

1997

Called Back to Stewardship: Recovering and Developing Abraham Kuyper's Cosmic Pneumatology

Vincent Bacote

Drew University, vincent.e.bacote@wheaton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr>

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bacote, Vincent (1997) "Called Back to Stewardship: Recovering and Developing Abraham Kuyper's Cosmic Pneumatology," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr/vol2/iss1997/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal for Christian Theological Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.

Vincent Bacote, "Called Back to Stewardship: Recovering and Developing Abraham Kuyper's Cosmic Pneumatology," [Journal for Christian Theological Research](http://www.jctr.org) [www.jctr.org] 2:3 (1997) par. 1-17.

Called Back to Stewardship: Recovering and Developing Abraham Kuyper's Cosmic Pneumatology

[Vincent Bacote](#)
Drew University

1. Abraham Kuyper's cosmic pneumatology provides a highly significant contribution to the further systematic development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It merits further examination in the present for two reasons. First, the cosmic work of the Spirit has tended to be neglected in Western systematic treatments of pneumatology; and second, modern approaches to cosmic pneumatology are incomplete. How so? A somewhat hyperbolic statement to this effect comes from Hendrikus Berkhof, who, in his 1964 volume on the Holy Spirit, noted that the relation between the Holy Spirit and creation was in need of development, and that he only knew Calvin and Kuyper to have written on it. In the intervening three decades, this aspect of pneumatology has received increased attention by theologians. Jürgen Moltmann, in *God in Creation and The Spirit of Life*, calls for a holistic doctrine of the Spirit, and adopts a pantheistic understanding of this relation, thereby hoping to engender greater respect for the created order. Colin Gunton highlights the Spirit's work as perfecter of creation so that the renewed creation will give praise to God. The World Council of Churches' Seventh Assembly in Canberra focused on the theme "Come, Holy Spirit, Renew The Whole Creation," and led to several Ecumenical Review articles reflecting on aspects of the theme, though none focused on the further development of the Spirit's role in creation. Ken Gnanakan's missiological response to Canberra focuses on the Spirit's role in re-creation, and also emphasizes the ecological concern that stems from this focus, as a corrective to misinterpretations of the stewardship paradigm. Michael Welker looks at the characteristic traits of God's reality and power in the structural patterns of life. Mark Wallace calls for an ecological pneumatology, re-visioning the Spirit as a life-giving force rather than as a metaphysical entity. Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz expresses the Spirit as "the core-energy of creation itself," and as the divine means to connect the cosmic, personal, and social elements of life. Catharina J.M. Halkes and Rosemary Radford Ruether are among Feminist approaches to the question. These have all contributed to the discussion, but, in my opinion, have not adequately or properly developed the ecological, cultural, and sociopolitical implications of the Spirit's role in creation.

