

## Getting the Trophies Ready: Serving God in the Business World

*Richard J. Mouw*  
*Professor of Faith and Public Life*  
*Fuller Theological Seminary*

Too often today, antagonisms prevail between academics and business professionals. This article looks to the Reformed Christian social thought of Abraham Kuyper to help bridge this gap, especially for those who find themselves living between these poles as professors of business, caught between the academy's generally left-leaning, ivory-tower scorn for business on the one hand and the practical realities of businesspersons' struggling for success in their enterprises on the other. What Kuyper offers, and what this article illustrates, is a paradigm for understanding the spiritual vocation of business as a sovereign sphere of common grace. A note of caution is in order regarding the abuse of this autonomy through sin in Kuyper's understanding of the antithesis. Then Kuyper adds a coherent delineation of the rightful role of government in the business world by highlighting its threefold right and duty: first, to adjudicate disputes among spheres; second, to defend the weak against the strong within each sphere; and third, to exercise the coercive power necessary to guarantee that citizens do their part, personally and financially, in maintaining the unity of the state. The article concludes with a consideration of the various trophies faithful Christians will one day lay at the feet of Jesus as evidence of their stewardship over the unique callings they have been given, whether evangelism, scholarship, business, or otherwise.

Recently I spent a week in the ancient Chinese city of Xi'an, where I gave lectures to one hundred and twenty pastors from the Western and Midwestern regions of mainland China and addressed the student body and faculty at the Shaanxi Bible School. My son was with me, and he sat patiently through about ten hours of my standing before audiences, able to understand only half of what was going on, as my lectures were being translated into Mandarin.

Toward the end of our stay, I was typing at my laptop in our hotel room, and my son asked me what I was doing. I told him that I was working on my lecture for a conference dealing with business and common grace. He asked, “Are they going to provide a translator for that talk too?”

We both laughed, but, after I thought about it a bit, I realized it was not quite as funny as he intended it. This gathering of folks at Calvin College brought together persons from the academy, the business world, and the church—three arenas of cultural interaction. The three spheres of service have their own defining activities, promoting different goals in accordance with their unique patterns of authority; this means that they do each have their own special language.

Most of the time, most of us make the linguistic transitions in our daily lives quite smoothly. We work alongside our colleagues, stop at the grocery store to make a purchase, go home to a family meal, and then relax in front of our TV sets as spectators in the world of athletics. In all of that, we encounter different languages. How we talk at the workplace differs from our meal table conversations, and the vocabulary of the commentators on ESPN is yet another pattern of speech. We typically navigate all of that with no awareness that we have successfully made our way through a variety of Kuyperian spheres.

Sometimes, though, the boundaries between spheres are crossed only with great linguistic difficulty. This has certainly been true often in encounters among scholars in the academy and practitioners in the business world. As an academic who has often done some traveling between those two spheres, I can testify to the fact that communication between inhabitants of the two spheres has not always been easy. Sometimes it is simply a problem of understanding each other’s language, but frequently the difficulties are rooted in deeper problems.

I can testify, wearing my academic hat, that we often have had difficulty talking to and about business practitioners because of a suspicion about what we think is really going on in the marketplace. Sometimes the suspicion has to do with a discomfort in the presence of wealth. Many of us have started our academic careers with significant financial debt, and we see ourselves as awkward financial managers. Sometimes the suspicion is more ideological in nature: To be trained in the academy is often to hear quite a bit of anticapitalist rhetoric, embodied in oversimplifications of what competition and profit-making are all about. Understandably, then, leaders in the business community often avoid any kind of dialogue about business practices with the “left wing” intellectuals who inhabit their “ivory towers.”

Where those antagonisms prevail, it can be tough on the people who teach business in colleges and universities. Either they occupy some kind of uncomfortable middle space, or they are forced to move in one or the other polarized direction.

