

Rooted and Grounded? The Legitimacy of Abraham Kuyper's Distinction between Church as *Institute* and Church as *Organism*, and Its Usefulness in Constructing an Evangelical Public Theology

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Abstract: The question of the precise nature and scope of the church's mission has been both perennial and thorny. In recent years many evangelicals have made positive reference to Abraham Kuyper's distinction between the church as 'institute', and the church as 'organism' noting this is a helpful and necessary way of distinguishing between the organised church with its own particular and specific roles and responsibilities, and the church understood as Christians in the world, living out their God-given vocations in all spheres of life. This article describes and critiques Kuyper's distinction asking whether it is a help or a hindrance, and offering possible other ways of delineating and distinguishing the mission of the church.

To successive classes full of super-zealous, conservative evangelicals training for pastoral ministry in the UK, justifying a module entitled *Evangelical Public Theology* has not been an easy task. While such a subject might be 'interesting' and even important, for a seminary theological curriculum, isn't the theological reflection on the relationship of and responsibilities between evangelicals and their society, a peripheral or even 'luxury' subject? Worse, might public theology distract from and dilute not only the main responsibilities of the pastor, but more widely the mission of the church? In such a 'harsh' environment, discovering Abraham Kuyper's distinction between the church as *institute* and church as *organism* was something of an oasis. Distinguishing between 'the body of Christ gathered around word and sacraments for worship and discipline' (institute), and 'the body of Christ in the totality of its multidimensional vocations in the world' (organism),¹ enabled me to allay the fears of students, while keeping public theology on the agenda. In other words I could confidently say to my students that they

¹ John Bolt, *A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 248n100.

will need to be doing *exactly* what they thought they would be doing as pastors: a delimited set of roles and responsibilities prescribed in the New Testament. However, I could also open their eyes to a more expansive vista stating that their ministry will always have public theology implications, albeit indirectly through their congregations. Theologically it seemed to be a distinction which could simultaneously promote the primacy of word and sacrament and the ultimacy of evangelism and discipleship in the ministry of the local church, *and* the need for Christian world-view thinking, vocation, cultural engagement and more broadly, the societal and cosmic implications of the gospel.

I am not the only one who has found Kuyper's distinction helpful. As public theology impinges upon the perennial and thorny debate concerning the precise nature and scope of the church's mission, scholars and pastors such as Tim Keller, Don Carson, Jim Belcher, Kevin DeYoung and Michael Horton, have all made positive references to something like Kuyper's distinction. I say 'something like' because contemporary theologians often employ the terms 'institute' and 'organism' with subtly different meanings than Kuyper's original construal.

Of course such usage is not illegitimate, but would not an *ad fontes* exercise be helpful here, especially given the stature of the architect? This article wishes to offer a closer inspection of Kuyper's construal, concluding that his own understanding of the distinction was more complicated, ambiguous and even confused, not to the point of it being rendered useless for us, but needing some crucial modifications.² The nature of these modifications will depend upon broader theological commitments at work, commitments which clash in current debates such as the intra-Reformed 'two-kingdom' versus 'transformationalist' models.³ Certainly without these modifications, Kuyper's construal appears to fall into a theological no-man's land, and is certainly not the bridge on which two-kingdom and transformationalist proponents can shake hands. To return to our earlier image, the seeming ecclesiological oasis of the institute/organism distinction may actually be more of a mirage.

After noting some important contextual factors, I will describe Kuyper's institute/organism distinction noting earlier and later phases in the development of the distinction. I will then offer a number of lines of comment and critique particularly of the later stage, before offering some conclusions as to the validity of the distinction in the development of an Evangelical Public Theology.

1. Kuyper's Context: A Man of His Time

As soon as one plunges beneath the surface of Kuyper's institute/organism iceberg, one discovers a particular nexus of the personal, social, theological and ideological which in terms of context is extremely important to grasp. In more ways than one, Kuyper (1837–1920) truly was a man of his time.⁴ First, is Kuyper's polymathic life and seemingly gargantuan work ethic.⁵ His interests and accomplishments do not need to be rehearsed again, save to point out that his move from pastor to politician appears to run

² There are several Dutch language studies of Kuyper's ecclesiology and the institute/organism distinction. One of the main studies in English is Henry Zwaanstra, "Abraham Kuyper's Conception of the Church," *CTJ* 9 (1974): 149–81.

³ I have outlined the contours of both these models (using slightly different terminology) in a previous article, "Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology," *Them* 36 (2011): 238–60.