2. What do I mean when I say that these recent contributions have not adequately or properly developed the ecological, cultural, and sociopolitical implications of cosmic pneumatology? I mean that it is my view that these works are either incomplete in some sense (such as in scope), or that the proposals for expressing and applying the implications of cosmic pneumatology are not within the limits of orthodoxy. What follows are brief statements concerning what may be missing in these works. In the case of Moltmann, his concerns for the health of creation are valid, and I appreciate his desire to redirect our focus to God's immanence in creation (while maintaining an emphasis on divine transcendence), but I resist expressing the Spirit-world relation in a pantheistic manner, as I believe this unnecessarily blurs the creator/creature distinction (for an in-depth engagement with Moltmann, see Steven Bouma-Prediger's, *The Greening of Theology*). I have a question in this regard. Is it necessary to imply a kind of interdependence between God and the creation in order to engender a better ecological theology? Moltmann also desires that the creation be allowed a sabbath rest, in contrast to being perversely "developed" (i.e. devastated) under the guise of stewardship. It may be true that much creation stewardship has been a lightly-masked domination of creation (while masquerading as dominion), but is this sufficient reason to move away from stewardship properly performed? Instead of abandoning the concept, should we not strive to do it right instead? Colin Gunton's work is focused on Christ, but does a great job of demonstrating a trinitarian approach to the created order. What is lacking is an emphasis on the sociopolitical and cultural implications of the Spirit's cosmic work as it moves creation toward its goal, and that is probably because it is beyond the scope of that particular work. As mentioned above, though the WCC Assembly in Canberra focused on the Spirit in creation, it did not result in the production of any works (within the bounds of orthodoxy) that developed the various implications of the Spirit's role in creation. Gnanakan's article is impressive, but the article simply offered some suggestions for corrections in perspective regarding the ecological implications of stewardship of the created order. In that he offered suggestions, his article did not focus on developing the implications of the Spirit's cosmic work. Welker's work is focused on discovering the Spirit's reality in divergent and even contradictory structures of life experience. The aspects of his work which focus on the Spirit's activity in creation are more focused on renewal and redemption than on preservation, so there is a difference in focus between Welker and Kuyper. There is not a particular emphasis on the stewardship of creation as a result of the Spirit's preserving work, and while it might be improper to label his work as inadequate or incomplete, it might best be said that Welker's pneumatology arrives at its sociopolitical implications through a different means than Kuyper's. Wallace's work is very honest and intriguing, and it attempts to be a postmodern approach to the question of the Spirit's cosmic work, with a central focus on ecology. While I admire his concerns, I disagree with his view that all biotic forms are on the same level, as his work intentionally contends against the notion of human stewardship over creation. Indeed, there is interdependence among life-forms on this planet, yet is it not also true that humans are unique as bearers of the imago Dei, and is there not a mandate for stewardly dominion over creation? Further, I find Wallace's conception of the Spirit in creation to be too pantheistic (he admits that this may be the case in chapter five of *Fragments of the Spirit*). Fahrenholz's case is similar, in that his efforts to express the Spirit's presence in creation also blur the creator/creature distinction. Though he admits that they are metaphors, the concepts of "womb" as a primeval space in God for creation and "respiration" as the manner in which God sustains the creation are too pantheistic. I understand what Fahrenholz wishes to convey, but his metaphors make the divine-creation relationship too close. I also disagree with his use of the category of myth as a means for expressing an understanding of ultimate reality. His use of this category leads me to ask what he views as "real" in the history of creation, and what he views as "mythic creations" designed to provide categories of understanding for our life in a particular place and time. Halkes and Ruether share a concern regarding the patriarchal theological and sociocultural perspectives which allow and encourage the abuse and domination of both women and nature. Neither author develops her alternative approaches to such patriarchal abuse from an explicitly pneumatological standpoint, though the Spirit is acknowledged as being active in creation. A further problem with Ruether is her positive appropriation of non-Christian perspectives as part of her development of an ecotheology, the most obvious example of which is in the book's title, the concept of "Gaia," the earth as a divine living organism. This is the most explicitly pantheistic approach of all of the authors, and, as stated above, pantheism obliterates the creator/creature distinction. Another noteworthy point of disagreement is that both Halkes and Ruether desire an end to the stewardship of creation (which they, like many of the other authors, view as domination and violence to creation).

3. I propose to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Abraham Kuyper's cosmic pneumatology. This aspect of Kuyper's pneumatology calls us to approach creation with respect, to recognize that we are stewards of the earth, particularly because the Spirit is involved in creation in the form of "common grace."

4. For Kuyper, there are three aspects of the Spirit's activity in creation. First, the Spirit performs a perfecting function in the creative act. As the Father spoke and produced the material of creation, and the Son formed and ordered creation, so the Spirit's role is that of bringing the potentialities of creation to their most complete end. Kuyper writes, ". . . [O]ur creation will be complete only when we have become what God designed. . . . Thus to lead the creature to its destiny, to cause it to develop according to its nature, to make it perfect, is the proper work of the Holy Spirit" (The Work of the Holy Spirit 21). What is the end of this perfection for Kuyper? It is the glory of God (Holy Spirit 22). A central purpose of the Spirit's cosmic work is to be immanent in creation and to promote the progress and development of the created order toward its proper telos.

5. Second, Kuyper views the Spirit as the animating principle of all life. He says:

How intangible are the forces of nature, how full of majesty the forces of magnetism! But life underlies all. Even through the apparently dead trunk sighs an imperceptible breath. From the unfathomable depths of all an inward, hidden principle works upward and outward. It shows in nature, much more in man and angel. And what is this quickening and animating principle but the Holy Spirit? . . . This inward, invisible something is God's direct touch. There is in us and in every creature a point where the living God touches us to uphold us; for nothing exists without being upheld by Almighty God from moment to moment. . . . And as the Holy Spirit is the Person in the Holy Trinity whose office it is to effect this direct touch and fellowship with the creature in his inmost being, it is He who dwells in the hearts of the elect; who animates every rational being; who sustains the principle of life in every creature" (Holy Spirit 25-26).