To be sure, all of that is much too quick, lacking the important qualifications and nuances. But I say it to express my deep gratitude for what has happened in our present discussions. To the degree that my sketch accurately describes how things often go in attempting to cross the boundaries between the academic and the business spheres, this conference on common grace and business has been a marvelous exception to what has often been the rule. I commend the Calvin Business Department and the Acton Institute for making this exciting conversation happen.

There has been much in our presentations and dialogues about how best to work in engaging in this complex task together, and my assignment is not to add more content to what we have already received but to tie things together by reflecting a bit on what we have witnessed here, as well as to encourage us all to keep at the important task of kingdom witness in these important areas of human interaction.

Some of the most productive conversations I have had on the subject of common grace were with Bob Lane during his ten-year stint as the CEO of the John Deere company. Bob got in touch with me shortly after he read my book on common grace. Several times I traveled at his invitation to the John Deere headquarters in Moline, Illinois, for some engaging theological discussion about the relevance of Kuyperian thought to the selling of tractors, combines, and other farm equipment. Bob had found in the theology of common grace a helpful fleshing out of a key insight he had learned in Arthur Holmes' philosophy class at Wheaton College—the profound claim that Holmes also chose as the title for one of his books: “All truth is God's truth.”

As the CEO of a large international company, Bob worked with a team of key managers who represented a wide variety of religious and worldview perspectives: Muslims, Hindus, Confucians, Christians, Jews, persons who claimed no religious faith at all, and many others. The theology of common grace allowed Bob to see this not simply as a diversity to be tolerated but as a positive blessing from the Lord. If that sounds a bit too optimistic to some of our theological ears, it is important to be reminded of John Calvin's own perspective on these matters.

Many of you know that the doctrine of common grace has been much debated in the world of Dutch Calvinism. Those of us who defend the doctrine insist on going back to Calvin himself as the source of this important teaching. Even though the great Reformer had established himself as a defender of the doctrine of the “total depravity” of fallen humanity, he managed to express appreciation on many occasions for the contributions of non-Christian thinkers. Before his evangelical conversion, Calvin had studied law, and he never lost his respect for the ideas he had gleaned from the writings of various Greek and Roman writers,

especially Seneca. In his *Institutes*, Calvin observed that there is an “admirable light of truth shining” in the thoughts of pagan thinkers. This means, he said, that “the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness,” can still be “clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” Indeed, he insisted, to refuse to accept the truth produced by such minds is “to dishonor the Spirit of God.”<sup>21</sup> For a punch line that we defenders of common grace especially like to quote, Calvin says that there is “a universal apprehension of reason and understanding [that] is by nature implanted in men,” and when we see this ability to understand important things correctly at work in unbelievers, we should celebrate this as a “peculiar grace of God.”<sup>22</sup>

This goes well beyond the kinds of things that are usually associated with the idea of common grace: things like the fact that God sends rain to nurture the crops of both believing and unbelieving farmers, and that even very wicked governments often manage to do some things that promote human flourishing. All of that can be explained simply by the work of divine providence—God’s use of bent sticks to draw a few straight lines.

Calvin sees this common grace operating inside unbelievers. They actually think some correct thoughts and are—at least in some areas of human inquiry—lovers of truth. Kuyper nails down this idea of the inside dimensions of common grace in this wonderful passage: In addition to the purely external operations, he says, common grace is at work “wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life.”<sup>23</sup>

In the business world, then, we need to recognize that we can discover insights into truth, stewardship, promotion of human good, healthy employee practices, and the like from those who do not name the name of Jesus Christ. Kuyper’s important emphasis is also affirmed by his younger colleague Herman Bavinck, who wrote that because of common grace there is “[s]ometimes a remarkable sagacity ... given to [unbelievers] whereby they are not only able to learn certain things, but also to make important inventions and discoveries, and to put these to practical use in life.”<sup>24</sup>

That wonderful insistence on the reality of common grace, as a favorable disposition of God toward all human beings, is a blessing received from the Reformed tradition—although we can also find variations on our common grace theology in other theological traditions as well. For those of us who endorse the Reformed doctrine of common grace, however, it is important to keep reminding ourselves that it is not enough to approach the kinds of issues we have been

wrestling with here as if we are the only ones who have access to the truth about the practical concerns and challenges of the human condition.