⁴ James Bratt's recent, magisterial Kuyper biography is especially illuminating here, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

⁵ Permeated, I should add, by several nervous breakdowns.

in parallel with the development of the institute/organism distinction, whereby, and as we shall argue, the organism was increasingly given prominence at the expense of the institute.⁶

Second, a large part of Kuyper's voluminous output was dramatic, rhetorical and 'poetic' in nature.⁷ He was an activist, a brilliant orator and writer who wanted to affect his audiences. As Bacote notes, 'his work was produced in the midst of many ideological, ecclesiological, and political battles. His primary aim was not to articulate a mammoth systematic text on a theology of public engagement but to develop and present a theologically grounded approach to public engagement for the various challenges of his day.'⁸ Kuyper's main expositions of the institute/organism distinction, what Bolt calls the 'cornerstone of his public theology',⁹ are contained in an inaugural sermon to his third pastorate 'Rooted and Grounded' (1870) and his six-year newspaper serialisation on Common Grace (published in *De Heraut*) finally published as *De Gemeene Gratie*.¹⁰ For a construct that was so axiomatic to his ecclesiology and indeed cultural agenda, a detailed sustained treatise on it is conspicuous by its absence in his writings. Moreover, and perhaps precisely because it never received a systematic treatment, it is perhaps not surprising that Kuyper's discussion of the distinction is arguably not without ambiguity.¹¹ Those wanting scholastic precision will be disappointed in the sometimes florid and suggestive style. Without doubt there is development between earlier and later articulations, and this is not entirely due to the very different occasions that prompted them.

Third, are the theological and philosophical influences which shaped Kuyper's thought. Zwaanstra notes that Kuyper was a child of the nineteenth century but that 'although intellectually Kuyper drank widely and at times, deeply from a variety of courses, within his own system of thought everything bore the mark of Kuyper's genius and originality.'¹² Bratt notes that in his ecclesiology Kuyper attempted to mix different thought worlds, 'The older set came from the tradition of Reformed scholasticism, while the others were the idiom of nineteenth-century organic thinking rooted in Idealist thinking and Romantic poets.'¹³

⁶ That said, Kuyper's manual on church polity, *Our Worship* (1910) is a late work and demonstrates the need not to make simplistic judgements on someone like Kuyper. To make matters more complicated, I recognise that I am only consulting English translations of Kuyper's work. His prolificity is pretty overwhelming. As Bratt notes, 'He authored over twenty thousand newspaper articles, scores of pamphlets and numerous multivolume treatises' *Abraham Kuyper*, xiii. See, Tijitze Kuipers, *Abraham Kuyper: An Annotated Bibliography 1857–1910*, trans. Clifford Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

⁷ To use John Bolt's term. See John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 3–80.

⁸ Vincent Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 154–55.

⁹ John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 427.

¹⁰ *De Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, 1902–1904). For this article I am using James Bratt's selected translations in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 165–201. In 2014, The Christian Library Press began publishing a full English translation of the work under the editorship of Jordan Ballor and Stephen Grabill, <http://www.clpress.com/publications/series/common-grace>.

¹¹ John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 427.

¹² Zwaanstra, "Abraham Kuyper's Conception of the Church," 149.

¹³ Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 183.

Kuyper's ecclesiology is a fascinating and heady mix. In direct continuity with his confessional tradition, there is Calvinistic/Reformed creedal orthodoxy e.g. his explicit assent to Article 29 of the Belgic Confession and WCF 25/1).¹⁴ Added to this are new developments and creativity on this tradition (e.g. sphere sovereignty and common grace which underpin his ecclesiology) for which others, both then and now, would critique him as illegitimately 'speculative' and lacking Scriptural warrant. Finally there are other influences and trends ingrafted in: Schleiermacher, Schelling, Idealism, Romanticism, nationalism, a social evolutionary view of progress and improvement with race science overtones. It is both ironic and sobering that although Kuyper was a theocentric, cross-centred, Bible-believing Christian, who extolled the crown rights of King Jesus, who stressed antithesis and was stalwart against modernity, appears to have been influenced precisely by the modern zeitgeist he so often vehemently set himself against.

Finally, as a non-Dutch speaking British Baptist (albeit Reformed, covenantal and sympathetic to cultural engagement), I recognise myself to be something of an 'outsider' looking into the theologically complex and sometimes bewildering world of Dutch Reformed theology past and present. While I might be critical of certain aspects of Kuyper's project, there is so much rich marrow in this tradition which can strengthen evangelicalism. If it achieves little else, I hope this article might pique interest in the *Themelios* reader to get stuck in to the works of Kuyper, Schilder, and their theological progeny.¹⁵

2. The Institute/Organism Distinction

With this backdrop painted, we come then to the institute/organism distinction itself. As already mentioned, we will focus mainly on Kuyper's sermon 'Rooted and Grounded' and his work on 'Common Grace,' but also briefly mention some other works.

2.1. 'Rooted and Grounded' (1870)

Kuyper's sermon 'Rooted and Grounded' not only explores how the church is both divine and human, but also offers an apologetic for the role of church in public life from the context of disestablishment. The Roman Catholic stress on institution, and modernism's ambitions to usurp the church and so do away with institution (i.e. Christian living continues only as an organism) are twin dangers to be avoided. Both of these can be avoided by a return to Scripture and the Apostle's description in Ephesians 3:17 of the church as being both 'rooted' ('a description of organic life') and 'grounded' ('the requirement of the institution').¹⁶ Kuyper distinguishes between the more 'organic' scriptural metaphors (plant, vine and body), and those which are more 'constructed' and the work of human hands (e.g. temple and house). The church is both grown and built, with both metaphors being necessary and inextricably linked.

¹⁴ WCF 25/1: "The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all."

¹⁵ Richard Mouw has been an 'evangelist' in this regard for some time now. For example see Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); "Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian," *CTJ* 38 (2003): 281–98.

¹⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Rooted and Grounded*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2013), Kindle edition, loc. 318.

