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# Abraham Kuyper on Apologetics

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## Abstract

*This paper explores Abraham Kuyper's view of apologetics, particularly in response to B.B. Warfield's classical approach. It examines three key questions: Why did Warfield and Kuyper disagree over the questions of apologetics; Why did Kuyper have such a low view of apologetics; and What alternative did Kuyper propose to apologetics in Christian life and thought?*

## Key words:

Abraham Kuyper, B.B. Warfield, apologetics

## 1. Introduction

In his *Lectures on Calvinism*, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was an apologist for Calvinism. He showed how Calvinism, as a world-and-life-view, had affected for the good many areas of life from the arts through to the sciences and politics. In *Sphere Sovereignty* (Kuyper, 1998b), Kuyper was an apologist for a distinctly Christian university in Dutch higher education. In his *South African Crisis* (Kuyper, 1900a), he writes as an apologist for the Boers and against the British. In many ways, Kuyper appears to have filled the role of an apologist.

But Kuyper was not an apologist in the sense we usually envision: someone rationally defending Christianity or trying to persuade someone of the veracity of Christianity. When we think of apologetics, the questions of personal evangelism usually come to mind:

Does God exist?

Are all religions the same?

Was Jesus both human and God?

Can we believe in miracles in an age of science?

How can a loving and all-powerful God allow evil, suffering, and death?

Did Jesus rise bodily from the dead?

Isn't Christianity intolerant?

How can we believe the Bible?

Surprisingly, Kuyper – the great Dutch advocate for world-engaging Christianity – did not address any of these questions directly. He does not appear to have been overly concerned with making Christianity presentable and appealing to a critical or non-believing audience for the purpose of individual conversion. He was certainly convinced of Christianity's truth and relevance but he doesn't appear to have felt the weight of defending it for those not already inclined toward faith. In his introduction to the Dutch translation of George Fredrick Wright's (1907b) book, he stated, "I never placed apologetics in the foreground" (Kuyper, 1908).

In fact, in his *Principles of Sacred Theology*<sup>1</sup>, Kuyper goes so far as to say that "Every effort to prove the existence of God by so-called [apologetic] evidences must fail and has failed" (Kuyper, 1968:113). In this regard, Kuyper was not an apologist: he actually called apologetics "useless" (Kuyper, 1931:136).

On the other hand, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921), the Old Princeton theologian, had a very high view of apologetics. Generally, Warfield had great respect for Kuyper. He called Kuyper "a theologian of genius" (Warfield, 1908) and was primarily responsible for Kuyper coming to the USA to deliver the Stone Lectures at Princeton. In his introduction to Beattie's *Apologetics*, Warfield describes Kuyper as "one of the really great theologians of our time."

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1 This was an abridged translation of Kuyper (1894). It was originally translated by J. Hendrick De Vries and published as *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* by Charles Scribner's in 1898. It was subsequently republished by Eerdmans as *Principles of Sacred Theology* in 1954 – the version used here is the 1968 Eerdmans reprint.

Despite this high praise that Warfield gave to Kuyper, Warfield was so concerned with Kuyper's low view of apologetics that he devoted his introduction to Beattie's *Apologetics* (Warfield, 1903) to responding to Kuyper on this issue. Warfield was simply puzzled by Kuyper's dismissive attitude towards apologetics. He wrote, "we cannot understand why [Kuyper] does not magnify, instead of minifying the value of Apologetics" (Warfield, 1903). From Warfield's perspective, Kuyper had given apologetics "a curtailed place", "a subordinate place".

This raises some important questions for understanding Kuyper's view of apologetics within the Reformed/Reformational tradition. Through the use of Warfield as a theological/apologetical foil, this paper will uncover Kuyper's view of and response to apologetics. Why did Kuyper and Warfield differ on this topic to such a degree? Why does Kuyper have a "low" view of apologetics? And, what alternative to apologetics does Kuyper propose?

## **2. Kuyper and Warfield on Apologetics**

Before we delve into the contours of Kuyper's attitude towards apologetics, a brief overview of Warfield's understanding will set the stage. Warfield is helpful here because his view of apologetics tends to be what most Protestants think of when they envision apologetics. As such, he is a stable benchmark from which to present Kuyper's critique and alternative view.