No life can be sustained apart from the Spirit's involvement, apart from divine "vitalization."

6. The third aspect of the Spirit's role in creation is the restraint of sin. The Spirit constantly opposes sin and prevents creation from falling into chaos. This is a vital function as the Spirit moves creation to its end of glorifying God (Holy Spirit 24).

7. In Kuyper's theology, the cosmic activities of the Spirit are implicitly linked to common grace. In describing the role of common grace in creation, Kuyper's comments are inextricably related to his statements concerning the Spirit's role in creation. Speaking of common grace in the Stone Lectures on Calvinism, Kuyper says:

... Calvinism has wrought an entire change in the world of thoughts and conceptions. In this also, placing itself before the face of God, it has not only honored man for the sake of his likeness to the Divine image, but also the world as a Divine creation, and has at once placed to the front the great principle that there is a particular grace which works Salvation, and also a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator (56-57).

As described earlier, Kuyper understands the cosmic work of the Spirit as that which seeks God's glory in a perfected telos, upholds and maintains the world, and resists the sinful curse on creation so that creation may develop and move toward its intended end. He also says:

... there is no sun, moon, nor star, no material, plant, or animal, and in a much higher sense, no man, skill, gift, or talent unless God touch and support them all. It is this act of coming into immediate contact with every creature, animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, rational or irrational, that, according to the profound conception of the Word of God, is performed not by the Father, nor by the Son, but by the Holy Spirit (Holy Spirit 44).

From these statements it is clear that the Spirit can be understood as the agent of, or the one who provides the context for, common grace. The Spirit's life-giving and life-sustaining touch is the "engine" of common grace.

8. For Kuyper, it is this common grace that serves as the impetus for political involvement, social action, and cultural development. Regarding this, S. U. Zuidema says:

Common grace supplies the believer with the material for fulfilling his calling to be culturally formative and to fight the battle of the Lord in the world of culture. The sphere of common grace . . . is the area where Christian scholarship, Christian politics, Christian social action and individual Christian activity are to be developed. Common grace provides the platform, as it were, on which these cultural tasks are to be acted out. Common grace is the presupposition of the possibility of Christian cultural activity (57).

Further, Kuyper understands common grace as compelling us to responsibly attend to and develop creation, saying: ". . . for our relation to the world: the recognition that in the whole world the curse is restrained by grace, that the life of the world is to be honored in its independence, and that we must, in every domain, discover the treasures and develop the potencies hidden by God in nature and in human life" (Calvinism 59). As stated above, the Spirit's cosmic activity is the source of common grace. These last two statements lead to the conclusion that the Spirit as provider of common grace is the driving force behind a total engagement with the world, and further that the Spirit's cosmic work in common grace calls for responsible stewardship of the created order. Common grace calls for fervent involvement in creation, but with a fervor tempered by a great respect for creation.

9. How does this pneumatologically derived approach to creation-stewardship relate to the contemporary situation? In an interesting reversal of a wide-spread consensus, many consider stewardship to be a patronizing approach which permits humanity to act destructively in relationship to the environment. James Nash expresses the dilemma well:

Though the ethical concept of stewardship justifiably has positive connotations to many Christians, implying love and service, it has negative ones for substantial numbers of environmentalists (including many Christians). Stewardship conveys to them, because of historical associations with Gifford Pinchot and others in this century, the notion of anthropocentric and instrumental management of the biosphere as humanly owned "property" and "resources" (107).

Nash, thus, is ambivalent toward the use of the term, and understandably so.⁴ Nevertheless, the perceived misappropriation and abuse of the stewardship paradigm does not therefore call for lexical or conceptual alternatives, but for an alternative which is instead the proper application of stewardship, and which provides a counterbalance to the caricatured representations of the paradigm in many circles.

10. Kuyper's cosmic pneumatology sounds a prophetic call for "responsible" stewardship, by virtue of the Spirit's intimate involvement in and with creation. Because of the Spirit's role in common grace, all persons are called to greater responsibility as stewards of creation. It is true that the recipients of particular grace are understood as having a greater motive for heeding the call to responsible stewardship, but it is also true for Kuyper that common grace provides even those who are not partakers of particular grace with some capacity for developing the creation to the glory of God (Zuidema 65).

