

The Kuyperian vision for culture: what is it, and how is it doing?

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Many evangelicals have never heard of Abraham Kuyper, but most have been influenced by him far more than they know. Kuyper was a Dutch pastor and politician who lived in the last 1800's up to the early 1900's. He was initially an enthusiastic "modernist" and was trained in modernism at seminary. Modernism is the school of thought, sometimes also called classic liberalism, which says that science, reason and logic are the hope for the future of mankind, sufficient for solving all important problems, and the old notions of religion and traditional morality must be discarded as things of the past. Kuyper, as a modernist, encountered robust, living Christian orthodoxy in his first experience as a rural pastor in Holland, and was eventually converted. He still loved science and the academic world ("science," as he would have defined it, included not just the "hard sciences" but all the reasoned endeavors of the university). He eventually propounded a very definite vision for the interaction of the church and culture, which can be called the Kuyperian vision, though of course others contributed to this view before and after Kuyper.

The Kuyperian Vision and the Puritan Vision

The main elements of the Kuyperian vision are the following:

1) *Calvinism*. The main element of Calvinism which becomes part of the Kuyperian vision is the notion of the "sovereignty of God." This basically is taken to mean that God cares about every little thing in the world; there are not large parts of the world that are of no concern to him or beyond his control. In particular, the devil is not in control and the world does not belong to him, even though evil is real.

Classically, Calvinism includes the concepts of predestination of individual conversions. But in many Kuyperian circles, this is downplayed and being Calvinist is more strongly associated with the above notion of concern for the whole world.

2) From this notion a general definition of the "*kingdom of God*" is developed. The kingdom of God, in much classical Christian thought, is equated with God's people, the totality of all God's people wherever they are. Kuyper generalized this much further. In his view, the kingdom of God is wherever there is anything beautiful, true, or honorable that glorifies God.

This is a crucial point. It not only implies that non-Christians have true knowledge and that when they do good, they are building the kingdom of God, even if they don't know it (Kuyper termed this "common grace"). That might not affect strategy that much; it would just be a redefinition. What does affect strategy is the further implication that Christians are building the kingdom of God any time they are doing good work, even if they are not

bringing people into the kingdom of God, i.e., converting hearts and making disciples. This contrasts with many Christians' notion that "ministry" is a higher calling than secular work.

3) Another key aspect of Kuyper's vision is the concept of "*world view*" ("weltanschauung"). The Christian looks at everything in the world differently, through the lens of faith. This notion influenced later scholar Cornelius van Til (US born, of Dutch descent) in the early 1900's to develop his view of "presuppositionalism." This outlook says that even given the same "facts," we can draw very different conclusions because of our different outlooks on the world. Kuyper's view can be summarized in relation to the following table in regard to science:

"philosophical world view"
"theories"
"data"

In Kuyper's view, Christians and non-Christians can agree on the basic data and even on the general theories drawn from the data, but can draw radically different conclusions at the highest level of world view. The Kuyperian sees evangelism as primarily at this level: not challenging the facts and theories of modern science, but challenging the overarching conclusions which are claimed to follow from them. So, for example, a Kuyperian would not typically challenge the facts of genetics and archaeology, nor the theory of Darwinian evolution, but would strenuously object that atheism follows from either the scientific facts or the theory of evolution.

The same pyramid can be generalized to include art:

"philosophical world view"
"style"
"technique"

A Kuyperian artist would say that a Christian can learn technique from non-Christians (e.g. how to play an instrument, or how to make a film), and also adopt non-Christian styles (e.g. rock, jazz, rap, horror films, romance novels) without accepting that these demand adherence to a non-Christian world view. Similar hierarchies can be made for other cultural endeavors such as law, politics, business, engineering, etc.

4) A last element can be called "*excellence*." The Christian honors God by doing the best possible work in whatever field of work he or she has chosen. God is not honored by shoddy work. An implication of this is that Christians do well if they become experts according to all the standards of the secular world. This typically means buying into all the world offers in the two "lower" categories in my above tables, while remaining committed to a Christian world view at the higher level.

Although many do not know the name of Kuyper, his influence is everywhere. For example, the Jubilee conference in Pittsburgh, which is one of the largest evangelical

youth conferences in the nation, is thoroughly and openly Kuyperian. Francis Schaeffer, who had huge impact in evangelical circles, had tremendous influence from Kuyper, as well as his friend Os Guinness. One could call, in some sense, the whole evangelical movement a Kuyperian movement.