### **2.1 Warfield on Apologetics**

Warfield has a positive view of apologetics, classically understood. For him, apologetics is that rhetorical and rational attempt to convince another of God's existence. Then, once God's existence has been successfully argued for that other, to the point that they become convicted in this new belief, then the specific contours of biblical Christianity can be presented.

Warfield envisions apologetics as a kind of chain of logical sequences, beginning with convincing someone that God exists: "before we draw [theology] from the Scriptures, we must assure ourselves that there is a knowledge of God in the Scriptures. And, before we do that, we must assure ourselves that there is a knowledge of God in the world. And, before we do that, we must assure ourselves that a knowledge of God is possible for man [sic]. And, before we do that, we must assure ourselves that there is a God to know" (Warfield, 1903:4).

This is the same view that Warfield expresses later when he writes that

Apologetics are defenses of Christianity, in its entirety, in its essence, or in some one or other of its elements or presuppositions, as against either all assailants, actual or conceivable, or some particular form or instance of attack; though, of course, as good defenses they may rise above mere defenses and become vindications. Apologetics undertakes not the defense, not even the vindication, but the establishment, not, strictly speaking, of Christianity, but rather of that knowledge of God which Christianity professes to embody and seeks to make efficient in the world, and which it is the business of theology scientifically to explicate (Warfield, 1908).

As we can observe, Warfield relies on human reason when it comes to apologetics. It's not as though human reason is able to produce conversion to faith but apologetics, like other sciences, is rooted in argumentation and evidence that is meant to convince. As he says,

We are not absurdly arguing that Apologetics has in itself the power to make a man a Christian or to conquer the world to Christ. Only the Spirit of Life can communicate life to a dead soul, or can convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. But we are arguing that faith is, in all its exercises alike, a form of conviction, and is, therefore, necessarily grounded in evidence (Warfield, 1908).

For Warfield, therefore, apologetics is the positive means by which a Christian argues for God's existence and then shows, with argument and evidence, "the truth of Christianity as the absolute religion" (Warfield, 1908). Likewise, apologetics is also the negative means for "defending developed Christianity against philosophy, falsely so called" (Warfield, 1903). In contrast, Kuyper sees no place for apologetics in establishing or defending the truth of Christianity – their views are that starkly disjointed.

## **2.2 Kuyper on Apologetics**

There are occasional points in Kuyper's career when he appears to support a Warfield-like embrace of apologetics. One example is Kuyper's introduction to the Dutch version of G.F. Wright's *Scientific Confirmations of Old Testament History*.<sup>2</sup> Kuyper wrote that Wright's book shows "the high character of the evidence supporting the common belief concerning the Scriptures, against the wildness and conceit of the critics" (Kuyper, 1908). The use of "evidence" here is strikingly similar to Warfield, noted above.

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2 The Dutch version (Wright, 1907b) contained Kuyper's introduction – the introduction was translated and published as Kuyper (1908).

But Kuyper had experienced how apologetics, in the wrong hands, could be turned into a façade. On his move to Utrecht (which took place in 1867), he came across some prominent apologists. He perceived them leading a double life: believing one thing in the pulpit and another in the study: they held “two divergent beliefs”. This led Kuyper to question apologetics’ ability to give Christians (much less others) “their strong faith”. The early church believed in the resurrection of Christ and the key elements of faith without an apologetics of rational/scientific evidence and proof:

Did the church believe these facts or did it not? If not, then neither scientific apologetic nor philosophic enveloping of the truth could make the Christian movement an authority in the world. But if the church believes the facts, the strength of the confession based on this belief should show itself. Only a fresh and inspired conviction can give this lost faith back to us. (Kuyper, 1908)

Thus, Kuyper became, very early in his career, suspicious of apologetics and tended to view it as a defensive ploy, and a largely ineffective one at that. Though at times he recognizes a limited and narrow place for it, Kuyper would have agreed with Warfield’s criticism of his position that apologetics was merely a “subdivision of a subdivision”.