Kuyper breaks down each metaphor in more detail. God is the sovereign creative and supernatural source of the church, a Body ‘rooted in election.’¹⁷ The organism ‘is the heart of the church’ and has its origin in a miracle of grace: ‘A church cannot be manufactured; a polity no matter how tidy, and a confession no matter how spotless, are powerless to form a church if the living organism is absent.’¹⁸ However, ‘the church cannot lack the institution, for the very reason that all life among human beings needs analysis and arrangement.’¹⁹ The institute is still established by God for it ‘manifests not merely the organism, but the institution is a means supplied by God for feeding and expanding that organism. . . . From the organism the institution is born, but also through the institution the organism is fed.’²⁰ Kuyper employs another metaphor here:

The organism of the church is the nourishing source for that stream, but the institution is the bed that carries its current, the banks that border the waters. Only in this way is there development, only in this way is the progress of the Christian life conceivable. It is the church that makes us stand upon the shoulders of those who went before us, and preserves our harvest for the generation that comes after us. Only through the institution can the church offer us that unique life sphere where the ground we tread, the air we breathe, the language we speak, and the nourishment of our spirit are not those of the world but those of the Holy Spirit. That institution positions itself between us and the world, in order to protect the uniqueness of our life with the power supplied by that unanimity and that order. . . . For that reason we have such an institution that is itself thoroughly formed, that works formatively upon the individual, structurally upon the family, directly upon society, and chooses the Christian school as its vestibule. An institution that calls into being, from the root of its own life, a unique science and art, that strives in its confession for a more correct expression of the eternal truth and for an ever purer worship of the Holy One. An institution, finally, that preserves discipline and justice, and is nevertheless flexible, tender, and supple, adapting to the nature of each, accommodating itself to every nation, and in every age adopting the language of its time—behold what the church of Christ needs desperately as she needs her rootedness in God.²¹

Kuyper answers the question as to whether the visible church should be identified with the kingdom of God. Here he uses another metaphor. The church on earth is like scaffolding appearing as defective and misshapen but necessary for a time, because of sin, in the creation of a glorious temple. ‘But one day . . . then that scaffolding will be removed, then that church on earth will fall away, and then that glorious temple will shimmer in its eternal beauty—a temple that hitherto had not existed, but that the builders had been building while supported by that church.’²²

On the uniqueness of the church and its antithetical contrast to the world, Kuyper writes:

¹⁷ Ibid., loc. 440.

¹⁸ Ibid., loc. 440.

¹⁹ Ibid., loc. 451.

²⁰ Ibid., loc. 484.

²¹ Ibid., loc. 499.

²² Ibid., loc. 537.

The marketplace of the world not the church, is the arena where we wrestle for the prize, the race track where we wage the contest for the wreath. Far from being the battlefield itself, the church is rather like the army tent of the Lord where soldiers strengthen themselves before that battle, where they treat their wounds after the battle, and where one who has become 'prisoner by the sword of the Word' is fed at the table of the Lord.²³

Finally we return to the relationship between the two metaphors. As Kuyper summarises, 'first rooted, and then grounded,' but both together at their most inner core! . . . The organism is the essence, the institution is the form. To say it once again with Calvin, 'What God has joined together, you O man, may not be put asunder.'²⁴

2.2. Lectures on Calvinism

Kuyper's most well-known work, *Lectures on Calvinism*, delivered at Princeton in 1898, do not explicitly refer to the institute/organism distinction, but the second lecture, "Calvinism and Religion" does speak of the essence, manifestation and purpose of the church. It thus forms a helpful bridge between 'Rooted and Grounded' and 'Common Grace'.

The Church 'is a spiritual organism having at present its center and the starting-point for its action, not upon earth but in heaven.'²⁵ Human beings have a prophetic, priestly and kingly role to consecrate the cosmos for God's glory. Kuyper continues:

He [God] so loves His world that He has given Himself to it, in the person of His Son, and thus He has again brought our race, and through our race, His whole cosmos, into a renewed contact with eternal life. To be sure many branches and leaves fell off the tree of the human race, yet the tree itself shall be saved; on its new root in Christ, it shall once more blossom gloriously. For regeneration does not save a few isolated individuals, finally to be joined together mechanically as an aggregated heap. Regeneration saves the organism, itself, of our race. And therefore all regenerate human life forms one organic body, of which Christ is the Head, and whose members are bound together by their mystical union with Him.²⁶

In terms of the form of the church, it comprises of 'local congregations of believers, groups of confessors, living in some ecclesiastical union, in obedience to the ordinances of Christ.'²⁷ The church comprises of those in Christ and who adhere to the church's ordinances of Word, sacraments and discipline.

Finally the purpose of the church, is not 'to prepare the believer for heaven' but to 'magnify God's glory.'²⁸ Kuyper moves into the area of morality, strenuously countering the view that Calvinism, with its stress on predestination, is neither antinomian, nor nomistic. He continues:

²³ Ibid., loc. 595.

²⁴ Ibid., loc. 514.

²⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 59.

²⁶ Ibid., 59.

²⁷ Ibid., 62.

²⁸ Ibid., 66, 68.

