



MICHAEL ALLEN

**GROUNDED
IN HEAVEN**

Recentering
Christian Hope and Life
on God

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In the End, God

Retrieving a Theological Eschatology

Eschatology came of age in the twentieth century in many ways. In that century Karl Barth said that any theology that is not wholly eschatological has nothing at all to do with Jesus Christ. In that century Ernst Käsemann argued that apocalyptic is the mother of all theology. Such claims for the importance of eschatology have been matched by new emphases regarding the substance of eschatology. And, perhaps more than any other person, Jürgen Moltmann has insisted that eschatology suffuses the Christian faith, and invigorates the moral and political imagination, with hope. Within the sphere of influence of Dutch Reformed theology as well—especially that based on the work of Abraham Kuyper and the so-called neo-Calvinism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—eschatology has been a major area of study. Proposed reforms in eschatology get at the nature of Christian hope and its *telos* (eternal life in heaven? new heavens and new earth?). Watchwords of this new emphasis can be identified: “embodied,” “earthy,” “cosmic,” and “holistic.”

Reform can be productive or parasitic. Theologically speaking, attempts to revitalize a doctrine, practice, or church sometimes lead to flourishing by way of deepening. But reforms can also be so intently or myopically focused as to lead to the unintended loss of a wider theological context and of confessional

integrity. The danger of polemics in theological debate, then, is not only a matter of tone (whether loving or vindictive) and of content (whether true or false) but also of breadth (whether well balanced or narrow). Too many times, potentially prophetic words misfire because they are separated from a wider doctrinal commitment to the whole counsel of God. In such cases, a reform (perhaps a needful and good reform) takes a parasitic turn and eats away at the substance of the doctrine, confession, practice, or church. Should modern reforms to Christian eschatological hope be viewed as productive or as parasitic? How can we steer them toward the former and away from the latter?

Hope grasps at the future, but a serious Christian hope for our times also needs to reach back to the past.¹ The present chapter argues that contemporary Reformed theology, or at least the segment thereof that is heavily influenced by the neo-Calvinists or by the Kuyperian tradition, tends at times to maintain and extend its Reformed distinctiveness at the cost of its catholic substance. This forgetfulness is symptomatic not only of historical amnesia but of biblical dislocation. In several prominent recent accounts, central elements of the Kuyperian vision have been articulated in such a way that the center of our faith—the God who is with us (Immanuel)—goes missing at the finale. To regain a genuine Reformed catholicity, we need to retrieve an eschatology that is unabashedly and substantively theological.

Not that the neo-Calvinist emphasis upon the universality of Christ's lordship is wrong; far from it, for it too is exegetically vital and theologically central. Nor that the Augustinianism of the Kuyperians, with its testimony to Christ's reign throughout history and his providential governance of all things unto their blessed end, is misguided; again, nothing could be more

1. See Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); cf. the various proposals in Darren Sarisky, ed., *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: T & T Clark, 2017).

appropriate and fundamental in reading the witness of both the prophets and the apostles. But the neo-Calvinist emphasis often forecloses other lines of scriptural teaching that have marked the church's life and ministry through the centuries. Kuyperians have been unduly suspicious of these teachings as well. In particular, Kuyperian eschatology has so emphasized the earthiness of our Christian hope that it has sometimes lost sight of broader biblical priorities and has consequently undercut the catholic tradition's emphasis upon communion with God and the ultimate bliss of the beatific vision. While Kuyperians have maintained an Augustinian emphasis upon God's grace and Christ's lordship, which bring us to our designated end in the kingdom of God, they have sometimes let slip the precise content of that end, namely, the presence of the triune God. We need to be wary, therefore, of unwittingly falling into an eschatological naturalism that speaks of God instrumentally (as a means to, or instigator of, an end) but fails to confess communion with God as our one true end (in whom alone any other things are to be enjoyed).

**Lord of All:
The Kuyperian Reform of Christian Cosmology**

Neo-Calvinism has shaped the Reformed theological world like no other movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Largely owing to the instigation of Abraham Kuyper and to the analysis of Herman Bavinck, the Dutch Reformed theological vision has had inestimable impact far beyond the borders of the Netherlands or even of its immigrant churches elsewhere. Reformed theologians in other geographic, cultural, and denominational backgrounds have been resourced by Dutch Reformed theologians, ranging from Kuyper to Bavinck to Berkouwer to Hoekema.² In re-

2. For reference only to the remarkable impact of this tradition upon

cent years N. T. Wright has advanced Kuyperian principles in his many academic and popular writings, extending the influence of the tradition much more widely in his prolific work.³

Further, the tradition has had a catholic ripple effect in various ways. No doubt, the most intellectually respected movement from the Reformed world of late has been that of “Reformed epistemology” as developed by Alvin Plantinga.⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff has established himself as one of the most significant philosophers of recent decades, participating in conversations on a range of topics including the doctrine of God, aesthetics, justice, and the doctrine of divine revelation.⁵ Both Plantinga and Wolterstorff have been Gifford lecturers, perhaps the highest mark of academic distinction in their field.