The dominant contrast to the Kuyperian vision can be called the “city on a hill” vision; it is often called the “fundamentalist” view, though many have held this view who would not identify themselves as fundamentalists. It can be traced to the Puritans, among others, so I will call it the Puritan vision, as the word “fundamentalist” calls to mind a number of other associated foibles. Some key elements:

- 1) Christians need to keep a distinctive identity, different from the “world” which consists of all non-Christians. As such, they will form an attractive community which others will want to join (the “city on a hill”).
- 2) If the practices of the “world” impinge on the Christian community too much, Christians must find a way to withdraw in order to maintain their purity and distinctiveness. (“Come out from them and be separate, lest you take part in her sins,” Revelation 18:4, was an early rallying cry.)
- 3) The primary goal of the church is saving souls, bringing people into the kingdom of God and giving them the hope of heaven.
- 4) Acceptance by the world as experts or otherwise is not important, and in fact, lack of acceptance or persecution is to be expected; in general, a sense of being “anti” the dominant culture, and “subversive” to it, prevails.

My Critique of Kuyperianism

Having laid out the general tenets of the Kuyperian vision and its contrast to the Puritan vision, I now want to cast a critical eye on it. We have now had over 100 years of Kuyperian theory and practice. How is it doing? How has it worked out? I will break this into two parts, theory and practice.

Theoretical criticisms

My first criticism is the Kuyperian notion of the kingdom of God. Biblically, the kingdom of God is God’s people. God will save his people and take them to heaven. He will not lead truths and beauties to heaven. It is correct to say that all things true and beautiful *glorify* God, and God gives gifts to all people, Christian and non-Christian, to find truth and make beautiful things, but one just cannot miss in the Bible the strong theme that all the things of this world will “burn up,” that this world is “passing away” and is “vanity,” that we should set our minds on the “things above,” that we are “strangers and foreigners in this world,” etc., etc. The Kuyperian has to do backflips to downplay this strong theme in Scripture. Paul and the Apostles were filled with burning desire to see *people come to faith*. Jesus spent his time working with *people*, not painting

and doing science. The Old Testament focuses on the building of a community of people, namely, the nation of Israel. Kuyperians spend hours trying to glean the Kuyperian vision from Jesus making wine at a party, or Paul making tents, or one artist in the Old Testament, Bezalel, ignoring the many clear verses that say “do not love the world” and so on.

Fundamentalists, and the Puritans before them to some degree, have typically reacted the other way, in seeming to deny the validity of any work for the sake of truth and beauty, or pleasure and fun. Kuyperians and evangelicals are correct in saying that there is a place for finding “satisfaction in one’s work” (Ecclesiastes 2:24) and doing “whatever your hand finds to do, with all your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10, Colossians 3:23). The error of the fundamentalists is to fail to realize that there are many aspects of what it means to be fully human, which include curiosity (science), art, building, relaxation and fun. To deny these things any validity is to make us feel less human, and this has historically been a problem for fundamentalists who lose their children who see real value in such things.

But the Kuyperian error is to see such things as *ends in and of themselves*. In Kuyper’s view, a person is building the kingdom of God by being a good scientist, even if he never speaks to another person about his faith or adds a person to the community of the church. The Bible simply never talks this way. Such things are good, but are “vanity.” To focus on such things to exclusion is to empty. The whole message of the book of Ecclesiastes is that such things, pursued as ends in themselves, fail to satisfy. Only God himself satisfies. Ecclesiastes says that such things are good, and we should do them and rejoice, but they are *nothing by themselves*. This is not just the message of Ecclesiastes; there is a whole “vanity theme” running through the Bible. We are fundamentally a people made for heaven, and a people who want to bring others to heaven, and all heaven rejoices, not when a person makes a good Ming vase, but when one sinner repents and is fit for heaven.

I recently read a very Kuyperian book that tried to argue from the Bible that our cultural artifacts will actually accompany us to heaven. To say the least, the argument was contorted. Ecclesiastes says they won’t even be remembered after a few years in *this* world!