But it remained the special trait of Calvinism that it placed the believer *before the face of God*, not only in the church, but also in his personal, family, social, and political life. The majesty of God, and the authority of God press upon the Calvinist in the whole of his human existence. He is a pilgrim, not in the sense that he is marching through a world with which he has no concern, but in the sense that at every step of the long way he must remember his responsibility to that God so full of majesty, who awaits him at his journey's end.²⁹

In contrast to the Anabaptist separatism, there is one world, created, fallen, redeemed and saved by Christ and which will pass through judgement into glory:

For this very reason the Calvinist cannot shut himself up in his church and abandon the world to its fate. He feels, rather, his high calling to push the development of this world to an even higher stage, and to do this in constant accordance with God's ordinance, for the sake of God, upholding, in the midst of so much painful corruption, everything that is honourable, lovely and of good report among men.³⁰

2.3. Common Grace (1902–1904)

Thirty years on from 'Rooted and Grounded' Kuyper returns to the institute/organism distinction in his treatment of the doctrine of common grace. Before coming to this later articulation of the distinction, a longer run-up is needed.

First, Kuyper's understanding of common grace seen negatively as 'restraint' is in continuity with the Reformed tradition, although expanded. However it is in the more 'positive' aspect of common grace where Kuyper significantly develops the tradition. His agenda is clear from the outset:

The doctrine of common grace proceeds directly from the Sovereignty of the Lord which ever is the root of all Reformed thinking. If God is Sovereign, then his Lordship *must* remain over *all* life and cannot be closed up within church walls or Christian circles. The extra-Christian world has not been given over to Satan or to fallen humanity or to chance. God's sovereignty is great and all-ruling also in unbaptized realms, and therefore neither Christ's work in the world not that of God's child can be pulled back out of life.³¹

Second, Kuyper notes that it is 'undeniable' that special grace presupposes common grace and 'that everything happens for Christ's sake, that therefore the *body of Christ* is the all-controlling central element in history, and on that basis the church of Christ is the pivot on which the life of humanity hinges,'³² However, Kuyper is keen to stress and particular Christocentric ordering: 'all things exist for the sake of Christ and only as a corollary for his *Body* and the *Church*—hence not for *you* and then the

²⁹ Ibid., 69, emphasis in the original.

³⁰ Ibid., 73. Bringing us back down to earth with a bump, Kuyper finishes this chapter with some brief comments on card playing, theatres, and dancing!

³¹ James Bratt, "Common Grace," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James Bratt (Carlisle: Pater-noster, 1998), 166.

³² Ibid., 170

Church and so also for the *Body* of Christ and finally for the *Christ*. No: Christ, by whom all things exist including ourselves, is before all things.³³ He concludes here,

In that sense, then, we must acknowledge that common grace is only an emanation of special grace and that all its fruit flows into special grace—provided it is understood that special grace is by no means exhausted in the salvation of the elect but has its ultimate end only in the Son’s glorification of the Father’s love, and is in the aggrandizement of the perfection of our God.³⁴

Third, is Kuyper’s construal of the relationship between nature and grace. Christ is Reconciler and Re-Creator of both soul and body, of the spiritual and natural realm. One must ‘not run the danger of isolating Christ from your soul’ and viewing ‘life in and for the world as something that exists outside your Christian religion not controlled by it.’³⁵ Although it was the incarnate Word who created the world, not the Son of Man, Christ connects nature and grace because he is Creator and Re-creator. However, Kuyper makes a crucial distinction at this point: “The Reformed principle produces a much purer distinction between the things that originate from the Creation and things that originate from the Re-creation.”³⁶ Thus, ‘Creation’ is to be associated with common grace working on the ‘original’ and ‘Re-creation’ with special grace which is ‘new’ cannot be explained by the old, though linked to it. Furthermore, and in what seems a further extension to the previous point, there appears to be a certain autonomy given to common grace in its purpose to bring the world to consummation “There is beside the great work of God in *special grace* also that totally other work of God in the realm of *common grace*.”³⁷

Kuyper finally returns to his institute/ organism distinction when articulating the ecclesiological implications of all this. The church as institute is touched upon but only briefly and described rather ‘coolly’ as ‘apparatus’ ‘temporally constructed’ ‘having real substance only insofar as the mystical body of Christ lies behind it and manifests through it.’³⁸ When one comes to the organism, the ‘organic’ is stressed:

We are thoroughly misguided, therefore, if in speaking of the church of Christ (not as *institute* but as *organism*) we have our eyes fixed almost exclusively on elect persons or initiates and deliberately close them to the rich and many-sided combinations which, the final analysis, unite the multiplicity of members into the unity of the Body. This exclusive interest in persons is the curse of nominalism that still lingers on in present-day Liberalism. Christianity is more than anything *social* in nature. Paul has pointed graphically and repeatedly to these three: *body*, *members*, and *connective tissue*. The church as organism has its center in Christ; it is extended in its mystical body; it individualizes itself in the members. But it no less finds its unity in those original ‘joints,’ those organic connections, which unite us as human beings into one single human race, and it is on those joints that the spirit of Christ puts its stamp. Though it is true that

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 172.

³⁶ Ibid., 174.

³⁷ Ibid., 176.