11. How is it that Kuyper's cosmic pneumatology leads to a level of responsible stewardship where nature is respected and not viewed as the object of simple anthropocentric domination? While Kuyper holds a view of "dominion" where the world is subject to humanity, this subjection is understood as a serving, "holy duty," to be performed under God in all the world in all parts of life (Calvinism 57). In the performance of this duty, "Christian action in the domain of common grace must minister to the structures of creation and the structures of common grace (which for all intents and purposes coincide)-instead of overturning them! . . . Its results can only be a higher development' of nature' and the natural,' i.e., of the creature" (Zuidema 72). Nature is lifted and respected on its own terms in Kuyper's approach to common grace. This leads to an urge toward cooperation with the Spirit in helping creation reach its potential. Creation is affirmed as good and worthy of full, responsible engagement. Further, due to common grace "No Christian has a legitimate reason for withdrawing from the world of God's creating. That holds for the whole of creation, to its farthest reaches; that holds for "all areas"; that holds in principle for the whole world of culture, politics included" (Zuidema 72). There is no room for a sectarian apoliticism in Kuyper's pneumatology, nor for an anti-creational opposition between technology and theology. Rather, science and politics become means of respecting creation as we transform it in a stewardly fashion to the glory of God.

12. This pneumatologically derived approach to stewardship leads to a positive environmental perspective, and to well-considered approaches to the environment without needing to resort to alternative proposals. Conceptually, it is not necessary to conceive of the God/world or Spirit/world relation in pantheistic or panentheistic forms in order to produce or encourage sound ecological theology and public policy. The many ideological avenues which emphasize God's immanence in order to raise or create ecological consciousness run the risk of attributing the negative as well as positive aspects of the world to God, including evil and injustice. Also, these conceptual paradigms, when taken to the extreme, put God at risk by connecting the destiny of creation with divine destiny. While Scripture affirms that God responds to human action in creation, and even that God grieves over sin, it does not portray a "God at risk" who is somehow at the mercy of human decision. Is it not more accurate to the deepest levels of analysis as well as biblical to conceive of God as Kuyper does, as a transcendent Trinitarian God who relates to creation in an intimate manner through the sustaining presence of the Spirit?

13. Practically speaking, responsible stewardship may manifest itself in an environmental concern which may lead to various forms of social action. There is no place for callous disregard of the environment because of an other-worldly focus. Indeed, there has been much Christian neglect of the environment, and the time is now at hand to develop an orthopraxis which reflects the high ideals of responsible stewardship. To do nothing would be to resist the Spirit and misuse common grace.

14. While it is easy to see how Kuyper's view of the Spirit's work in creation leads to responsible ecological stewardship, how is it that the Spirit's involvement in creation leads to "responsible" cultural development and political involvement? A good way to understand this relation is to inquire about the function of culture and politics. If we understand both politics and culture as activities in which we "work with" the material of creation, or if we view these activities as our acting "upon" creation, then it follows that both areas require responsible stewardship. As with the environment, it is important that we properly apply these approaches to the created order. We must not understand stewardship and dominion to be license for domination. At this juncture it is important to remember the earlier quote that all activity in creation, the realm of common grace, must minister to the structures of creation. Culturally speaking, the objective is to develop human potencies and sociocultural structures toward a God-glorifying end. Politically, Zuidema puts it best: "Christian political action will have to be more than lobbying for legislation to preserve the "Christian heritage" of Sunday observance: it will have to be the expression of a political philosophy and program that touches upon every aspect of political life" (73). Kuyper's objective in common grace is not for Christians to be a certain breed of citizen, but simply to be citizens *par excellence* who embody the best in public and private life (Zuidema 73). As stated earlier, it is primarily Christians who Kuyper has in mind, as it is those who are being sanctified who will be most concerned to be good stewards of common grace. However, this does not mean that non-Christians are unable to develop the creation; rather, that they will be less inclined toward cultivating the potencies in common grace for the purposes of God's glory.