My second theoretical criticism is of Kuyper’s acceptance of all that lies below the line in the above tables. Kuyper himself seems to have been quite enamored with the successes of science and did not question the validity of any of the claims being made. My own experience in science, by contrast, tells me that people make mistakes at all three levels, not just at the top level. Sometimes these are honest mistakes, and sometimes they are errors due to pushing our world view at all costs onto the data and theories. I believe that a Christian ought to be skeptical and critical of every truth claim made by the world, and made by other Christians. We ought not to adopt *anything* wholesale from the world without careful examination of every facet.

One obvious example is evolution. Kuyperians in general are theistic evolutionists and hate the intelligent design movement. To them, rejecting any the data of evolutionists or

their theories is to make the mistake of thinking that we cannot bring in God at the highest level. But my own experience is that non-Christian world view influences not just the high levels, but everything all the way down, from data collection to theory making to broad categories of language. In general, my experience is not that strong Kuyperians cravenly capitulate to the world. Rather, my experience is that they simply do not question much of what the world teaches, because they have a very high view of the giftedness of secular scientists (common grace) and a predisposition to accept their views.

But there are other examples. One is evangelical Christian music, known as CCM (“contemporary Christian music”). Many modern Kuyperians shudder at the previous generation’s CCM, because it fails the “excellence” test and is derivative. But the people who started CCM went in with a fully Kuyperian model: learn the techniques and styles of the world, and do just as good or better. They simply “Christianized” it at the top level, with Christian words. Fundamentally, this is the same approach as a theistic evolutionist who adopts the entire materialist evolution story without question, not questioning whether all of the details are really proven, but then puts on top of it with a Christian story line. Both accept the lower levels (data/technique, style/theories) but then add words giving glory to God. The Kuyperian theistic evolutionist will say “but evolution is *true!*” and the CCM lover will say “but Barry Manilow’s style is *good!*” but to outsiders both seem to be taking something wholesale and adding a Christian veneer. They might ask, “Don’t you see *anything* in it that might be questioned?”

More recently, the younger generation of Kuyperian evangelicals has gone one step further, to remove the Christianness of the lyrics also, while still keeping a Christian identity (U2 being the best and earliest example of this.) They see this as a way of being more excellent in their craft by not being constrained to only one type of lyric. Along the same lines there are Christian metal bands with mosh pits. Some of this music is indeed well done. But it is no less derivative; in fact, it is quite a bit more sucking-up to the world; more imitation, not less. The analogy in evolutionist terms would be a scientist who says we should simply *do* Darwinian evolution, and dispense with the God-talk altogether, instead of having conferences and books on how God is glorified by evolution.

In the same way, the present generation of evangelicals is embarrassed about the politics of the older generation, the so-called Christian Right. Yet the Christian Right was begun largely by Kuyperians influenced strongly by Francis Schaeffer. The approach was the same as the above: adopt the techniques and styles of secular politics and use it for Christian ends. The younger generation now wants to go one step further by rejecting distinctively Christian goals, and adopt only goals which the world applauds, such as feeding the hungry and helping the environment. More imitation, not less.

It might be that aspects of the evolutionary story are true, and it might be that some Christian emo music is excellent, and it might be that Christian lobby groups are productive on some issues. But I think we ought to question each effort at every level, not only at the top level. We ought to march to beat of our own drummer.

Practical criticisms

Now let me turn to how Kuyperianism has worked out in practice. Much of this cannot be laid at the feet of Kuyper himself, who might shudder what what some of his followers have done.

Let's start with Kuyper's world: Holland and the Dutch church. Kuyper was the prime minister of Holland and the major scholar quoted by all the Dutch churches ever since. If ever there was a position of influence, that would be it. What is his legacy?

I know it sounds harsh, but I cannot think of a society where evangelicals have had less influence on a culture for their numbers, than Holland. In the US, Dutch immigrants mostly moved to Michigan, and all grow up immersed in Kuyperianism. Does anybody know they are there? I cannot think of a branch of the church with less influence on the culture than Dutch Christians in Michigan. Think of any other group: Amish and Mennonites, Scotch-Irish Southern Baptists, the African American church, Roman Catholics (think of the Supreme Court), New England Anglicans, you name it, the most Kuyperian of all churches are the least influential in society. Perhaps I am unfair. There are some notable stars from the Dutch church, such as philosopher A. Plantinga and former surgeon general C. Everitt Koop. But certainly it is fair to say that being more Kuyperian has not translated into more influence in society!

But let's look at specific ways in which Kuyperianism has worked out.