One obvious necessary supplement to common grace thinking for Kuyper was his doctrine of sphere sovereignty. Peter Heslam has rightly pointed out to us in his fine presentation that Kuyper said very little about business in particular. The one key opportunity that Kuyper had to get into these issues was in the major address that he delivered to a Christian Social Congress in 1891. Speaking to an audience whose daily callings were in the areas of labor and management, Kuyper chose to speak fervently about God's concern for the poor, and here he did say some profoundly important things that we all need to hear clearly from him. While he warned against romanticizing poverty, because rich and poor alike are sinners who need the correcting power of saving grace in their lives, he quickly went on to observe that the Bible, "when it corrects the poor, does so much more tenderly and gently; and in contrast, when it calls the rich to account, it uses much harsher words."<sup>5</sup> Then he spoke eloquently about the Savior's compassion for the poor.

That is an important call to obedience on our part. But the underlying concern here in Kuyper's thought is his conviction that God's people must be committed to promoting human flourishing. This means that we must take the variety of spheres that were built into God's design for his creation seriously. In developing this notion, Kuyper comes closest to pointing to the important place of business in this diversity of cultural spheres in his comments about the need to keep the state in its proper place.

Kuyper did not develop a full-blown theology of the proper limits of government authority. He was more interested in viewing the role of government against the larger tapestry of human interaction than he was in providing a detailed theory of the proper functions of government.

The need to keep government in its proper place is, however, a topic that Kuyper addressed with considerable passion in his Stone Lecture on politics. The creation order, he argued, displays a rich variety of societal spheres. Because all of these spheres have the same origin in "the divine mandate," political authority must respect the fact that each of the other spheres has its own integrity. "Neither the life of science nor of art, nor of agriculture, nor of industry, nor of commerce, nor of navigation, nor of the family, nor of human relationship may be coerced to suit itself to the grace of government," says Kuyper. "The State may never become an octopus, which stifles the whole of life." Then, abruptly switching metaphors, he continues: Political government "must occupy its own place, on its own root, among all the other trees of the forest, and thus it has to

honor and maintain every form of life which grows independently in its own sacred autonomy.”<sup>6</sup>

Kuyper then goes on to offer some clarifications, asking, “Does this mean that the government has no right whatever of interference in these autonomous spheres of life?” His answer is: “Not at all.” Government, he explains, has a “threefold right and duty”: first, to adjudicate disputes among spheres, “compel[ling] mutual regard for the boundary-lines of each”; second, to defend the weak against the strong within each sphere; third, to exercise the coercive power necessary to guarantee that citizens “bear personal and financial burdens for the maintenance of the natural unity of the State.”<sup>7</sup>

There are important implications in those three clarifying comments for our understanding of business life. Kuyper wants the state to see to it that, for example, the proper functions of business activities are not squeezed out by too much control from government. The state must allow the sphere of business to “do its thing.” Second, the state does have an obligation to see to it that in the realm of business the strong do not keep the weak from flourishing. That deserves much more reflection on our part. Third, the business sphere, like all the others, must surely look to the larger flourishing of society—each sphere has its contribution to make to what he describes as “the natural unity of the State.” Some kind of taxation for the larger human good—roads, “trans-spherical” services, and the like—is a duty for all of us. This fits nicely with the mandate that the prophet Jeremiah delivered from the Lord to the exiled people in the wicked city of Babylon: “Seek the welfare”—the shalom, the human flourishing—“of the place that I have put you in exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom” (Jer. 29:7, my translation).