15. This discussion of the Spirit as the ultimate driving force behind ecological, political, and cultural responsibility eventually leads to the question of appearances. What forms will ecological plans, political philosophies, or cultural norms and values take if there is cooperation with the Spirit's enabling, sustaining, and developing power? What should this cooperation look like? Should it look like Calvin's Geneva mediated through Kuyper's Amsterdam? Probably not; but it means that we, like they, need to discern where the works of responsible stewardship lie in the natural and cultural cities of our day. Is it necessary that one ally oneself with Kuyper's political and cultural program, in which he called for separate Christian organizations? Possibly, but one cannot make hard and fast assertions concerning many ancillary particulars, since these may vary between societies and cultures. One answer to the first question could be that, while one might not rigidly call for one type of ecology, politics, and culture, there should be certain common characteristics among all attempts to be responsible stewards of creation. What are these characteristics? At the very least, there should be a climate of service and nurture, a climate of justice, an attitude of humility, and a zeal for creative development - characteristics which are encouraged by common grace. Regarding the latter two questions, it is certainly not necessary to become Kuyperian clones. For example, while in some cases it is indeed necessary that Christians form separate organizations, and while some social structures may even call for the manifestation of the church militant, all societies are not the same, and the requirements of responsible stewardship will vary, even to the inclusion of situations in which Christians work with non-Christians. In fact, it is practically impossible to effectively participate in a modern democracy without some alliance with those of different beliefs. Moreover, although I am arguing for the value of Kuyper's paradigm, I am not necessarily arguing for his application of that paradigm. Some may disagree with Kuyper's political and cultural views,² yet one need not adopt his positions in order to appreciate, utilize, and develop his work.

16. Some might argue that Kuyper's doctrines of cosmic pneumatology and common grace are only sufficient for certain cultures or certain epochs. While it is true that one might not find all of Kuyper's approach to be valuable, my argument is that Kuyper's cosmic pneumatology is generally useful for all, and will prove to be indispensable as we seek to develop approaches to pneumatology for the future. We may need to reconfigure or restate aspects of his pneumatology as we understand more about the Spirit and creation, but we cannot ignore his contribution. While there is a growing number of theologians who have written about cosmic pneumatology, this increase has hardly made Kuyper irrelevant or useless. There is fertile ground in Kuyper for further development, particularly as we seek to understand how the Spirit is related to all aspects of a public theology.

17. Pneumatologically derived responsible stewardship provides us with an impetus and rationale for engagement with the myriad, complex issues which impact society. It is important to recover a proper understanding and application of the stewardship paradigm, and Kuyper's approach is quite helpful. As we seek to systematically complete the picture of the Spirit's role in creation and the vital implications which follow, we do well to incorporate the essence of Kuyper's approach. The Spirit's sustaining and developing power rouses us from our neglect of the environment and our lack of substantive progress in political and cultural development. If this "call of the Spirit" is heeded, then the stage may be set for significant, transformative contributions to the issues of the day.

Footnotes

¹ This in spite of the fact that Thomas Derr has recently challenged this "naturalistic" view as contrary to the scientific evidence as well as to the theological tradition. See T. Derr, J. Nash, and T. Neuhaus, *Environmental Ethics and Christian Humanism*. Abingdon Press Studies in Christian Ethics, ed. M.L. Stackhouse (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

² Some may also view Kuyper as a cultural imperialist and latent racist, but the debates regarding these issues are not in themselves germane to the argument of this paper. They may play a role in discussions of Kuyper's applications of the paradigm at issue here, but arguments in favor of such applications are not being espoused in this essay.

Works Cited

- Hendrikus Berkhof. *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964.
- Ken R. Gnanakan. "The Holy Spirit, Creation and New Creation." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 15 (April 1991)101-110.
- Colin E. Gunton. *Christ and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.
- Catharina J. M. Halkes. *New Creation: Christian Feminism and the Renewal of the Earth*. London: SPCK, 1991.
- Abraham Kuyper. *Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures*. New Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931.
- _____. *The Work of the Holy Spirit*. Trans. Henri De Vries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1900.
- Jürgen Moltmann. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985. London: SCM, 1985.
- _____. *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*. Trans. Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.
- Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz. *God's Spirit: Transforming a World in Crisis*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995.
- James A. Nash. *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1991.
- Rosemary Radford Reuther. *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Mark. I. Wallace. *Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation*. New York: Continuum, 1996.
- Michael Welker. *God the Spirit*. Trans. John Hoffmeyer. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994.
- 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.