1) *It has led to a focus on worldly success at the cost of Christian witness.*

The pursuit of excellence has thousands of young Dutch-descent Christian students pursuing Ph.D.'s or business success. In the broader evangelical world, Christians want to be the next Christian supermodel (a jarring Kuyperian vision: Carrie Prejean of California walking in a thong bikini in a beauty contest, talking of her Christian world view), the next Christian rock star, the next Christian sports star, etc.

To get that kind of success, you simply must play by the world's rules. You cannot be Eric Liddell and refuse to play sports on Sunday. You cannot refuse to wear a thong bikini. You cannot be an actor who refuses to say the f-word. You cannot be a biologist who questions any aspect of evolution. You cannot say the emperor has no clothes in the modern art world when a man sells canned excrement and calls it art. You can't openly question the morality of homosexual acts or abortion.

Now, it may be that you are convinced the Fourth Commandment is not for today, and you may be convinced that there is nothing wrong with showing your body nearly nude, and you may be convinced that saying the f-word is authentic representation, and you may be convinced life originated through random processes. But what I have seen is many people who aren't really thinking these things through at all. Having been in evangelical circles for three decades, I have heard the phrase "You can be a Christian and

still ____” over and over. There is a mindset in evangelicalism that doesn’t think carefully about issues and ethics, but takes for granted that what is celebrated by the world must be good. Any opposition is regarded as “legalistic.” There is, in fact, a celebration of how much freedom we have as evangelicals to do this or that thing which would have shocked an earlier generation.

Part of that is healthy. We should not blindly accept traditions of conservative Christians any more than we should blindly accept the world’s values. We do not want to be reactionary against everything new that the world presents, whether a scientific theory, a new music form, or a new type of communication technology. But what I see as an intrinsic problem in the Kuyperian vision is the general concept of accepting all the tools of the trade, and only at the end blessing the whole structure with Christian presuppositions and language.

I am not saying that no one should go into high-profile fields. Far from it: I would like to see even more there. But I reject the idea that just by being there, and being successful, you are building the kingdom of God. In general, the reaction of the world to Christian superstars is mild bemusement, to accept the excellence of the person’s work, but not to ponder too much about their Christian beliefs. It may be that Christians in these roles are, in fact, bringing others to faith. But if they are, it is because they are able to form good relationships at a personal level, and they have integrity in their work that is consistent with their message. The fact of their being a model, or scientist, or sports star, is not itself what brings people to the Christian world view. For many people, the blood, sweat, tears, and compromises necessary to get to that fifteen minutes of fame is not worth the fleeting impact of that fame. Their relationships actually suffer, they never tell anyone of their faith, and they do work they aren’t proud of, just to stay in the game.

2) It has led to playing catchup and derivative work rather than distinctively original Christian work.

As mentioned above, today’s generation is embarrassed of yesterday’s CCM and right wing politics, even though these came out of a similar Kuyperian mindset, with less sophistication. It is a general rule: the more you play by the rules of one generation, the more dated you will appear to the next. In my mind, anything that starts out with “You can be a Christian and still ____” is intrinsically derivative. (Don’t you think that the next generation will mock Christian tattoos?)

What Christian music has had a lasting impact and is presently respected in the world? Folk Gospel music from the mid-American prairies, black Gospel, classical church organ music, and Scotch-Irish mountain music. All done by people who had no concept of Kuyperian success. They were simply doing what they liked. CCM, by contrast, is self-consciously adopting the best styles of the culture, and will mostly disappear. “Adopting the best styles of the culture” is code language for “derivative,” in art.

Before there was CCM, there was independent-label Christian music, in the 70’s and 80’s. If you listen to the best of these artists, such as Keith Green, Second Chapter of

Acts, and Rich Mullins, they can't be categorized. They had wildly confrontational words that couldn't get played on Christian radio today, and they were artistically creative, not formulaic. It is not exactly rock, it is not exactly Gospel, it is just joyful and well done. In each case they were not even trying to get major label fame.

The same criticism comes to me when I see Christians writing articles celebrating how junk DNA is part of God's plan for evolution, and we should not reject the idea of junk left over from evolution, right around the time when the world is moving on to a view that everything in the human body actually is fine tuned for a purpose, and all that junk DNA is actually not junk, after all. It would be one thing if we just didn't have enough brilliant Christian scientists who could really question the existing paradigms. But we do have lots of brilliant Christian scientists. However, the larger part of them disdain the idea of questioning paradigms, as misguided "fundamentalism." In other words, Kuyperian Christians are actually *less* likely to question paradigms than non-Christians, because they are concerned about being labeled as a fundamentalist, while the talented non-Christian has no such fears.