Given the relative inattention given to business in particular in the Kuyperian movement, let me emphasize in a very special way what I see as the importance in which God himself views the business enterprise. As we all know, when human beings arrive on the scene in Genesis 1, the Creator tells them to “have dominion” over that which the Lord has already put in place. I do not think it is stretching the Genesis narrative to understand that mandate in this way: God has been enjoying what he has already created—plants, animals, rivers, mountains—and when he fashions human beings in his own image he wants to be clear about the fact that he wants human beings to take care of that nonhuman creation, with an awareness that God is very fond of what he is placing under human management.

There is, then, a “managerial” dimension to what we have always referred to in the Kuyperian tradition as “the cultural mandate.” Business activities are an important means for fulfilling this mandate, but I think it is appropriate also to say that in our properly managing the affairs of the creation, there is a profound

sense in which we are not only pleasing God but that we are also engaging in godlike activities.

I once met an old friend, a theologian, whom I had not seen for some time. As is typical among scholars, I asked him, “What are you working on these days?” His answer was that he was exploring the idea of hospitality—a notion that, as Christine Pohl points out in her marvelous book on the subject,<sup>8</sup> features the notion of “making room,” of creating room in our world of relationships for people we are not simply obligated to host. Then my friend made the provocative suggestion that creating the world was itself the first act of hospitality. God is God and does not need us in order to be God. God made space for a creation and then made space for beings like us—bearers of the divine image who can be in fellowship with him.

I find that idea of a creational act of hospitality to be an inspiring one, and, of course, that hospitality shows up in an even more profound way at the Cross of Calvary where God made room for rebels like us to enter into a renewed relationship with him through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

Here is what I think is a closely connected point to all of that. Showing hospitality requires risks, and in some mysterious sense—that Calvinists like myself need to think more about—God was making himself open to the vulnerability that we experience in our own risk-taking when he decided to create human persons with the real freedom to rebel against his sovereign will.

In another related observation, I was talking to a friend who engages in his work in venture capitalism. “What are you occupied with these days?” I asked. He told me that a few years before he had bought a phone company that was doing badly, but it had become quite profitable. “So,” he said, “I think I’m going to sell it and take on another challenge.”

This person was pointing to a key attribute of the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs are not only risk takers but they are also problem solvers. They exercise the freedom of creating new solutions.

In all of that, I see them as engaging in a godly (in the sense of a godlike) activity. However we spell out our understanding of God’s predestining, fore-knowing, and the like, when creating the likes of us God was engaged in a kind of entrepreneurial project. We often see the artist who engages in crafting new things as being godlike in a profound sense. I think the same can be said for the creativity that is on display in the broad range of business activities. In looking down on our business activities when they are engaged in a way that honors God’s creating purposes, here, too, we can say with the Psalmist: “The Lord rejoices in all his works.”

Of course, and this, too, must be emphasized, there is much that actually happens in the world of economic activity in which the Lord does not rejoice. God hates injustice and corrupt practices, and there is all too much in our present world that grieves the heart of God. This is why it is not enough simply to operate with a teaching about common grace without also being very clear about another reality that Kuyper also insisted on recognizing—the antithesis, the pattern of human rebellion that stands over against God’s creating and redeeming purposes. The great tragedy is that our first parents succumbed to the temptation presented to them by the Serpent that they could be their own gods, attempting to sit on their own thrones, refusing to acknowledge that their chief end as human creatures was to glorify the Living God and enjoy lives of obedience to his sovereign will in all things.

This is why those of us who name the name of Jesus must constantly remind ourselves of the reality captured in another of Kuyper’s favorite terms: the wonderful Latin phrase, *coram deo*, meaning roughly “before the face of God.” We live our lives *coram deo*.

To talk about the importance of our functioning as economic agents, as people who live *coram deo*, is to recognize the necessity of our cultivating the spiritual gift of discernment, which can help us to interpret reality in God-honoring ways. This in turn must be sustained by the hope of the coming kingdom—and indeed by the hope of the coming King. Many of us have been critical of the kind of evangelical perspective that limits Christian involvement in the business world to maintaining a personal relationship with Christ without also thinking about what this means for engaging the systemic—the patterns of economic life. Christian engagement in business is more than simply guarding your personal relationship with the Lord—it is more than that, but it is not less than that. Kuyper knew this. A major theme in his devotional writings was from Psalm 73 (in Dutch): *nabij God te zijn*—to be near unto God. The psalmist said, “But for me it is good to be near God” (NRSV).