For Kuyper, therefore, apologetics has only two tasks: “to displace pseudo-theology ... and ... wayward philosophy” (Kuyper, 1894:461). This can be seen in Kuyper’s discussion of evolution/ism (see, Bishop, 2021). Kuyper does cover some of the relevant scientific ideas but primarily he seeks to get at the root issues: the worldview operative behind evolutionism. As a Christian, Kuyper objects to the monist and pantheist elements that he perceives through his apologetic engagement of the foundational principles and then goes on to show how these are inconsistent with a Christian worldview. But, as is evident, this is a very different approach than Warfield’s.

### ***2.3 Why/Where/How Kuyper and Warfield differ***

So, where exactly is the difference between Kuyper and Warfield when it comes to apologetics? Initially, it only appears that they differ in terms of the extent to which apologetics is useful. Upon closer examination, though, there are three key areas in which Kuyper diverges significantly from Warfield, producing a significantly different view of apologetics and its place in Christian life and thought. These three areas relate to Kuyper’s theology of human reason as well as his larger pragmatic and social critiques.

### 2.3.1 *A theology of human reason*

For Kuyper, the biblical account of the Fall (Genesis 3) and the related Calvinist doctrine of “total depravity” mean that a stark antithesis has been introduced into every aspect of creation, human reason included. As such, Kuyper does not believe that human reason is completely reliable. Like all aspects of God’s creation after human rebellion against God, even the human intellect has become corrupted and misdirected and no longer functions inerrantly.

In his 1892 rectoral address “The Blurring of the Boundaries”, Kuyper speaks of human rationality as “our clouded reason” because “sin not only spoiled the will and misdirected the mind but also *darkened the intellect*” (Kuyper, 1998a:391, 398 – emphasis in the original). The consequence of this view is that Kuyper views the present world as “abnormal”: “reason is incomplete ...’ Hence, the rather low value he placed on apologetics” (Bishop, 2020:64).

In this way, Kuyper is similar to Karl Barth in their common scepticism towards apologetics. As Bartholomew says, “Barth...was more radical than either Kuyper or Bavinck in terms of being wary of natural theology and thus of apologetics.” (Bartholomew, 2017:24). The noetic effect of sin means that, for Kuyper, apologetics and natural theology are misplaced. On natural theology, Kuyper remarks: “of itself is unable to supply any pure knowledge of God” (Kuyper, 1968:373). Natural theology is not a useful tool. No one is converted by rational argument alone. As with natural theology, so with apologetics for Kuyper: the mind cannot renew the heart. As Kuyper puts it:

This is the reason why the arguments for the truth of the Scripture never avail anything. A person endowed with faith gradually will accept Scripture; if not so endowed he will never accept it, though he should be flooded with apologetics. Surely it is our duty to assist seeking souls, to explain or remove difficulties, sometimes even to silence a mocker; but to make an unbeliever have faith in Scripture is utterly beyond man’s power (Kuyper, 1900:440).

It is this theological framework that explains why Kuyper refuses to allow reason to be the unquestionable arbiter of truth, even in apologetics. As he says, “no argument will avail where Reason is both a party to the dispute and its judge” (Kuyper, 1998a:396). This would result in the Christian abandoning their faith or at least submitting it to the idol of neutral rationality: it “hands the game to the opponent before it starts” (Kuyper, 1998a:383).

Heslam has also astutely observed this difference (between faith and reason) between Warfield and Kuyper (Heslam, 1999:4). This is largely due to two key influences on Warfield (and indeed the Princeton theology he embodied). These were Thomas Reid's Scottish Common Sense philosophy and Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) inductivism outlined in *The Novum Organum* (1620). It is rather ironic that to attempt to undermine the effect of modernism on Christian belief Warfield drew upon the presuppositions of modernism embedded in Reid and Bacon's approaches.<sup>3</sup>

Warfield's approach has been called "Right Reason epistemology". It comprised accepting evidentialism<sup>4</sup> and classical Christian epistemology, as these were seen to uphold biblical inerrancy and rest on reason rather than faith.