Not only in the highest echelons of philosophical inquiry but also in the grassroots movements of Christian education, the Dutch Reformed neo-Calvinist vision has spread like wildfire. Many primary and secondary schools now operate with an awareness of God’s sovereignty or lordship over all things, of the calling to take captive every thought to Christ, and of the

Reformed theology in the United States of America, see James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), and the essays in part 2 of David F. Wells, *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 115–86.

3. Wright himself has noted the influence of persons related to the neo-Calvinist Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto during his formative years in Canada in the 1980s.

4. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5. See, e.g., Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

need, therefore, to think systemically about Christian formation and education. Recent criticisms by James K. A. Smith of neo-Calvinist worldview education only illustrate the strength of the movement inasmuch as they offer qualifications and contexts for its furtherance (not its demolition, as some misinformed readers of Smith surmise).⁶ And institutions with no specifically Reformed commitments (e.g., Wheaton College) are marked by philosophies of education that owe much to the emphases of the neo-Calvinists, as evidenced by the programmatic statements issued previously by Arthur Holmes and more recently by Duane Litfin.⁷ Evangelicals at Wheaton and other schools have not all gone Dutch, of course, but it takes little detective work to see the lessons learned from the Kuyperians. I experienced the strengths of this neo-Calvinist approach in my studies not only at Wheaton College (for multiple degrees) but also in a Christian school founded by the Dutch Reformed in Miami, Florida, of all places. When a movement from the Netherlands and the Dutch Midwest has reached the “capital of Latin America,” one can see something of its wide cultural influence.

What have the neo-Calvinists given to this wider world of academe and its various pockets or institutions of culture making? It is not inaccurate to suggest that the Kuyperian advance

6. See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); and especially the following responses to reviews of *Desiring the Kingdom*: James K. A. Smith, “Worldview, Sphere Sovereignty, and *Desiring the Kingdom*: A Guide for (Perplexed) Reformed Folk,” *Pro Rege* 39, no. 4 (June 2011): 15–24; James K. A. Smith, “From Christian Scholarship to Christian Education [Response to a Review Symposium on *Desiring the Kingdom*],” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 39 (2010): 229–32; and James K. A. Smith, “Two Cheers for Worldview: A Response to Thiessen,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 14 (2010): 55–58.

7. Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

was a distinctly Reformed extension of certain reformational truths heralded by Martin Luther and John Calvin regarding the doctrines of creation, of humanity, and of vocation. Kuyperians have responded to the later temptation of modernity and its relocation of the religious in the private sphere by reaffirming and elaborating upon those reformers' teaching on the glory of the ordinary. In the hands of the Kuyperians, the sacred/secular dichotomy has been critiqued, reminding countless modern Christians that all of life is to be lived as unto the Lord (1 Cor 10:31).

Further, we must note that the Kuyperians have rooted these expositions of created reality in a deeper matter: the doctrine of the triune God. Perhaps no one is as impressive in this regard as that great dogmatician, Herman Bavinck. In his 1904 essay "The Future of Calvinism," he attempted to express the core commitments of the movement:

The root principle of this Calvinism is the confession of God's absolute sovereignty. Not one special attribute of God, for instance His love or justice, His holiness or equity, but God Himself as such in the unity of all His attributes and perfection of His entire Being is the point of departure for the thinking and acting of the Calvinist. From this root principle everything that is specifically Reformed may be derived and explained. It was this that led to the sharp distinction between what is God's and creature's, to belief in the sole authority of the Holy Scriptures, in the all-sufficiency of Christ and His word, in the omnipotence of the work of grace. Hence also the sharp distinction between the divine and human in the Person and the two natures of Christ, between the external internal call, between the sign and the matter signified in the sacrament. From this source likewise sprang the doctrine of the absolute dependence of the creature,

"With his characteristic clarity and verve, Michael Allen presents an alternative to the recent evangelical trend of thinning down heaven to human—all too human—proportions. This lively book is a conversation-changer!"

— J. TODD BILLINGS

"Allen's call to heavenly-mindedness on earth is a provocative corrective to the contemporary emphasis on earth-bound conceptions of heaven."

— KEVIN J. VANHOOZER

"Ecumenical readers will find this book to be, at its core, an exercise in sound biblical and Augustinian good sense."

— MATTHEW LEVERING

"This provocative book challenges us to 'recenter' our Christian hope and life on God himself. We need Michael Allen's voice in this conversation, for his arguments are not simply about the future, but about how we live in the present."

— KELLY M. KAPIC

"A splendid volume. Beneath its superb brevity lies a deep reservoir of research."

— MICHAEL HORTON

ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS are joined at the hip, says Michael Allen, and both need theocentric reorientation. In *Grounded in Heaven* Allen counters the earthly-mindedness of much contemporary theology. Reaching back to classical ethics as well as its reformation by Calvin and other Reformed theologians, Allen's *Grounded in Heaven* offers a distinctly Protestant account of the ascetical calling to both heavenly-mindedness and self-denial.

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