As a teenager, I frequently accompanied my father, a pastor, to a Saturday morning Bible study group of which he was a member. It was held at the Star of Hope Mission in Paterson, New Jersey, an urban ministry center founded by the Stam family, well known in evangelical circles then. Jake Stam was a leader of the Saturday group. A prominent businessman, he traveled frequently, and typically he would report, during our prayer request time, on something that had occurred during his recent travels.

One of those reports has stayed with me. He asked us to pray for a man with an Italian-American name. “I led him to the Lord last night on the flight back from Cleveland,” Jake said. As he said that, he reached down into the briefcase



that was at his side and spread some objects on the table at which we were seated: an empty one-drink scotch bottle, a half-empty package of cigarettes, and a deck of playing cards. Having informed us that he had successfully evangelized his fellow passenger, he pointed to the objects on the table and said, “Here’s the proof!” When Jake led someone to Christ he insisted that they give up their sinful habits immediately!

That little incident with Jake forever colored for me a line in one of my favorite hymns, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.” The line is this: “Go spread your trophies at his feet and crown him Lord of all.” I have this image of Jake kneeling before the Lord at the last judgment, with his briefcase beside him. The Lord asks Jake to account for himself, and Jake recounts the various airplane conversions that he facilitated. As he is telling the stories he is reaching into his briefcase, taking out each of the bottles and cigarette packs and decks of cards. Then having spread the trophies out, he says to the Lord, “Here’s the proof.” The Lord says, “Well done, Jake!”

I thought about Jake several years ago when I had a not-so-successful attempt at witnessing to a fellow traveler on a plane trip. I was returning home from an academic conference, and I was very tired—not at all interested in engaging strangers in any kind of conversation. But the person seated next to me was persistent.

She was a young Asian-American, and her name was Grace. It was clear that she was not experiencing much grace in her life at that point. She was on her way home from Florida, she told me, where she had attended her mother’s funeral. She was going back to a depressing time in her career—the bank where she had been employed for a half decade had just terminated her position. Even worse, the man she had been living with for several years had moved out, and she was going home to an empty apartment. She sobbed quietly as she told me all of this.

I tried to talk to her about her need for the Lord, but I stumbled much. I could not find the right words to focus on her spiritual needs. Finally, when we landed, I told her I would be praying for her, and we shook hands. As I disembarked, I felt like crying out, “Jake! Where are you when I really need you!”

I was still feeling bad when at home I emptied my own briefcase from my trip. I took out many items and spread them on my desk: the draft of a course planning document, the text of the scholarly paper I had delivered at the just-attended conference, a book review on which I was working, some grade sheets, and a draft of a memo I was writing to my faculty colleagues. Then I realized that these, too, are trophies to be spread at the feet of Jesus, to crown him Lord of all.

It is the same for the work of those of you active in the business world. To be sure, we must always be ready, when called to do so, to talk to others about the Savior. But there are also many other trophies to lay at his feet: market surveys,

advertising portfolios, accounting sheets, projects for resource explorations, the minutes of our budget meetings, our strategic plans, our annual reports. With all of these trophies we, too, can crown him Lord over all—over every square inch of the creation that he came to redeem and renew. May it be so with all of us.

## Notes

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.3.6, 273.
2. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.14, 273.
3. Abraham Kuyper, “Common Grace,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 181.
4. Herman Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” trans. Geerhardus Vos, *The Princeton Theological Review* 7, no. 3 (1909): 437–65, [http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pdf/bavinck\\_commongrace.pdf](http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pdf/bavinck_commongrace.pdf).
5. Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, trans. Dirk Jellema, ed. James Skillen (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2011), 33n5.
6. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 96–97.
7. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 97.
8. Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).