Andy Crouch has written about the different stages of Christian interaction with the secular world, from rejection/conflict, to criticism but lack of participation, to wholehearted embracement. This latter stage is no better or more original than the earlier stages. What we need is creativity of our own, on our own terms. To do that, we need to question not only the world view at the top level, but every element of what the world presents us.

3) *It has led to less evangelism and less conversion.*

While many justly criticize the fundamentalist churches for various errors, let us not forget some of their accomplishments. They sent out armies of missionaries around the world and brought large parts of Africa and Asia to faith in Christ. It was not Kuyperians, by and large, who were leading that charge. (A case can even be made that Japan was adversely affected by Kuyperians who brought teaching of evolution to the first university in Japan, in the 1800's.) Millions of people in the US and around the world were affected by evangelists like Billy Graham operating fully within an evangelism-first mentality. On the other hand, when the evangelical church in the 1980's turned to an agenda of transforming the culture first and foremost, through politics, science, music, etc., they did not transform the culture (though it could be argued that a worse slide was held back) and fewer people came into the church. There is no question that evangelicals have done much less evangelism than previous generations, and most church growth has come from shuffling Christians from one church to another. Instead, we are told that watching TV, surfing the internet, and entertaining ourselves all the time is "getting in tune with the culture." We are constantly preparing ourselves to talk the language of the non-Christian, and hardly ever actually talking to them.

4) *It doesn't take the blessing of persecution seriously.*

The Bible is absolutely full of statements about being willing to be persecuted rather than

compromise. That is not the language of modern Kuyperian evangelicals. They generalize those statements to apply to sickness, relational distress, or perhaps to persecuted Christians overseas. To actually be mocked for being a Christian is to be avoided.

At the most recent Jubilee conference in Pittsburgh, Gabe Lyons, a marketing expert, presented a plenary talk on focus group studies he had done on the Christian “brand.” One finding was that non-Christians felt that Christians were concerned too much about heaven. His recommendation: we should talk less about heaven, and more about the world. Another finding was that Christians were viewed as too confrontational about abortion and homosexuality. His recommendation: we should engage less in confrontation on moral issues and work more on popular issues like feeding the hungry and the environment. If we do these things, then our marketing image will improve, all men will speak well of us, and there will be revival. How far from Jesus’s words: “woe to you when all men speak well of you!”

We should not have a goal to get people to speak badly about us, a so-called “martyr complex.” But if we honestly think that the way of revival is to have all men speak well of us, we are seriously misguided. Think of times in the past when Christians made a deep impact on society. They were confrontational (e.g., Luther, Knox, Wilberforce, M.L. King), and mocked by many people as idiots. Yet like the Pharisees, we honor these prophets of the past but reject them in our own generation. We seem to think that the only proper type of persecution is when the persecutors openly admit to being evil. But that never happens. Persecution happens when Christians lose the public relations war, when they have bad “brand identity,” and are seen as fools. Our view of them only changes after the battle is over.

In the early 1800’s, Charles Simeon preached so strongly at Cambridge University in England that students threw tomatoes at him while he was in the pulpit. Yet he led a movement that sent out thousands of missionaries and brought revival to hundreds of parishes in the United Kingdom. God uses persecution very often. People need to see that there is a difference. When we play exactly by the world’s rules, we don’t come across as presenting anything different.

It is striking that the impact of Carrie Prejean, the thong-wearing Christian Miss California contestant, came not from her winning the beauty contest, but from her losing it, when she was pressed to the wall to affirm homosexual marriage, and she refused. It was her fundamentalist roots that came out and led her to be “anti.” Had she not been asked that question, or had she waffled on it, she would have been just another body in the daily parade of women’s bodies in the media.

A Balanced View?

I have been fairly hard on the Kuyperian vision. I also am not advocating the fundamentalist/Puritan model. So what is the alternative? Here are several principles for a different way:

1) *Geographically near to the non-Christian, not isolated.*

One of the key mistakes of the early “city on a hill” Christians was that they geographically isolated themselves. For various reasons, they left the cities and set up small communities in rural areas. Sometimes this was deliberate, a rejection of cities as evil, and sometimes it was purely pragmatic, a way of supporting themselves by farming. Over time, they became culturally distant from the centers of society. Even in cities and suburbs, Christians have sometimes ghettoized themselves by pulling back from interaction with non-Christians.

