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Beyond 'Faithful Presence': Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Common Grace and Cultural Development

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While James Davidson Hunter's concept of faithful presence is a good starting point for Reformed Christian cultural engagement, his fear of Christian triumphalism from the Right and Left leaves his vision disappointingly subdued. Building upon Abraham Kuyper's concept of the Reformed doctrine of common grace, this article seeks to go beyond Hunter's faithful presence by recommending a transformationalism without triumphalism. While "faithful presence" may be the right starting point, Christian cultural development can and must go beyond it, given the crises in our world today.

Introduction

James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* critiques contemporary Christian strategies for social and cultural change while offering faithful presence as an alternative proposal.[1] After briefly reviewing elements of Hunter's overall argument and giving specific attention to the strategy of faithful presence, Hunter's approach will be contrasted with one possible trajectory or version of Abraham Kuyper's legacy, followed by the proposal of an alternative that emerges from the possibilities and promise of common grace.[2] Kuyper's work helps us see that while the concept of faithful presence is a good starting point, a vibrant doctrine of common grace provides greater incentive for positive Christian influence on cultural change and development.

Hunter's Faithful Presence

Hunter supports the view that Christians should participate in the creation, engaging in areas as diverse as law, scholarship, art, and so on. He even uses the language of mandate to describe this activity and states that it is simply part of what it means to be a Christian. His critique is that Christians have an ambivalent legacy in terms of actual practice and that most efforts to change the world for the better are misguided. He states,

> I contend that the dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, for they are based on specious social science and problematic theology. In brief, the model on which the various strategies are based not only does not work, but it cannot work. On the basis of this working theory, Christians cannot "change the world" in a way that they, even in their diversity, desire.[3]

For Hunter, the reason these approaches fail is that change requires something greater than either changing the hearts and minds of individuals or providing humans with the proper worldview. Personal transformation, or the sum total of personal transformations, is not sufficient to generate cultural change. Nor is it enough to be a "culture creator" because even the result of producing a flood of cultural products is not sufficient to will cultural change into being.[4] For Hunter, whether it is ideas or cultural artifacts, the sum total of activity of individuals, especially grassroots individuals, is not sufficient. Bottom-up change rarely happens.

Hunter argues that the former views fail to recognize the complexity of culture and cultural change. He offers the following seven propositions about culture followed by four propositions on cultural change:

1. Culture is a system of truth claims and moral obligations.
2. Culture is a product of history.
3. Culture is intrinsically dialectical.
4. Culture is a resource, and, as such, a form of power.
5. Cultural production and symbolic capital are stratified in a fairly rigid structure of center and periphery.
6. Culture is generated within networks.
7. Culture is neither autonomous nor fully coherent.
8. Cultures change from the top down, rarely if ever from the bottom up.
9. Change is typically initiated by elites who are outside the centermost positions of prestige.

10. World-changing is most concentrated when the networks of elites and the institutions they lead overlap.
11. Cultures change but rarely if ever without a fight.

Cultural change is complex, and it usually takes a long time. Furthermore, it does not happen as a result of a single dynamic individual or well-organized institution or movement. Put in perspective in light of typical evangelical strategies, Hunter states, "Only indirectly do evangelism, politics, and social reform effect language, symbol, narrative, myth, and the institutions of formations that change the DNA of civilization."[5]

Hunter follows this critique by observing that the strategies of the Christian Right and Left, and neo-Anabaptists, are all insufficient because they all in some way attempt to bring about change through politics and because they articulate a discourse of negation toward those who should be blamed for causing some form of injury to their cause or view of how the world should operate.[6] Hunter also highlights the problems with pursuing power in order to bring about political ends, as well as a tendency (apart from the Anabaptists) to conflate the identity of the United States with the church. He sums up this critique by saying,

> The political options taken by the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists are perfectly legal, of course, but that doesn't mean that the way many of them engage the politics is either salutary or constructive. Not least, it creates a dense fog through which it is difficult to recognize each other as fellow human beings and impossible to recognize the good that still is in the world. The tragedy is that in the name of resisting the internal deterioration of faith and the corruption of the world around them, many Christians—and Christian conservatives most significantly—unwittingly embrace some of the most corrosive aspects of the cultural disintegration they decry. By nurturing its resentments, sustaining them through a discourse of negation toward outsiders, and in cases, pursuing their will to power, they become functional Nietzscheans, participating in the very cultural breakdown they so ardently strive to resist.[7]

Hunter's alternative to this is a strategy of faithful presence. While the label can seem like it is merely analogous to an Anabaptist alternative witness, such conclusions would be hasty. Hunter's proposal is offered in light of how he understands the need for Christians to live faithful lives to God with respect to the challenges of our current context. Highlighting the issue of difference (in light of the advent of pluralism) and dissolution (the great challenge to connect our discourse to an understanding of the "reality" of the world), Hunter argues that strategies focused on defensiveness from, relevance to, or purity from the

world are ultimately inadequate. We must ask ourselves what it means to model Christlikeness in a way that exhibits concern for all persons and facilitates the expression of Christian faith in all areas of life.