Thus, it is this role of reliable human reason which is the main theological difference between Kuyper and Warfield. Warfield accepted it and based the foundations of his apologetics on it. Kuyper rejected it as a foundation on which to build. Kuyper, with his background in modernist theology at Leiden University and with his rejection of the tenets of the French Revolution, was aware of the role that reason played in the development of these and Enlightenment worldviews – he thus emphasised revelation over reason.

Warfield, like Kuyper, was also an opponent of modernism. However, in his approach, Warfield apparently adopted modernist presuppositions when it came to his acceptance of apologetics as a reliable science. He argues based on the objectivity of science for revealing truth and the empiricist notion that observations lead to facts that, in turn, lead to patterns and theories and, eventually, certain truths. Thus, for Warfield, science was value-free or neutral.

For Kuyper this was unacceptable. He emphasized that faith played a role in every aspect of life, even in the sciences. Hence, not even science could be value-free. There is no neutral evidence: all evidence

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3 Helseth (2010), Smith (2011), and Zaspel (2010) have challenged the idea that Warfield was greatly influenced by Scottish Common Sense philosophy; nevertheless, though Warfield may have been less influenced than his Princeton predecessors – for example, Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), Charles Hodge (1797-1878), and A.A. Hodge (1823-1886) – the influence is still noticeable. On the role of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in Princeton see, for example, Ahlstrom (1955), Vander Stelt (1978), Marsden (1980), and Noll (1985).

4 Evidentialism is the use of evidence to prove the existence of God or the truth of Christianity. Proponents of such an approach include John Warwick Montgomery (1931- ), Josh McDowell (1939- ), and Gary Habermas (1950-).

is framed within a perspective (a faith commitment) and, therefore, an interpretive grid that highlights or foregrounds certain elements at the expense of others. Its “objectivity” is only a myth. Thus, Kuyper’s view of the significant role of *palingenesis*<sup>5</sup> and the resulting antithesis, even in scientific pursuit of truth.

Edgar and Oliphint see the issue as to the role and extent of the antithesis:

Warfield saw Kuyper’s notion of apologetics tied to (what Warfield saw as) an extreme view of the antithesis. According to Warfield, it was illegitimate to think of the antithesis as a “difference in *kind*” as a “difference in kind”, if what is meant by that is an entirely different species (Edgar & Oliphint, 2011: loc 9545<sup>6</sup>).

Warfield misunderstood Kuyper’s antithesis as involving a difference in kind. That is, Warfield thought it was a metaphysical antithesis. For Kuyper, the antithesis was covenantal and practical. It is not just a difference between Christian and non-Christian, though. The antithesis runs through the heart of everyone. However, *palingenesis* does make a critical difference. The regenerate and the non-regenerate see the world differently. So differently, in fact, that Kuyper maintained that there were two kinds of people (Kuyper, 1968:150-154).

These two kinds of people pursued two kinds of science (Kuyper, 1968:155-176). Warfield disagreed. Regeneration (*palingenesis*), Kuyper argued, “breaks humanity in two”, one consequence being that “there is an abyss in the human consciousness across which no bridge can be laid” (Kuyper, 1968:152). Both kinds of people are human, but they are “inwardly different” (Kuyper, 1968:154). Consequently, they “face the cosmos from different points of view, and are impelled by different impulses” (Kuyper, 1968:154). Two kinds of people, with different starting-points, principles and impulses, inevitably means that there are two kinds of science (Kuyper, 1968:155ff). Put simply, investigation of the world starts off from different places depending on one’s vantage point, proceeds differently, giving different results. There is no neutrality, not even in science – not even in apologetics. As Kuyper says, this produces “two credos [which] stand squarely against each other” (Kuyper, 1998b:468).

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5 Kuyper uses the term *palingenesis*, which means rebirth, as it “covers both personal rebirth (Tit 3:5) and the re-creation of heaven and earth (Matt. 19:2)” cited in Bratt (2018:39).

6 Loc. applies to the place in the Kindle version.

This is the reason that Kuyper, in contrast to Warfield, states that “Apologetics has always failed to reach results, and has weakened rather than strengthened the reasoner” (Kuyper, 1968:160). *Palingenesis* and the resulting antithesis (even in human reason) means that “every effort to understand each other will be futile” and “it will be impossible to settle the difference of insight”. It is because of Kuyper’s theology of human reason that he differs so significantly from Warfield when it comes to apologetics as a reliable scientific exercise.