In recent decades there has been increased awareness among evangelicals that we need to live near and rub shoulders with non-Christians. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we become just like them. But we need to speak their language.

Even here, we can not be too simplistic. There is some value in distinctive, isolated communities. The monks of the middle ages and tightly knit Jewish communities are recognized to have produced great art and scholarship. Shakers and Amish have produced great craftsmanship. But in general, the church needs to be missional, and that means going where the people are, not waiting for them to come to you.

2) *People and community oriented.*

Success in worldly pursuits and being part of a strong community of believers are not mutually exclusive, but we need to keep in mind that sometimes they do conflict, and prioritize relationships and community over success. The Kuyperian says that an artist going good art is building the kingdom of God, but an artist who is a wreck emotionally and cut off from Christian fellowship is not a healthy part of the kingdom of God even if he produces good art. Can we agree that it would be better for the kingdom of God if he did less art and connected more with people? I’m not sure all Kuyperians would agree.

We should be about the business of creating communities of Christians, even as we live in the cities and are not geographically or culturally isolated. These communities need to have a strong sense of identity, even while not being ghettos.

Along with this is not losing sight of heaven. Many evangelicals have criticized fundamentalists for “fire escape” theology, of viewing life as nothing more than pulling people from the fire to get ready for heaven. That is true: building the church is more than just evangelism. But let us not forget the importance of evangelism. There really is a heaven, and really are people who may not go there. We will not take cultural artifacts to heaven, we will take people there.

Historically, the times of greatest revival and impact on culture by Christians came at times when people were greatly concerned about, and thought a lot about, heaven. I would argue that being heavenly-minded leads to greater impact on culture than worldly-mindedness. People who know they are going to heaven have no fear; they can do bold

things, including speaking truth to power, without fear of losing their small holdings in this world. People who know they belong to a vast kingdom of people going to heaven have a sense of self confidence, instead of feeling like a mouse running around someone else's house just trying to stay out of trouble.

The proper criticism of fire-escape theology is that it focuses too little on heaven, not too much. It gives you a get-out-of-hell card and then turns its attention elsewhere. True Christianity dwells on the hope of heaven every day, as a way of giving glory and thankfulness to God. That focus on the glories of God then leads us to a full-life experience of walking with God, which affects everything we do, and makes us want to share that joy with other people.

3) *Kingdom strategy.*

All Christians are not called to work in church ministry, but all of our work should be evaluated through the lens of how it impacts people in the kingdom of God. Perhaps we want to know the truth in science so that we can better explain to others what is true and what is not, to prevent them from being deceived. Perhaps we want to make truly great art, for the sake of sharing with others the deep feelings we have, inexpressible in mere logical propositions and statements.

People who built cathedrals in the middle ages were not just doing them for their own sake. They were building community centers that would last thousands of years. The Kuyperian hero, Bezalel, decorated the tent of worship for the community. By contrast, many artists today are engaged in a conversation only with other artists, hoping to make a name for themselves.

Christians should engage in all the activities of culture— science, art, politics, etc.— but need to see these in the context of a larger kingdom strategy. They are not ends in themselves. That means that I personally may need to step away from some such activity if it leads me to compromise or away from community, or if I have a great opportunity to minister to people in another way. Any good thing becomes an idol competing for God if I say that I must have it at all costs, and that includes a career.

Henry Martyn was a brilliant scholar (chief mathematics wrangler at Cambridge University) in the early 1800's, who came under the influence of Charles Simeon. He ended up turning down a professorship at Cambridge and becoming a missionary. He died within the decade, but before then he translated the New Testament into both Hindi and Arabic. He reasoned that his influence for the kingdom of God would be greater in that part of the world than in England. I bless Henry Martyn, and wish we had more people like him. Maybe he would have been a great scientist or mathematician. But caring about people drove him away from it. Would a Kuyperian have recommended that?

4) An “Anti” or “subversive” outlook.