What exactly is faithful presence? Before unveiling this definition, it is important to note that Hunter speaks of Christians needing to live in the world in a dialectic between affirmation and antithesis, and that the doctrine of common grace factors into the affirmation side of the equation, though he is quick to note that the realm of common grace is not a neutral space because it is God's grace. Hunter definitely wants Christians to participate in the world and to resist what he identifies as late modernity, but note that he says the following about the "results" of Christian action in the world:

> any good that is generated by Christians is only the net effect of caring for something more than the good created. If there are benevolent consequences of our engagement with the world, … it is precisely because it is *not* rooted in a desire to change the world for the better but rather because it is an expression to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth, a manifestation of our loving obedience to God, and a fulfillment of God's command to love our neighbor.[8]

This quote indicates a commitment to action, but lays more stress on the disposition of Christians as they engage the world, and thus it is no surprise that Hunter describes rather than defines faithful presence in two aspects:

> The first is that incarnation is the only truly adequate reply to the challenges of dissolution; the erosion of trust between word and world and problems that attend it. From this follows the second: it is the way the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ and the purposes to which the incarnation was directed that are the only adequate reply to the challenge of difference.[9]

Faithful presence is ultimately a practice of incarnational Christianity in every area of life, expressed in love of all neighbors, a winsome use of power, and active participation in our spheres of influence. It might be fair to say that Hunter wants Christians to participate in the world in a way where their formation as humble disciples is on display and where they think less about ultimate or eschatological significance than about spiritual significance.

Hunter's approach might seem to have little within it that would cause a Kuyperian like myself to complain. On the surface this is true, and there is much to affirm in Hunter's work. Yet I am troubled by Hunter's ultimate conclusion at the end of the book. He rightfully emphasizes that we should prioritize the good we find in God over any transformations in society that may stem from

our activity in the world, yet this strikes me as too modest in vision. To quote Hunter at length:

> Will engaging the world in the way discussed here change the world?
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> This, I believe is the wrong question. The question is wrong in part because it is based on the dubious assumption that the world, and thus history, can be controlled and managed. This idea continues to be championed by some of the most prominent leaders in American Christianity. The logic that follows is dangerous indeed: once we have determined the right course of history, everything is subordinate to it—nearly any action can be justified if it helps to put the society on course and keeps it going in the right direction. As the logic goes, the world is ours to engineer as long as these efforts are in keeping with our overall objectives of history. By this logic, our actions are justified only by the outcomes they promise to bring about.
>
> The question is wrong because, for Christians, it makes the primary subservient to the secondary. By making a certain understanding of the good in society the objective, the source of the Good—God himself and the intimacy he offers—becomes nothing more than a tool to be used to achieve that objective. When this happens, righteousness can quickly become cruelty and justice can rapidly turn into injustice. Indeed, history is filled with the bloody consequences of this logic and the logic is very much present, even if implicit, on all sides and in all factions of the ongoing culture war.
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> To be sure, Christianity is not, first and foremost, about establishing righteousness or creating good values or securing justice or making peace in the world. Don't get me wrong: these are goods we should care about and pursue with great passion. But for Christians, these are all secondary to the primary good of God himself and the primary task of worshipping him and honoring him in all they do.… Against the present realities of our historical moment, it is impossible to say what can actually be accomplished. There are intractable uncertainties that cannot be avoided. Certainly Christians, at their best, will neither create a perfect world nor one that is altogether new; but by enacting shalom seeking … on behalf of others through the practice of faithful presence, it is possible, just possible, that they will help to make the world a little bit better.[10]

Is it possible that Christian faithfulness can include a view of discipleship that includes a commitment to kingdom faithfulness that witnesses to the kingdom in a way that also contributes to making a better world, and that such faithfulness includes the pursuit of transformation without illusions of triumphalism?[11] Is there a path forward that vigorously pursues change while resisting the temptations that cause the concerns Hunter states in his conclusion? I will now contrast Abraham Kuyper with Hunter and offer a suggestion about a way beyond faithful presence.