### 2.3.2 *Kuyper’s pragmatic critique*

A second reason for Kuyper’s difference from Warfield on apologetics is related to Kuyper’s pragmatic critique: apologetics, built upon faulty human reason, is too weak, pragmatically, for the necessary engagement Christians are called to in public life. Kuyper senses that this weakness lies precisely in its anxiously-reactive or defensive posture rather than in a confident hope that can lead towards discerning and discovering truth.

In “The Blurring of the Boundaries”, Kuyper speaks of Christian resistance to modernism’s rise and influential spread. One can almost sense a tone of ridicule in Kuyper’s attitude towards his contemporary apologists who offer merely a resistance of “ineffectual yapping” (Kuyper, 1998a:394). He identifies apologetics pragmatically with “the role of defender” who, when “under attack, the defenders rushed to the area to answer each shot from the enemy with a shot of their own. ... But no matter how hard they struck back, they gained nothing; for on the heels of one host of objections – held back only for a moment – came another army of yet weightier grievances” (Kuyper, 1998a:394-395). In the end, Kuyper concludes, “they had allowed the enemy to determine the plan of campaign ... Hence the endless series of concessions, till at last even the bravest fighter, thoroughly demoralized, lost courage” (Kuyper, 1998a: 395).

This explains why, in his Princeton Stone Lectures, Kuyper concludes that apologetics have not advanced us “one single step” (Kuyper, 1931:11). The reason is clear: apologetics is not designed to be a forward-progressing enterprise; it is defensive in posture. It safeguards the losing of ground, but it doesn’t present an original and offensive position that moves debate forward.

In Kuyper’s lengthy analysis of education, he offers a fuller explanation of the three faults that lie behind his pragmatic critique of apologetics (Kuyper, 2019:128-129). The first has already been hinted at above:

apologetics is a reactive rather than proactive argument. “If you rush to spend all your time as an apologist,” Kuyper explains, “you will have your studies dictated to you by your opponent ... every morning you will have to be ready to answer what has been brought against you this time. You will be tied down by an unproductive series of ad hoc arguments.”

Kuyper identifies a second problem related to criticisms of Christianity: there aren't any truly new objections. He says that Christians ought to “refuse to waste our energy refuting for the umpteenth time what has so often been refuted already”. The apologetic approach is a pointless pursuit of repeatedly addressing “objections raised against us [which] are worn-out theses that have been fully answered long ago” (Kuyper, 2019:129).

But the most serious problem with apologetics for Kuyper is that the Christian apologist and the non-Christian sceptic/critic are attempting to engage without first realizing that they are starting from different (even contradictory) starting points. That is, trying to argue with those who disagree at a fundamental level of first principles will not lead anywhere insightful or productive because there is no common ground identified between them. “Why engage in an argument, for example, about Christian doctrine with someone who denies it?”

Kuyper was a strong proponent of arguing proactively from first principles rather than in an ad hoc or piecemeal defensive fashion. Throughout his career and published works, he repeatedly probes to the foundational level in the battle of ideas. “Our battle today has to be fought on the basis of principle. ... The clash between the basic theme of the Christian religion and that of our century cuts too deep to be left to the playful sparring of the apologists” (Kuyper, 1998a:368). This was his same conviction in his Stone Lectures: “From the first therefore, I have always said to myself, – ‘If the battle is to be fought with honour and with a hope of victory, then *principle* must be arrayed against *principle*” (Kuyper, 1931:11). Bartholomew has also recognized the importance that Kuyper attributed to principles (Bartholomew, 2017:301).

Without this concerted attention to first principles, the foundational level in the engagement of differing ideas, Kuyper believes that we are left merely with “a conflict of *opinions*, a wrestling with abstract *concepts*, a battle decided in a clever *phrase*” (Kuyper, 1998a:410). And if ideas are engaged as opinions or the clever manipulation of words and phrases, then this is where the third aspect of Kuyper's

critique of apologetics lies: it narrows the intellect to the exercise of power, an element of Kuyper's wider social critique.