³⁸ Ibid., 187–88.

these Christianized connections serve in common grace to restrain sin and to advance general development, their Christianization is rooted in special grace and they find their original and primary goal in the propagation of special grace.³⁹

Kuyper continues his description in distinguishing his ecclesiology from that of the national church. Both national church and free church recognise that the church works directly for the well-being of the elect, and indirectly for the well-being of the whole society. However, whereas the national church includes civil society in the church, 'we place the church as a city on a hill amid civil society.'⁴⁰ Kuyper wishes to affirm a pure free church which has public influence. The national church only recognises church as institute but Kuyper distinguishes between two circles. The first is the objective church, the circle of the covenant which displays the marks of the 'true church' (Belgic Confession, 29):

But we cannot stop here. The institute does not cover everything that is Christian. Though the Christian religion only burns within the institute's walls, its light shines out through its windows to areas far beyond, illumining all the sectors and associations that appear across the wider range of human life and activity . . . that illumination will be stronger and more penetrating as the lamp of the gospel is allowed to shine more brightly and clearly in the church institute.

Aside from this first circle of the institute and in necessary connection with it, we thus recognise another circle whose circumference is determined by the length of the ray that shines out from the church institute over the life of people and nation. Since this second circle is not attached to particular persons, is not circumscribed by a certain number of people listed in church directories, and does not have its own office-bearers but is interwoven with the very fabric of national life, this extra-institutional influence at work in society points us to the *church as organism*. That church, after all, exists before the institute, it lies behind the institute, it alone gives substance and value to that institute. The church as organism has its center in heaven, in Christ; it encompasses all ages from the beginning of the world to the end so as to fulfil all the ages coming after us. *The church as organism may even manifest itself where all personal faith is missing but where nevertheless some of the golden glow of eternal life is reflected in the ordinary facades of the great edifice of human life.*⁴¹

Kuyper puts all this together by proposing a typology or 'spectrum'⁴² of four terrains. The first is a pure common grace terrain untouched by special grace, a world living in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). His example is China. The second terrain is the institutional church arising purely from special grace and whose members limit themselves to their own task. The third is the terrain of common grace, influenced by special grace, of which there are many examples in Europe and America. Here Kuyper refers once again to church being the city on the hill. The fourth terrain is that of special grace utilizing common grace. Here Kuyper talks about common grace being controlled by the principles of divine revelation and 'Christian' in a stricter sense than the third terrain. Here the biblical reference is

³⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 190.

⁴¹ Ibid., 195, italics added.

⁴² Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 202.

the yeast in the dough (Matt 13:33). Kuyper goes on to distinguish these latter two terrains. The city on the hill is different from the yeast in the dough (Matt 13:33): 'the former is based on external contact, the latter on internal kinship.'⁴³

2.4. Later Writings

Finally, and almost by way of postscript, we should finish our description by noting some other works by Kuyper in this later phase which touched on ecclesiological matters: his *Encyclopedia* and the *Locus de Ecclesia*, works which, to the best of my knowledge, are not available in English. We rely therefore on Zwaanstra here:

In still later writings, Kuyper further elaborated his views on the visible manifestations of the church outside the life of the church as institute. These visible appearances he called the *ecclesia apparens*, or the church appearing as a visible organism and reflecting the life of regeneration in all areas of life. . . . The *ecclesia apparens* represented all the temporal and visible evidences and effects of the spiritual power residing in the mystical body of Christ. The body of Christ visibly manifested itself in the palingenesis, or Christian metamorphosis, of all aspects and spheres of human life: in persons, families, nations, and all cultural activities. In Kuyper's opinion, therefore, all Christian activity arose out of the soil of the church and could flourish only on that soil. But then, the church has to be understood as the total life of humanity, including the cosmos, which had been restored through palingenesis, and not as the institute whose sphere of activity was strictly limited by its offices.⁴⁴

3. Analysis and Critique

Having sketched Kuyper's use of the distinction I would like to offer some lines of critique. While there is so much to appreciate in Kuyper's Reformed presuppositions, creativity and vision, and given the contextual caveats already noted, there are questions that must be raised concerning the legitimacy and usefulness of Kuyper's own construal of church as institute and church as organism. I would like to focus on a number of ways Kuyper is more speculative and less Scriptural in his distinction.

First, we return to 'Rooted and Grounded'. While James Bratt may be right that this 1870 sermon 'valorized the institutional church as nowhere else in the rest of Kuyper's work',⁴⁵ and while Kuyper is at pains to stress the inseparability of institute and organism, is the basic conceptualisation even valid? Notwithstanding the fact that Ephesians 3:17 seems to be referring to individual Christians and not the church collectively, while there are certainly metaphors that are 'organic' and 'constructed', can they be distinguished so neatly to demonstrate divine and human agency respectively? Sometimes organic images like the body are described as having to work if growth is to happen (Eph 4:1–16). Conversely the eschatological institutional 'city' of Hebrews 11:10 is not built by human hands but by God. Other examples could be cited with the 'living stones' of 1 Peter 2:5 being especially evocative.

⁴³ Kuyper, "Common Grace," 200.

⁴⁴ Zwaanstra, "Abraham Kuyper's Conception of the Church," 179.

⁴⁵ Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 176.