Kuyper's Cultural Vision

Abraham Kuyper was a unique figure: an academic, a church leader, and a political figure.[12] His version of the doctrine of common grace is central to his rationale for Christian public engagement. While he lived in another era, his expression of this doctrine and his articulation of his hopes for Christian influence in the Netherlands are helpful for us as we consider Christian faithfulness today and beyond. Before getting to common grace, I first note Kuyper's statement in 1897 where he clearly states what had been the passion of his life for decades:

> My life is ruled by but one passion,
> One higher urge drives will and soul.
> May breath fail me before I ever
> allow that sacred urge to fall.
> 'Tis to affirm God's holy statutes
> In church and state, in home and school,
> despite the world's strong remonstrations,
> to bless our people with His rule.
> 'Tis to engrave God's holy order,
> Heard in Creation and the Word,
> upon the nation's public conscience,
> till God is once again its Lord.[13]

Later we will see why this is not the expression of a theocratic or Constantinian vision. It does, however, clearly state that there is a desire to change the life of a nation so that life in it corresponds to God's creation ordinances and so that life flourishes at its best. Lest anyone think Kuyper was intent on establishing or manifesting a Reformed theocracy, it is worth noting that he became Prime Minister by a coalition that included Roman Catholics. What should not escape us is that for Kuyper this goal was an expression of Christian faithfulness, but it is more ambitious than Hunter. Is this because Kuyper was not a sociologist who studies change? I think it is more than that.

Common grace is key to Christian public engagement for Kuyper.[14] One can say that it provides permission to engage the world as well as explain how "good" things still happen in and emerge from the created order. Here is one way he defines it:

> Death, in its full effect, did not set in on that day, and Reformed theologians have consistently pointed out how in this non-arrival of what was prophesied for ill we see the emergence of a saving and long-suffering grace.… This manifestation of grace consisted in restraining, blocking, or redirecting the

> consequences that would otherwise have resulted from sin. It intercepts the natural outworking of the poison of sin and either diverts and alters it or opposes and destroys it. For that reason we must distinguish two dimensions in this manifestation of grace: 1. A *saving* grace, which in the end abolishes sin and completely undoes its consequences; and 2. a *temporal* restraining grace, which holds back and blocks the effect of sin. The former, that is saving grace, is in the nature of the case *special* and restricted to God's elect. The second, *common* grace, is extended to the whole of our human life.[15]

When speaking of common grace in the Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1898, Kuyper specifically links common grace to our ongoing possibility to carry out the cultural mandate.[16] Development is still possible, though the presence of sin makes this activity fraught with difficulty; weeds come along with fruit.

What did Kuyper think God wanted to have happen in a society if Christians engaged the world faithfully, and what would it look like if some goals for transformation were accomplished? Two helpful quotes follow:

> The supreme Artisan and Architect will want all that has gone into his design to be realized and stand before him in a splendid edifice. God will take delight in that high human development. He himself will bring it about and into view. Then he will seek in it his own glorification. The control and harnessing of nature by civilization, enlightenment, and progress, by science and art, by a variety of enterprises and industry will be entirely separate from the totally other development in holiness and integrity; indeed that *exterior* development may even clash openly with an *interior* development in holiness and become a temptation to the believer. Still, that exterior development has to continue and be completed to bring the *work of God* in our race to full visible realization.… The fundamental creation ordinance given before the fall, that humans would achieve dominion over all of nature thanks to "common grace," is still realized *after* the fall.[17]

Note that this is not easy business, but Kuyper believes it is God's desire. What could be the result in a nation?

> In such a country special grace in the church and among believers exerted so strong a formative influence on common grace that common grace thereby attained its highest development. The adjective "Christian" therefore says nothing about the spiritual state of the inhabitants of such a country but only witnesses to the fact that public opinion, the general mind-set, the ruling ideas, the moral norms, the laws and customs there clearly betoken the influence of the Christian faith. Though this is attributable to special grace, it is manifested on the terrain of common grace, i.e., in ordinary civil life. This

> influence leads to the abolition of slavery in the laws and life of a country, to the improved position of women, to the maintenance of public virtue, respect for the Sabbath, compassion for the poor, consistent regard for the ideal over the material, and—even in manners—the elevation of all that is human from its sunken state to a higher standpoint.…[18]

This is no theocracy; this is a flourishing nation where all can live freely, not a totalitarian regime where non-Christians wait their turn for execution. Ultimately this is a vision of a society where change occurs because Christians participate in the realm of common grace, and, as a result, the world gets better.[19] As the quotes above reveal, Kuyper has in mind the view that God has created the world in a state of potentiality with a specific end in view. Although sin is a reality that radically complicates the trajectory toward the fulfillment of God's creational intent, Kuyper argues that God works to bring his plan to fruition. Cultural development is a progressive unfolding of the immense richness that God has placed within his creation (this extends to humans as the individual and corporate expression of the divine image) and takes place through the progress of historical events in the domains of politics, education, culture, and family life—every social context.[20] This is not something that occurs easily or seamlessly, but does ultimately come about as an expression of God's decree.