### 2.3.3 *Kuyper's social critique*

Kuyper perceives in apologetics not only a theological problem (it doesn't take the falleness of human reason seriously enough) or a pragmatic one (it doesn't move from defensive response to proactive assertion of foundational principles seriously enough) but also a socio-philosophical one: apologetics utilizes fashionable cultural forms of power uncritically.

Kuyper was keenly perceptive of the dynamics of cultural power throughout his lifetime (Wagenman, 2020). And we can detect this same concern with the ideological or rhetorical power of the strong over the weak in his attitude towards the use of apologetics. Reason, like other forms of human activity, can be reduced – even in the form of apologetics – to what Kuyper calls “raw power” (Kuyper, 1998a:393). The result of raw power exercised through reason results in a situation where “the stronger celebrates its dubious triumph” – in either Christian or secular forms (Kuyper, 1998a:392).

It is secular modernism's “enormous *sense of power*” that Kuyper perceives as active in apologetics where rational argumentation is assumed to be what produces faith (Kuyper, 1998a:370). The problem is that rational or rhetorical power, through the intellectual force of logic, can only produce a coercive conclusion. But a logical conclusion is not the same as personal faith. For Kuyper, it is personal faith rather than a logical conclusion that the Christian ought to be aiming for. “For what does it profit you if you can track the law of causality without a break to the first nebula, the first cell or the first germ, if you nevertheless have to acknowledge behind that cell or germ the unexplained act of a creating God, and so for all your thinking still run into the very rock your whole theory was devised to avoid?” (Kuyper, 1998a:377).

## 3. Kuyper's alternative approach to Apologetics

If Kuyper is critical of apologetics for these weighty reasons, which distinguish Kuyper from Warfield so significantly on this topic, then what does he offer instead of apologetics? Bartholomew is right that “theologically Kuyper was highly critical of piecemeal apologetics in the face of the onslaught of modernism” (Bartholomew, 2017:203). Instead of the power of scientific human reason, Kuyper offers a unique life of one's own, rooted in a scriptural

worldview, that produces a battle of beliefs that is to be waged in the public sphere.

### ***3.1 A unique life of one's own***

Repeatedly, when Kuyper is faced with the challenges of modernism (in either its secular or their apologetic forms), he responds with the witness of a unique Christian life of one's own. This is the alternative to an apologetic approach that is constantly responding to critiques: the assertion of a life, in all its comprehensiveness, with its own unique inner dynamic: Christian faith lived comprehensively.

Rather than Christians responding reactively to the shifting objections of non-Christians with rational apologetics, Kuyper believes that the true witness the Christian is called to offer is a unique life of their own. He argues that Christians “must start by drawing a line around *their own circle*” (Kuyper, 1998a:396) – meaning that they must explicitly and thoughtfully occupy a particular place rooted in foundational theological principles revealed through scripture. Then they “must develop a *life of their own* within that circle” (Kuyper, 1998a:396) which highlights the contextual nature of Christian life in unique times and places, with unique challenges and opportunities. Finally, Kuyper says, they “must *render account* for the life thus constituted” (Kuyper, 1998a:396) – meaning that a proactive and credibly-contextualized assertion must be presented before others for their consideration.<sup>7</sup>

What Kuyper is highlighting is that secular modernism is itself a unique form of human life. Kuyper recognizes that modernism is “so powerful a *life-movement*” (Kuyper, 1998a:397). It is “the vast energy of an all-embracing *life-system*” (Kuyper, 1931:11), and therefore it “can be successfully countered only by the movement of an antithetical *life*” (Kuyper, 1998a:397). What Kuyper wants Christians to understand is that in the face of a comprehensive life-system like secular modernism, “then also it must be understood that we have to take our stand in a life-system of equally comprehensive and far-reaching power” (Kuyper, 1931:11).<sup>8</sup> The Christian is not primarily called to a rational or rhetorical engagement with the fashionable forms of power but to so clearly and uniquely embody a unique Christian life, in all its comprehensiveness, that the surrounding world has a thesis set before them that requires recognition and consideration. Kuyper believes that “there is

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7 Bartholomew argues that “engaging the worldviews of the day intelligently ... [means] bearing witness to Christ with credibility” (2017:129).

