

Editorial *Business in the Light of Grace*

Look at the cover of this journal issue. Do you see features that resonate with twenty-first century business? This painting from the 1600s illustrates active lives of buying and selling.¹ Yet observe the light that washes across the canvas to illumine the marketplace darkness.

Then and now economic exchange meets human needs and shapes community flourishing. Almost four hundred years after this painting's creation our business exchanges do not look like this one. Physical presence may be immaterial to our transactions as we buy apps, information, ideas, and style as well as food. How often now are women, men, children, and animals together in a common economic space? Our organization of producers and sellers is more varied. Financial markets involve global capital flows, not just local currencies. Business in this century is different. Yet do we still not seek light to improve transparency, enable what we construct, and add beauty to business?

Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, believed that such light arises from God's common grace. He based this perspective on God's covenant with Noah after the flood, about which he observed that "many people ... admire the rainbow without being aware of the underlying covenant. ... We must begin with placing the lofty significance of that Noahic covenant in more radiant light once again."² Then, building on the ideas of other theologians, including John Calvin, Kuyper thoughtfully distinguished common grace for creation from the saving grace to which Christians respond.³ Kuyper wrote,

The issue of “common grace” comes down to discerning clearly that we are dealing here with an *act of God*. An act of God not for the benefit of those eight persons living at that time, but with an *act of God* that extends to the entire earth and the entire human race, not in a saving but in a preserving sense, of course. The fact that the Lord God has performed such an act of *preserving* grace that extends to *all* of our human life comes to no clearer expression than with the Noahic covenant. Everyone senses and perceives that here a promise is being given for the benefit of the *whole* world, and people discern immediately that what was promised contained rescue and preservation not for eternity but for this *temporal* life.⁴

Kuyper lived these convictions about grace as a minister, journalist, educator, political leader, and theologian. He influenced leaders and followers in churches, schools, towns, and political parties across the Netherlands and its surrounding countries; portions of his thinking then spread within US and Canadian Presbyterian and Reformed circles.⁵ The attraction was Kuyper’s capacity to articulate a grounded biblical theology that connected Christian faith to both everyday life and its related social institutions. Kuyper was deeply committed to a public pluralism that creates common spaces for people of multiple faith traditions, whether Christian or otherwise, to live and work together. Gradually, his broad vision for biblical faith, God’s grace, and pluralism spread to other continents. Now there are pockets of those who embrace Kuyper’s ideas in Africa, Asia, Australia, and Latin America.

Nevertheless, the connections from Kuyper’s theology to business needed to expand. In the twentieth century only a few of his works were available in the English language. While Kuyper wrote full treatises to weave Christian faith with education, science, politics, and the arts, he pondered economic life in commentary interspersed here and there. Additionally, the market capitalism of his time differs substantially from that of the twenty-first century. When Kuyper was writing, European labor unions were still finding their footing as the industrial age matured. Economics was a very young field of study. It provided government with concepts and with limited technical aid for business policy. Economists such as Keynes and Friedman had not contributed their research. In Kuyper’s times, business was an entrepreneurial endeavor for certain social classes. Some business owners were powerful, though managed corporations employing thousands of global people were not a major force. Kuyper lived and wrote just as the communist economic experiment was rising.

This issue of the *Journal of Markets & Morality* highlights the theme of Abraham Kuyper’s theology of common grace, linking its Christian foundations

more deeply to business life and pulling its theological power more fully into twenty-first-century business applications.

The time is now ripe to emphasize Abraham Kuyper's theological voice. For several years, the Abraham Kuyper Translation Society, with the vision and support of economist Rimmer de Vries, has worked diligently to translate Kuyper's seminal theological works from Dutch into English. Many of his central writings will be translated and published by early 2016. To highlight the 2013–2014 English publication of the first volume of Kuyper's theological commentary on common grace,⁶ the Calvin College Business Department organized an October 2014 symposium, which was co-sponsored by the Acton Institute. Faculty, business practitioners, and students gathered to think about the meaning of Kuyper's common grace theology for twenty-first-century business. Over an exceptional day of discourse, presentations and panels were woven into a robust discussion about the light of faith for business when that life is shared together by Christians and those who follow other paths. Leaders from banking, manufacturing, natural resources, film, food, and floral industries, among others, joined with business educators to shape the current intertwining of common grace and business.

The symposium was framed around three themes that emerge from Kuyper's writings about common grace. Its planners described these as the protective, constructive, and imaginative functions of common grace. Through such grace, God protects remnants and echoes of his good created order as gifts for all people despite continuing human perversity. God designs the expectation and possibility that together humans will construct institutions to respond to needs and support social order. God provides continuity between the values and virtues of all people so that Christians as well as those in other faith traditions can work together imaginatively.

The article contributions to this journal issue originated in that October 2014 symposium. Peter Heslam's opening article provides some of Kuyper's less-known commentary about business life. Then eight articles, all authored by Christian business educators, articulate the implications of Kuyper's common grace theology for business ethics, strategic planning, global debt markets, entrepreneurship, market pricing, the accounting profession, operations management, and human resource frameworks. Richard Mouw's closing article enjoins us to bring robust Christian faith to the business spaces where God's light can readily flood. (A separate review essay unrelated to the symposium also appears as part of the journal's regular publication schedule.) Finally, integrated into the journal's book review section are four reviews of recent books about faith and business that highlight resources to deepen this intersection of faith and business.

These contributions pose many matters for further deliberation about a closer intertwining of Kuyper's big vision for God's kingdom with business choices. We will not all agree, but that is not the point. The goal is to enrich the quality and depth of our thinking and practices as we connect God's provision of common grace to our particular business activities and institutions to enable Christian influence in business decisions.

Sealed with the rainbow, God's promise is that divine light could and would shine on our marketplaces. Abraham Kuyper articulated a common grace theology for Christians who shape business that reflects the prism on the other side of that rainbow.

—Shirley J. Roels, PhD

Notes

1. The painting entitled *Old Fish Market on the Dam* was painted circa 1650 by Emanuel de Witte.
2. Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: Noah–Adam*, vol. 1, part 1, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, ed. Jordan J. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill (Grand Rapids: CLP Academic, 2013), 15.
3. Kuyper actively engaged Roman Catholics in the Netherlands. Pope Leo XIII, author of *Rerum Novarum*, the 1891 Roman Catholic encyclical about the rights and duties of capital and labor, was Kuyper's contemporary. Kuyper's 1891 book *The Problem of Poverty* includes some themes and content about Christian foundations for economic systems that parallel *Rerum Novarum*. See Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2011).
4. Kuyper, *Common Grace: Noah–Adam*, 120.
5. For deeper knowledge of Abraham Kuyper's life and times, see James D. Bratt's biography entitled *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).
6. Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace*, vol. 1 in 3 parts, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, ed. Jordan J. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill (Grand Rapids: CLP Academic, 2013–2014).