
Pro Rege

Volume 36 | Number 3

Article 2

March 2008

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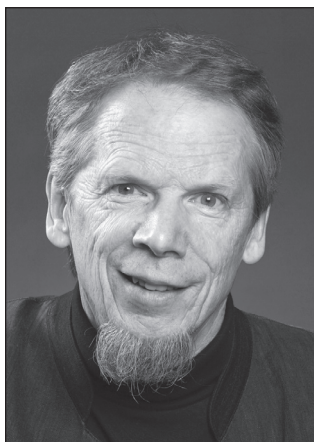
Recommended Citation

Henderson, Roger (2008) "Kuyper's Inch," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 36: No. 3, 12 - 14.

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Kuyper's Inch



by Roger Henderson

If you have seen or heard Abraham Kuyper's famous "not a square inch" adage quoted often enough, you may have noticed more than one version¹ and not know which is the authentic. They read,

There is not a square inch in the whole of creation over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: "Mine!"

There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: "Mine!"

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The second is the authentic;² the original was, of course, in the Dutch language.³ It appeared as part of a longer sentence in a speech Kuyper delivered in 1880 in Amsterdam at the opening of a new university.⁴ His reference is to the whole of "human existence" (*het menselijke bestaan*), yet there is a tendency to change it into the whole of "creation." Perhaps the phrases, "the whole of" and "over all" lend themselves to the wider statement—even though this was not his claim. Those who endorse Kuyper's adage may feel thrust by the inherent forcefulness of the statement into making the wider claim. As we shall see, there is a reason Kuyper said what he did.

Although logically incorrect, the wider claim seems somehow justifiable in light of the narrower. The vagueness or generality of "creation" stands in contrast with the narrower "human existence." Perhaps the wider seems easier because we associate "creation" with skies, forests, and trees, making it less controversial. It may seem easier to assert that Christ rules over nature than to uphold Kuyper's real claim—that "the whole domain of our human existence," entailing, as it does, all that happens on Fifth Avenue, New York City, and the like, belongs to Christ.⁵

Within the *nature-culture* contrast, we may feel that nature is the better candidate for falling within the ownership-claim of Christ. This feeling probably indicates just how little those (of us) who like to quote "Kuyper's inch" are like Kuyper in our basic thinking. We are inclined to take the path of less resistance where he courageously took the path of greater resistance. Calling oneself "Kuyperian" may have become a relatively popular designation,

but being such is, indeed, a challenge to which many of us have not yet risen.

How should Kuyper's adage be understood? What does it mean to believe that Christ makes an ownership-claim over *human existence*? In the context in which he was speaking—the inauguration of a university, a school of higher learning, an educational institution—it implied that all of the work done there, each domain, could, would, and did belong to Christ—that nothing was cut off from Him or from the other areas. All of the teaching, learning, research, administering, and writing has a place in, through, and to Christ—it all belongs to

What does it mean to believe that Christ makes an ownership-claim over human existence?

Him and is not work done on alien ground or in foreign territory. University education and all the fields it covers is, properly speaking, in the service of God and for the care of humanity—in anticipation of Christ's "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21, Matt. 18:28). The adage says that the whole domain of human existence is inherently connected not merely to God but specifically to Christ the Ruler and the Redeemer of lost humanity. In other words, Christ the savior is interested in earthly existence, has a stake in culture, and is not the type of religious leader concerned only with some choice portion of the religious client and otherwise unconcerned with his or her work, environment, or life.⁶

However, the fact that no part of human existence is alien to Christ did not mean to Kuyper that everything was of equal importance. Distinctions could and should be made, but all things, the whole domain of our human existence—even those very small, as small as the width of a thumb—are meaningful and claimed by Christ.

Kuyper's "square inch" comes from the Dutch term and source of our inch-measurement, the human thumb, "thumb-width," (*duim-breed*). In other

words, the first part of his saying shares the same frame of reference as the second—human things. Even something as small and seemingly insignificant as a human thumb is important, along with the whole domain of human existence: "there is not a thumb-width... in the whole domain of human existence...over which Christ...does not cry 'Mine!'" This requires of us that we look for the ways everyday human affairs are connected with the Lord Almighty, that is, not as foreign affairs but as involving, "belonging to," Christ. Living like this involves believing in Christ and trusting in him as sovereign Lord of civic, legal, economic, domestic, artistic, and entertainment, as well as church and mission, affairs.