8 This other “power” that the Christian has access to will be elaborated below but it is not the same kind of power that modernism possesses, though the same word (“power”) is used.

only one kind of resistance worth offering” (Kuyper, 1998b:401) and it is the presentation to others of a unique *life*, in all its unique comprehensiveness, not only a powerfully rhetorical rationale.

Kuyper’s own life is a primary exhibit of what this unique (and yet comprehensive) life could look like: taking the Christian faith and embodying it in media, labour, economics, politics, education, etc. As Kuyper himself said, the goal is “to consecrate every department of life and every energy at its disposal to the glory of God” (Kuyper, 1931:24). Yes, “Kuyper was highly critical of piecemeal apologetics in the face of the onslaught of modernism, [but] he recognized and was a master practitioner of” applying a Christian worldview through a whole range of public cultural enterprises (Bartholomew, 2017:129). It is this comprehensiveness of the Christian life as it views and engages in the entire world to the glory of God which points to the other aspect of Kuyper’s alternative to apologetics: a scriptural worldview.

### **3.2 A scriptural worldview**

In addition to pointing to the importance of a unique life, Kuyper also insists that a unique worldview, received by the Christian and informed by scripture, is the means by which God acts in the world. It is important to Kuyper that a Christian worldview is something one receives. The unique life of the Christian, as compared with the secular modernist, does not disclose itself merely in a religious system of doctrines or an ecclesiastical system of hierarchies but in a comprehensive *life* that is lived and “this powerful life-system is not to be invented nor formulated by ourselves, but is to be taken and applied as it presents itself in history [Scripture]” (Kuyper, 1931:4).

It is precisely here that Kuyper recognizes and safeguards divine action in *palingenesis*. “Faith in Scripture,” Kuyper points out, “can never be the result of criticism [ie. reason]” (Kuyper, 1998a:399) For Kuyper, divine action through scripture is not something human reason can prove. Scripture attests to the mighty redemptive acts of God through history, culminating in Jesus and the revelation of God’s personal presence in the world through the holy spirit. The Christian is not called to “boil this down” into propositional doctrines or proofs but to receive it as a story (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004), allow it to transform one’s life, and then live uniquely out of it.

This transforming act of God through scripture does touch on thought as part of the whole life (what Kuyper calls being “reoriented in the world of *thought*” (Kuyper, 1998a:39)) but it is not limited to thought. Clearly, as Bartholomew summarizes Kuyper here, Christian life “and cultural engagement *require* an explanation of the logic of the gospel that moves beyond the great

story of Scripture. At an academic *as well as* at a practical level, serious Christian engagement with life and culture – that is, mission – requires the development of a Christian worldview” (Bartholomew, 2017:129 – emphasis in the original).

Instead of a different rational approach, Kuyper’s advocacy of worldview, rooted in scripture, involves the reception of a “divinely ordained authority” (Kuyper, 1998a:401) that reveals the drama of God in history/scripture and produces something new – which, Kuyper says, “is precisely the issue” (Kuyper, 1998a:398) It is precisely the issue because in *palingenesis* God creates something new and unique which results in a battle of beliefs.

### **3.3 A rivalry of beliefs**

Faith and unbelief, for Kuyper, are two rival credos, two antithetical positions of faith. It is not as though Christian faith is a kind of faith and secularism is the rejection of faith. Secular modernism is, for Kuyper, another version of faith with its own authority and life. It is a comprehensive “life-system” that shapes one’s view of the world and one’s place and purpose in it.

This explains why Kuyper routinely contrasts “believers” with other rationalists (even apologists!): because they represent “another impression of *life*” from each other (Kuyper, 1998a:398). Or, as he put it in his Stone Lectures, these are two “*life systems* [which] are wrestling one with another, in mortal combat” (Kuyper, 1931:11). In fact, Kuyper goes on to say that it is this struggle “in which I myself have been spending all my energy for nearly forty years. In this struggle Apologetics have advanced us not one single step” (Kuyper, 1931:11).

