jacob, how could it stand? For I am not exaggerating: for us to dare establish this school is to set ourselves against all that is called great; it is to challenge a universe of scholars, to row against the current of an entire century, a century of such enormous attraction.

Look down then, as freely as your conscience permits, on our persons, our strength, and our academic significance. The Calvinist credo, to consider God all and man nothing, gives you the full right to do so. One thing only I beg of you: even if you are our fiercest opponent, do not withhold your respect for the *enthusiasm* that inspires us. After all, the confession we have dusted off was once the heart-cry of our downtrodden nation; the Scriptures, before whose authority we bow, once comforted as God's infallible witness the sorrowing among your own people; the Christ, whose name we honor in this institution, was he not the inspiration, the one and only, the adored one of your own forebears? Even if we suppose, in line with your credo and in accordance with what has already been written in the stud-

ies of the scholars and echoed in the halls of the steel mills, that the Scriptures have done and Christianity is outmoded, even then I still ask: Has Christianity not been, also in your eyes, a historical phenomenon too imposing, too majestic, too sacred to come to a humiliating end and fall without honor? Or does *noblesse oblige* no longer exist? Could we allow a banner such as we carried off from Golgotha—could we allow it to fall into the hands of the enemy so long as we had not attempted our utmost, so long as one last arrow remained in our quiver, and so long as our country still had a bodyguard, however small, for the One who was crowned by Golgotha?

To that question—and with that I close, ladies and gentlemen—to that question our soul responded with a resounding: “By God, never that!” Out of that “never” our association was born. And upon that “never,” as an oath of allegiance to a higher principle, I ask for an echo—may it be an Amen— from every patriotic heart!

And herewith I declare this ceremony concluded and the Free University opened!

Thank you.





The Trinity Forum

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1 What is sphere sovereignty, as Kuyper defines it, and how does it differ from other models of authority? On what basis does he form his model? To what extent do you think it makes sense as way of delineating creation?
- 2 In what spheres do you participate? Where does the authority rest, and how are decisions made? How do the various spheres interact with each other and with the state?
- 3 How does Kuyper describe the sphere of the state and its particular role in ordered creation? How might one determine what is in the purview of the state and what is not? What do you make of Kuyper's assessment that human history is, in essence, the struggle of sphere sovereignty against state sovereignty?
- 4 Kuyper argues that where God is not acknowledged as absolute sovereign, the state will become the absolute sovereign. What do you make of this assumption? What are the consequences if it is true?
- 5 Kuyper writes that "In any successful attack on freedom the state can only be an accomplice; the chief offender is the citizen who neglects his duty. . . . In a nation that is healthy at its core and whose people continue to guard the health of the various spheres, no state can remove the proper landmarks without encountering the people's moral resistance with the help of God." What does it mean to "guard the health of the various spheres"? Is this a sufficient defense against tyranny? Why or why not?

6 Where do you see the principles of sphere sovereignty playing out well in your society? Where do you see an enmeshment or encroachment of the spheres that Kuyper would discourage?

7 In the second part of his address, Kuyper argues specifically for the need for universities to operate as sovereign spheres. What are the dangers, according to Kuyper, if either the church or the state tries to exert undue influence over the scholastic sphere? What is the difference between a university founded on the principles of a specific denomination and a university that is overly influenced by the sphere of the church?

8 Kuyper believed that there should be a Christian presence in all spheres of life, to act, as Vincent Bacote puts it, as a “leavening influence.” This is not the same thing as Christian domination over all spheres, and, indeed, Kuyper supported pluralism. What might it mean to be a leavening influence in the various spheres in which you participate? What is the line between being faithfully present and striving to dominate?

9 What is the tension between antithesis and common grace as Kuyper saw it and Bacote describes in his introduction? Where do you see this tension playing out as Christians seek ways to engage in the public square or in education? In what ways might either concept be taken too far?

10 In the introduction, Bacote states that, “for Christians, the goal is not to turn every sphere into a church but to discern what God intends within each domain.” How might you determine what God intends for the spheres in which you participate? What would it look like for you to be faithful in these intentions?

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Further Resources

Vincent Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Wipf and Stock, reissued 2010)

Jessica R. Joustra and Robert J. Joustra, editors, *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First-Century Reading of Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures* (IVP Academic, 2022)

Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Brief and Personal Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2011)

Abraham Kuyper, *On Charity and Justice*, edited by Matthew J. Tuininga and translated by Harry Van Dyke, part of the Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology Series (Lexham Press, 2022)

Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Lectures* (Cosimo Inc, 2007)

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