This is probably my most controversial proposal. I think of past successes of groups that engaged the culture and transformed it, or who are presently engaging it successfully. These include the communists, the Nazis, and Islamicists. Earlier there were the Reformers, the modernists, and the abolitionists, and before them, the monks who set up universities and the monks who were the first missionaries to northern Europe. In each case, there was a) a strong sense of community, b) a strong sense of working together on strategy to advance their common cause, and c) a strong sense of wanting to change things, to create something new, not just succeed in the existing system. This last is what I call an “anti” or “subversive” outlook.

One might call this “infiltration.” Strategists work in the existing systems, but they keep a sense of separate identity. They have a long-term view that if they don’t succeed in changing things right away, it is okay. They work by persuading others one person at a time. They strive to be excellent, not as an end in itself, but as part of the larger cause.

Does being subversive or having an “agenda” lead to bad work? Not necessarily. Steinbeck was a communist, who wanted to advance the communist cause with all his books. But *Grapes of Wrath* is a tremendous book. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is also a great book. So are those by C.S. Lewis. A good message can’t save a bad work (good intentions can’t save bad science in the anti-evolution movement either) but a message does not automatically make a work bad.

Without a sense of being “anti” the prevailing culture to some degree, Christians end up losing their distinctiveness and their originality. They are continually in the role of being apologists to the church for the latest thing the culture is doing or thinking, rather than ones who push the edge of the culture themselves.

For subversives to succeed, they usually need to be better qualified than others. Sometimes they also need to keep some of their views to themselves for a while. But if they are good enough, they can get away with being open about their views, because they are persuasive and do good work. Those who cannot be that good probably should not be in the role of infiltrator. Those who are less qualified but go into the top circles of competition will just end up as followers of the crowd, or worse, confirming bad stereotypes. Not every Christian is called to go into high-profile jobs in academia, the media, etc.

The different subversive groups listed above did not and do not all have good goals; we would say many led to evils in the world, even if they did not or do not see it that way. But their evil goals do not make the concept of being subversive intrinsically evil. As Christians, we believe that the world is not what it should be, and that there is a higher standard to which it should and can conform. That is something we hold in common with all these subversive groups. But our goal is not just for societal change. We believe not just in redeeming “cultures” but in saving real people. Of all people, we should be thinking strategically about how to get others to see the need for something different, not

just succeed at more of the same culture.

5) *Awareness, with skepticism.*

Finally, just a few words on what Christian endeavors in secular occupations might look like. Some people might take this essay as a call for a return to fundamentalism, which might look either like a) working just to make money to spend on evangelism and missions, or b) putting a Christian message into every part of our work. There is nothing wrong with either of those, necessarily. Work for money is completely honorable, even if our heart is not in it—only those who have grown up in the western world in the last fifty years have had the option, and feel the need, to find work that exactly suits their gifts. Also, putting explicit messages into our work might or not be good—who can criticize Handel's *Messiah*, or *Pilgrim's Progress*? But I am not advocating either of these options in general.

I have already mentioned some aspects of doing work in a secular area. First, pick a place to do it that puts you near non-Christians. Second, pick a place to do it where you can be part of a healthy Christian community. Third, do it in such a way that does not require you to compromise or hide your Christian belief. *Be* a Christian. Fourth, think strategically about how your work can help people, can advance the work of the church, and can subvert anti-Christian world views.

It also follows, in my perspective, to be well aware of what is going on in the world, whether in science or art or other fields, but to also be skeptical of every aspect, to not take anything for granted. Don't try to be just like the world, at any level. Be well aware of what is out there, and use some, none, or all, as you see fit, if it is good and noble and true. Know that non-Christians do have many gifts, but also know that world view affects not just what we *say* about our work, but also can affect what we actually do, at every level. To question, to reject, something the world loves is not to be a fundamentalist. If we live in fear of being called a fundamentalist, or of being called a right-winger, we are still marching to the tune of someone else.

We should also be skeptical of what other Christians tell us. Just because art has a Christian label doesn't mean it is good art, and just because science is done in the name of creationism (or theistic evolution) doesn't mean it is good science.

One of the main things that people will say who have made it to the top of any field, is that there are no shortcuts. Good work requires years of training and dedication. Innovation may only come at the end of a long process of learning, if then. Christians should have the patience and dedication to be willing to not take shortcuts. But during that long process, we need to not just imbibe everything, but to ask at every stage what is true and good and noble, and what ought to be rejected. We cannot wait until the very end before we think critically, and we cannot think that just by getting to the top we will somehow automatically be building the kingdom of God.