Kuyper recognized the religious tension between various faiths active in human life, Christian or otherwise. As Bartholomew explains, “We live and think *out of* our worldviews, so it is not a question of whether one has a worldview or not, but the question of which worldview one thinks from, lives from, and works from” (Bartholomew, 2017:129). In fact, not recognizing this clash of rival beliefs leaves Christians susceptible to cultural assimilation to the dominant forms of belief in a culture. “Failure to consciously develop and indwell a Christian worldview will merely leave us captive to the ideological worldviews of our day” (Bartholomew, 2017:129).

Therefore, part of the reason why Kuyper has such a strongly negative view of apologetics is because, as it relies on reason, apologetics is at best incomplete. As noted above, Kuyper views reason as “incomplete” and therefore we can safely say at this point that he also views apologetics

as incomplete – a position that may be rather shocking for a university founder and professor. The reason for this is not only Kuyper’s theological commitments (to the Fall and total depravity, noted above) but a consequence of those commitments: if reason is fallen, clouded, and partially unreliable, then to the extent that Christian faith, in the form of apologetics, attaches itself to rational argumentation, it will be incomplete.

Kuyper argued that “Faith in Scripture can never be the result of criticism [Reason]” – to which he goes on with the following explanation: “Otherwise no one could ever have believed for criticism [reason] is still incomplete” (Kuyper, 1998a:399). Kuyper is acknowledging that reason is a human faculty, like other fallen human faculties, which (by nature of its fallenness) can never fully arrive at a comprehensive, objective, God’s-perspective view of the entirety of reality. Reason is only a means by which we fumble forwards in the dark. As such, it is always ever-incomplete. Finite human understanding will never attain and comprehend the infinite.

But secular modernism, in Kuyper’s view, not only sought an “enormous *sense of power*” (noted above) but also an “inflated sense of *human worth*, and its penetration into the riches of *nature*” (Kuyper, 1998a:370). Kuyper views the modernist project as depersonalising creation and substituting “nature” and then overemphasizing human reason’s abilities and substituting “objective knowledge” in place of incomplete and ongoing discovery. It’s not a stretch to see how a “God of the gaps” problematic develops here where Christian responses to ongoing human discoveries about the world create a perennial apologetic problem. Instead, Kuyper believes that in scripture we have a record of what God has done in history: making covenantal promises and then keeping them through the self-inflicted pain and torture of Jesus (God-in-the-world).

Therefore, the Christian is not called to engage in the same scientific, rational battle as the apologist envisions. Rather, the Christian is called to an engagement of beliefs as rival comprehensive life-systems. And this, for Kuyper, is not something that apologetics can achieve because it, itself, is beholden to the same fallacies as modern, scientific reason.

## 4. Conclusion

Kuyper has a low view of apologetics because he believes human reason, after the Fall, is clouded and faulty. With a darkened intellect, apologetics can only provide a defensive posture to the onslaught of competing views

of the world, too often based on power in the modern era. As an alternative, Kuyper argues that a unique Christian life, in all its comprehensiveness, is what is needed. This life is rooted in *palingenesis* and finds its authority in God's mighty acts of redemption recorded in scripture: a scriptural worldview. It is this worldview which patterns Christian life and thought on everything, even the battle of beliefs that exists despite reason's limited abilities. It is the logic of the gospel, rooted in the renewed human life, embodied in the whole of life, and articulated with thoughtful credibility, that eschews power and safeguards God's sovereign action in the world.

As noted at the beginning of this paper Kuyper wrote in his Introduction to Wright's book, "I never placed apologetics in the foreground". In the next few sentences of the same Introduction, he continues: "The best generals always taught that in a severe war one perishes as soon as he stands on the defensive alone. He can expect success only when he boldly ventures to attack the enemy" (Kuyper, 1908:374).

This is exactly what Kuyper did. He took the battle to the modernists, naturalists and humanists in establishing a Christian University, a Christian political party and editing two Christian newspapers. Rather than being apologetic he proffered an alternative and showed that Calvinism as a life-system was able to combat modernism.

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