On interpreting biblical models of the church, Edmund Clowney notes that ‘there is a difference between a metaphor and a model.’⁴⁶ Kuyper has delineated two ‘families’ of biblical *metaphor*—one ‘rooted,’ the other ‘grounded’—and from them constructed his organic/institute *model*. However as Clowney warns, ‘the metaphor that would be extended for use as a model must be such that other scriptural metaphors and non-metaphorical statements can be included in it.’⁴⁷ Kuyper’s distinction is overly neat and simplistic. Rather than describing two discreet conceptions of church, however inseparable, might it not be better, conceptually, to think of one reality that is the church that has been divinely revealed to us in many different metaphors all of which qualify the other. What God has joined together let not Kuyper separate.

Second, with the distinction between institute and organism ‘set’ in Kuyper’s thinking, even though ‘Rooted and Grounded’ notes the indispensability of the church as institute, there are hints even here that the spiritual ‘organism’ has some kind of primacy. This is confirmed in later writings as the organism is valorised to the detriment of the institute, particularly when Kuyper appears to be speaking of the visibility of the organism, the *ecclesia apparens*. Bratt himself notes that in the later Kuyper, ‘his theory moved from his earlier institute-organism distinction to an institute-organism opposition.’⁴⁸ But what is the biblical evidence for a visible organic church? We do not have the space to go into a full-blown doctrine of the church. However a few modest ‘basics’ can be established which I hope are broad enough to have the consent of those of us who might have different ecclesiological sensibilities.⁴⁹ While not denying a spiritual and eschatological ‘now and not yet’ character to the church in that it is the Risen and Ascended Lord Himself who gathers a people from heaven,⁵⁰ the New Testament usage of ἐκκλησία ‘refers almost exclusively to the concrete assembly of Christians at a specific place.’⁵¹ This ‘specific place’ is either the local gathering of believers or the universal, heavenly and simultaneously eschatological gathering of all believers around the throne/Mount Zion. Apart from the much discussed reference in Acts 9:31, there does not seem to be a proliferation of ἐκκλησία being used to describe all the believers alive on earth at any one point in time, nor all those believers in a particular geographical region, nor is it used in the singular to refer to the aggregate of a multitude of local churches.

By separating of institute from organism, prioritising the organic over the institute, and focusing in later writings on the ‘visible organic church,’ Kuyper was in danger of departing from these, what I think are quite broad and generous, biblical contours, evacuating the word ‘church’ of any notion of ‘the gathered’ and of dislocating the visible organic church from any concrete congregation. As Zwaanstra notes, ‘By placing the church as institute alongside the church as a visible organism and assigning specifically different tasks to each, the conceptual unity of the church as an historical existing reality was seriously compromised, if not lost.’⁵² Even in Kuyper’s day one of his critics noted that the character

⁴⁶ Edmund P. Clowney, “Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, ed. D.A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁸ Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 186.

⁴⁹ I am thinking here of Independents, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians.

⁵⁰ See, for example, David Peterson, “The ‘Locus’ of the Church—Heaven or Earth?” *Churchman* 112 (1998): 199–213.

⁵¹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137.

⁵² Zwaanstra, “Abraham Kuyper’s Conception of the Church,” 181.

of the visible or local church was damaged and its destiny lowered by conceiving it as ‘a phenomenon of only passing significance’ and placing it on the same plane as other social institutions.⁵³

Moreover, there appears to be further dislocation between visible organic church and humanity. I am sympathetic to the cosmic work of Christ and his Kingly reign over all creation, sympathetic to a holistic anthropology which does not dichotomize physical and spiritual, and sympathetic to the social, political and cultural implications of putting all things under the Lordship of Christ. However, to call all this ‘church’, to use the body of Christ language in terms of ‘joints’ and ‘connective’ tissue, and to talk about church as organism manifesting itself ‘where all personal faith is missing’, is speculatively poetic and pseudo-mystical.

As indicated above, I do not want to be guilty of a pendulum swinging overstatement here, which looks like some form of ecclesiological ‘minimalism.’ As Volf notes:

Doubtless . . . the life of the church is not exhausted in the act of assembly. Even if the church is not assembled, it does live on as a church in the mutual service its members render to one another and in its common mission to the world. The church is not simply an act of assembling; rather it assembles at a specific place (see 1 Cor. 14:23). It is the *people* who in a specific way assemble at a specific place. In its most concentrated form however, the church does manifest itself concretely in the act of assembling for worship, and this is constitutive for its ecclesiality.⁵⁴

There is a ‘covenantal’ aspect to the nature of the church which one might (probably unhelpfully now) call ‘organic.’ In other words, the covenantally constituted church does not simply blink out of existence when it is not gathered. However whatever this aspect is and is called, it is inextricably tethered to the visible gathered local church, and it is this visible gathered and local church which is most natural and normative, in terms of biblical usage.

What lies behind Kuyper’s prioritising of the organic? I have already noted Kuyper’s change of context from pastor to politician. Bratt, Zwaanstra and others note in this later period the philosophical influences of Idealism and Romanticism, and in particular Schelling, on Kuyper’s thought.