The ruin and alienation brought about by sin, curse, and fall did not transfer ownership of human existence out of the hands of God. Rather, it has meant that the ownership is *contested* by one who has no rightful claim whatsoever to the works of human hands, fingers—not even a thumb-breadth. The struggle of human faithfulness has many fronts.

As mentioned above, Kuyper's adage is actually taken from a longer sentence. The whole reads, "Oh, not a single bit of our world of thought can be hermetically sealed off from the rest; and there is not a square inch..." That is to say, these famous words fit into a larger picture, in which human thought is said to function as an integral whole and is not made up of isolated provinces untouched by each other. Put differently, religion cannot be kept within superimposed limits. There is no separation of any one domain of human thought from the rest, no isolation of any one domain of human life from another or from Christ. When Kuyper speaks of "our world of thought," this world of thought is parallel to "the whole domain of human existence." Here too there is no separation.

The whole context of Kuyper's speech, which you will recall was for the opening of a new Christian university (as well as the integral character of the world of human thought) makes plain that we are responsible agents, who should work for reconciliation and renewal in the world. Yet it is important to notice that Kuyper's idea does not imply a claiming or reclaiming of things by us for Christ. Nor does it abrogate our responsibility to be agents

of reconciliation and renewal in the world: this is a biblical notion even if it can't be tied in with this statement of Kuyper. It is Christ who is the Almighty Lord, and he makes the ownership-claim. We may hope that our work has reforming effects, but what we are called to do is to acknowledge the rightfulness of *his* claim, bow before his law, and *try to live in accordance with his norms and statutes*. Kuyper's adage is a quotation (of Christ), not a veiled assertion of *our* mutual-ownership of or our *own* ability to reform things. Neither "our world of thought" nor "the whole domain of human existence" is separable into parts. It is the integrity of the fabric of creation, of human thought and existence under Christ's rule, which Kuyper asserts. This integrity needs to be acknowledged and acted upon if we are to see reform and renewal manifested. Reform is often the result of God's blessing of human action that is done with integrity! If Christ is really *Lord* of anything, he is Lord of everything! This lordship implies the goal of doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way, with humility and dependence upon him. If numerical, statistical, or comparative success does not follow from what we do, we may rejoice with Christians in ages past who have suffered for striving to live with integrity.

In conclusion, it is imperative, in my opinion, to go on stressing the "inch" regarding "human existence." Yet the affirmation, perhaps contrary to appearance, does not make a person more obedient or "spiritual" (and perhaps will make us less) unless it is accompanied by an importuning faith in the one who cries "Mine!" There is a peculiar temptation called "secularization," which also accompanies this affirmation. Kuyper recognized this peculiar temptation because he was an ex-"liberal" himself;⁷ and he consciously combated it in his life-long practice of writing and publishing what are called "devotional books," e.g., *To Be Near Unto God*. An affirmation of the Lordship of Christ over "creation" alone is too easy; it is insufficient without the emphasis on "human existence." In order to live out this reality, we must continue to recognize our need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.⁸

Endnotes

1. This is a bit reminiscent of the famous misquotation of Augustine's statement about God's actions before time in which authors invariably leave out the "*is not*": "My answer to those who ask, 'What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?' is not 'He was preparing Hell for people who pry into mysteries.'" (*Confessions* Bk. XI, 12, Trans. Pine-Coffin, [Penguin Books, 1961]).
2. James D. Bratt, ed., *A Centennial Reader*. Edited by James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.
3. The Dutch reads, "geen duimbreed is er op heel 't erf van ons menselijk leven, waarvan de Christus, die áller Souverein is, niet roept: 'Mijn!'" *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring* (Kok: Kampen, 3rd ed., 1930), 33.
4. This is a university "in" but not "of" that city, viz. De Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam: The Free University at Amsterdam. The inaugural oration was titled "Sphere Sovereignty."
5. The assertion about the whole of creation may not appear so unproblematic when one thinks about hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, etc.
6. It is important to realize that while no part of human existence was alien to Christ, Kuyper did not take this to mean that everything was of equal importance. Preaching can be generally more important than carpentry without making carpentry unimportant.
7. Kuyper had been a liberal, primarily in a theological sense. See my "How Abraham Kuyper Became a Kuyperian," *Christian Scholars Review* 22 (1992): 22-35.
8. To express this in terms of Kuyper's own theological categories, one can make a pretend affirmation of creation, or common grace, which removes the need of salvation, or special grace—re-inventing secularism using a Kuyperian-sounding discourse.