Of course there is no theory of the mechanics of change here, but there is a larger vision for a better world. Common grace not only makes possible participation in the public realm but also prompts a teleological orientation that compels Christian activity toward the transformation of society. This orientation not only does not contain a necessary pursuit of realizing the kingdom of God, but also does not encourage mere steadiness; if the cultural mandate remains a Christian responsibility, then the cultivation of various "public goods" (political, artistic, educational, and so forth) should be regarded as normative practice when the conditions allow (e.g., this is much harder to do in a regime where Christians would be oppressed or martyred or excluded from any potential public influence).

Why is this larger vision necessary? Why beyond faithful presence? For certain, faithful presence is a good place to start, and certainly we can agree with Hunter that many Christians need to be more faithful in their posture as they participate in the public realm. It is also true that Christian commitments to transformation also have the great temptation of triumphalism. Yet is it not also possible that faithful presence carries a contrasting temptation to be unnecessarily content with the status quo or "slow change"? Is there not also the possibility that what one regards as faithful practice could be mistaken and in fact oppose God-glorifying change? Moreover, one of the most significant reasons faithful presence is insuf-

ficient is because there are people in the world who do not have the luxury of waiting decades for change to happen or for hoping that when their grandchildren are alive certain changes will ultimately arrive. If one lives in a crisis, yet lives in a context where public participation is a genuine possibility, then faithful presence needs to be the beginning but hardly the end and definitely subject to ongoing reflection so that faithfulness is truly an expression of fidelity to God.

Conclusion

The doctrine of common grace encourages Christians to continue to be faithful in a world God gave to humans to steward toward flourishing. To say that cultural change is difficult is not surprising; it has been difficult since the realities of Genesis 3. Still, common grace and particular grace compel Christians to "get in the game" at all levels and live a life of faithful kingdom witness that hopefully trends toward changes in our world that are good for all human beings. Challenges of race and ethnicity, sex trafficking, financial mismanagement on Wall Street, the seduction of power in Washington, and many other large problems lay before us. The possibilities in front of us stemming from common grace do not allow us to settle for faithful presence, and the ongoing crises in the world require us to have a holy impatience in the face of a mandate for stewarding the creation that has never left us.

Notes

1. The main point of reference for many discussions of Christianity and culture is H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). Among contemporary engagements with Niebuhr and the larger conversation on Christianity and culture see Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006); Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989); and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

2. Among the many helpful works on Kuyper and neo-Calvinism, including some that express the legacy of this approach to cultural engagement, see Vincent Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010); Steve Bishop and John H. Kok, eds., *On Kuyper:*

A Collection of Readings on the Life, Work & Legacy of Abraham Kuyper (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2013); John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); James Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); William D. Dennison, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (June 1999): 271–91; R. D. Henderson, "How Abraham Kuyper Became a Kuyperian," *Christian Scholars Review* 22 (September 1992): 22–35; Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); and S. U. Zuidema "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper," in *Communication and Confrontation*, ed. Gerben Groenwoud, trans. Harry Van Dyke (Toronto: Wedge, 1972), 52–105.

3. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

4. See Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

5. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 45.

6. Hunter singles out figures such a Chuck Colson and James Dobson as representative of the Christian Right; Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, and Ron Sider among Christian Left figures; and Stanley Hauerwas, Shane Claiborne, and John Howard Yoder among prominent neo-Anabaptist proponents. On the Christian Right and Left specifically, see Kenneth J. Collins, *Power, Politics and the Fragmentation of Evangelicalism: From the Scopes Trial to the Obama Administration* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012); Jon A. Shields, *The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

7. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 175.

8. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 234.

9. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 241.

10. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 285–86.

11. On this, see Calvin P. Van Reken, "Christians in This World: Pilgrims or Settlers?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 43, no. 2 (2008): 234–56.

12. See note 2, particularly Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*.

13. In John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 328.

14. See note 2, particularly Heslam, Bratt, Bacote, and Zuidema (the latter for the most extensive summary and engagement). See also Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom & Wonder: Common Grace in Science & Art*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2011); and William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace: A Defense of the Historic Reformed Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

15. Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 167–68.

16. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 30.

17. Kuyper, "Common Grace," 178–79

18. Kuyper, "Common Grace," 199.

19. For more on Kuyper's thinking about development as persons and as a society, see Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 208–14, 244–53; Cf. James Eglinton, "Bavinck's Organic Motif: Questions Seeking Answers," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 51–71; and idem, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

20. Kuyper, "Common Grace," 178.