A central feature to this thinking was the prioritization of essence over manifestation ‘and it’s marked elevation of the (free) organic over the (artificial) mechanism’ which ‘Kuyper took as axiomatic—and as an agenda.’⁵⁵ Such organic essentialist thinking can be traced right back to Kuyper’s doctoral dissertation, which compared Calvin and Johannes a Lasco’s ecclesiology, strongly favouring the latter. As Zwaanstra notes, ‘According to Kuyper, the essence of the invisible church lies in God, as a church-forming power or operation imminent in Him.’⁵⁶ This explains Kuyper’s stress on supralapsarian election being at the core of his ecclesiology: ‘In eternity the church was constituted as the mystical body of Christ and ultimately characterized in its most distinctive quality as an organism.’⁵⁷

⁵³ Quoted in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 191. Strangely, Bratt does not name the individual here.

⁵⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 137.

⁵⁵ Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 184.

⁵⁶ Zwaanstra, “Abraham Kuyper’s Conception of the Church,” 153.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

As has been observed, ‘the problem with organicist thinking is that it valorizes an abstract ‘totality’ outside the experience of individuals.’⁵⁸ Zwaanstra makes the point that Calvin too spoke of the church as an organism but in the sense of an historically existing community of believers, ‘Kuyper’s conception of the church is speculative and metaphysical rather than historical.’⁵⁹ As an aside, it is interesting to compare Van Til’s claim in his analysis of Kuyper’s position on common grace, that Kuyper’s epistemology displays Platonic and Kantian traits with its stress on abstract universals. I am not the first to notice that Kuyper appears to have had some difficulty in moving from God in eternity to God’s contingent action in creation. If there is not a chasm here, Kuyper may have dug himself a ditch.

At this point Kuyper does not seem particularly rooted and grounded in Scripture. Zwaanstra concludes that Kuyper made a serious error in suggesting there were many historical forms of the body of Christ, of which the institutional church was just one. Kuyper might have avoided this error by calling these other forms ‘Christian’ or evidences of the Kingdom of God, rather than ‘church.’⁶⁰

Moreover, I think that David Van Drunen is correct when he notes that Kuyper’s priority for the organic was curiously self-defeating:

Kuyper saw the organic church, whose task it was to pervade all of life’s spheres with Christian influence, as existing before, lying behind, and alone giving substance and value to the institutional church. Because, according to Kuyper’s own claims, the means of grace—the preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments—are received only in the institutional church, one might wonder how, apart from the institutional church, the organic church would attain any resources to support its own existence.⁶¹

Finally, it is well worth noting here that Klaas Schilder (1890–1952), the Reformed theologian who in his book *Christ and Culture* advocated an expansive theology of Christian cultural development, appears pointedly to take issue with Kuyper’s distinction, wanting to ‘protect’ the institutional church but *for the sake of cultural development*. He notes that, ‘the Church should not be even in the smallest direct centre of culture, but she *must* be the greatest indirect cultural *force*.’⁶² He expands this, I think very helpfully thus:

In the Head of the Church the sum of all things is drawn up. This statement destroys the theory according to which the Church itself is a cultural state or is allowed to become one. No encouragement is here given to any suggestion that the Church—which always, as institute, is to be instituted and therefore never gives away the name of Church to whatever else, in order to characterize the Christian communion in school, family, social life, political life, etc. is falsely called ‘the church as organism’—is *directly* a practical cultural business, let alone an exponent of culture. This sort of concept of the church would murder her, violate her. In a service in which the word is preached, the Church

⁵⁸ Duncan Heath and Judy Boreham, *Introducing Romanticism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2005), 34.

⁵⁹ Zwaanstra, “Abraham Kuyper’s Conception of the Church,” 157n17.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁶¹ Van Drunen, “Abraham Kuyper and the Reformed Natural Law and Two Kingdoms Traditions,” *CTJ* 42 (2007): 305.

⁶² Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. G. van Rongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1977), 107, http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/cc/christ_and_culture.pdf, emphasis in the original.

does not present a direct lecture on culture that goes into all sorts of technical details, a thinly disguised university of the peoples. But, on the other hand the administration of God's Word does put the whole of life under promises and norms. . . . From the Church, where the Spirit of Christ distributes the treasures of grace obtained by Him, the people of God have to pour out over the earth in all directions and unto all human activities, in order to proclaim over all this, and also to show in their own actions, the dominion of God, the Kingdom of heaven. From the Church the fire of obedience, the pure cultural glow included, must blaze forth all over the world.⁶³

4. Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to describe and critique Kuyper's distinction between church as institute and organism. While I agree with much of Kuyper's Reformed presuppositions, vision, and urgency for public theology and public engagement, I do not think that the institute/organism distinction, *as Kuyper understood it*, is a safe vehicle in which to carry this agenda forward, for it creates a forced distinction in describing the church, separates the 'organism' from the 'institute', and then stresses the organism to the detriment of the institute, ironically leading to the withering of what the 'organism' is meant to represent and achieve. It would seem safer for us to stick more closely and precisely to the New Testament understanding of ἐκκλησία. Let me re-iterate: this is not to deny Christ's cosmic work and kingship, or even the aspiration to see Kuyper's third and fourth terrains realised.⁶⁴ It is simply that it is unhelpful to directly, and without heavy qualification, call any of this 'church'. We need to work on creating a better conceptual framework, *not ditch public theology*.

If we *do* have to make a distinction, then we need to make one which stresses that it is the gathered church of redeemed believers that, in the words of Cornelius Plantinga, 'serves as witness to the new order, as agent for it, and as first model or exemplar of it.'⁶⁵ The means or 'engine' of any social, cultural or political agenda must be focused upon men and women being converted through the special grace

⁶³ Ibid., 105, emphasis in the original. It is worth noting that in parallel to these observations concerning the separation of the organism from the institute, is the debate over Kuyper's doctrine of common grace and whether he gave, first, an autonomy, stability and progressive power to common grace apart from special grace; and second whether such an autonomy is legitimate or illegitimate. There are similar Christological implications in a separating of Christ's work in creation and re-creation. This discussion obviously takes us beyond the scope of this paper save for noting that a broader placing of Kuyper in the Reformed tradition at this point is difficult. Whether one agrees with his overall sympathies or not, I think Van Drunen is correct in noting enough tensions and ambiguity in Kuyper's ecclesiology and the relationship between common grace and special grace, to conclude that he sits uncomfortably in both 'transformationist' and 'two-kingdom' camps. I mention this all here because it is on the issue of common grace and culture that Schilder in *Christ and Culture* is critical of Kuyper. For a detailed analysis of both Kuyper and Schilder on this topic see Henry Van Til's important 'classic', *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), with a foreword by Richard J. Mouw.

⁶⁴ Here I'm happy to reveal my own cards as one who holds to a congruity between cultural mandate and Great Commission. In this area, I think I am becoming more and more sympathetic to a position like that of Schilder. Branson Parler leans on Schilder in his critique of both Van Drunen's 'two kingdoms' model and Kuyper's view of common grace in his essay "Two Cities or Two Kingdoms?: The Importance of the Ultimate in Reformed Social Thought," in *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective*, ed. Ryan McIlhenny (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2012), 173–200.

⁶⁵ Cornelius Plantinga, "The Concern of the Church in the Socio-Political World," *CTJ* 18 (1983): 203.

of the gospel proclaimed, being nurtured in the gathered church, learning to apply Christ's Lordship to all areas of life, and sent out.⁶⁶ I think Carson is right in the following: 'when Kuyperianism, a branch of European Reformed Theology, becomes the intellectual structure on which we ground our attempts to influence the culture yet cuts itself loose from, say, the piety of the Heidelberg Confession, the price is sudden death.'⁶⁷

Carson himself ends up distinguishing between church *as church*, and church *as Christians*. Not fancy but helpful. Similarly, Michael Horton highlights the Reformed distinction between the public ministry of the church and the church as people scattered in their various vocations:

In the former sense, the Body of Christ is served, enjoying its Sabbath rest from secular callings and commitments, to be fed at Christ's banquet and filled with the Spirit. In the latter sense, the same body loves and serves its neighbors in the world. However, if the church is not first of all the place where Christians are made, then it cannot become a community of witnesses and servants.⁶⁸

To finish, because I'm happy to talk about cultural transformation, because of my own post-Christian British situation, and because of a certain temperament within conservative British evangelicalism,⁶⁹ I would like to suggest us channelling some of Kuyper's front-foot belligerence and poetic rhetorical power. In his address on 'sphere sovereignty', Kuyper concludes:

Could we permit a banner that we carried off from Golgotha to fall into enemy hands so long as the most extreme measures had not been tried, so long as one arrow was left unspent, so long as there remained in this inheritance one bodyguard—no matter how small—of those who were crowned by Golgotha? To that question . . . a 'By God, Never!' has resounded in our soul.⁷⁰

What can I say to my seminary students about their role and the role of public theology? What about this for a clarion call?

On behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ, Christians are engaged in a battle with the world. The gathered church is the heavenly, anticipatory eschatological army tent of the Lord and you pastors in training are going to be field medics, strengthening the troops, treating their wounds after battle, feeding them with God's word and sending them back out to take every thought captive for Christ.

⁶⁶ While I think it might be little too 'neat', I have some sympathy with Peter Bolt's conclusion in his survey of 'mission' in Acts concluding that "The concept of the "mission of the church" ought to be laid to rest. Acts does not present 'the church' as an institution which is sent. A particular church may send individuals to a particular work (cf. 13:1–4), but the church itself is not sent.' Peter Bolt, "Mission and Witness," in *Witness to the Nations: The Theology of Acts*, eds. D. G. Peterson and I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 210–11.

⁶⁷ D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 216.

⁶⁸ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 898.

⁶⁹ Given recent history, I have some sympathy with American Evangelicals being uncomfortable with 'culture war' language and wanting to retreat from it. However in my context, I would like conservative evangelicals in the UK to recognize that there is a culture war going on around us and to engage it at the cultural apologetic level.

⁷⁰ Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 490.

And the distinction to be made? How about church ‘gathered’ and church ‘going’? Or, maybe better still: ‘church gathered’ and ‘church dismissed’ (but *never* dismissed!).⁷¹

⁷¹ A shorter version of this article was presented as a paper at the ETS Annual Meeting, San Diego, November 2014. I would like to acknowledge my former MTh student, Matthew Banks, whose dissertation on Kuyper’s distinction has been of great assistance in the writing of this article.



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