

# Bad Religion at Work: Four Warnings from Abraham Kuyper

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If this is the culture we live in, what then, is a Christian response to these new forms of spirituality at work?

I suggest that we turn to a rather unlikely source for guidance—a 19th century Dutch theologian named Abraham Kuyper.

In his lecture on “**Calvinism and Religion**,” Abraham Kuyper was particularly critical when it came to modern ideas about religion and spirituality. He argued that while these new perspectives on promised personal “enlightenment,” “liberation,” and “empowerment,” they actually led to something quite the opposite.

In the end, Kuyper outlined four modern aspects of what we might call “Bad Religion”

- 1 **Self-Religion**
- 2 **Expert-Religion**
- 3 **Partial-Religion**
- 4 **Normal-Religion**

I want to explore Kuyper’s perspective on these matters in light of new forms of spirituality in the Seattle workplace.

## 1 **Self-Religion at Work**

Engaging in spiritual practices at work for the sole purpose of improving self-focus, self-empowerment, and self-actualization is a perfect example of what Kuyper might call “self-religion.” According to self-religion, spiritual practices are “useful” for making your work easier, more efficient, healthy, and productive.

Religion, in short, becomes a tool to make your life better.

While these examples might sound foreign and “New Agey” to Christians, we must admit that Christians are often guilty of using their faith and their God as well.

As Christians we often ignore God when things are going well. Then, when something goes wrong, we turn to God to fix it. Or we resolve to do more “Christian stuff” in order to fix the issue. We resolve to pray more and read the Bible more in hopes that we can use our faith to make the problem go away. The idea, basically, is that God, prayer, church, and the Bible are merely useful tools whose only purpose is to serve and help us.

This, Kuyper argues, is the essence of “self-religion.” Treating God like a divine servant whose sole purpose is to serve and glorify us. Treating the church as a group of people who exist purely to serve, empower, and inspire us.

But the gospel is not about us, it’s about God.

The gospel is not about our power, freedom, or glory—it’s about God’s. Our lives and work are a response to His work. We are an echo of His song—a reflection of His glory. The purpose of our story is to tell His.

The counter-cultural and paradoxical truth of the gospel is this. If we want to live, we must die. If we want to be free, we must submit. If we want to be filled, we must become empty.

“Self-Religion” promises liberation through self-focus, the gospel promises liberation through self-forgetfulness. The good news of the gospel is that it is not about us and it is not up to us to make the world work.

Our daily work is a small part of the much larger, much more complex, and much more beautiful work of God. It is not about us.

The gospel offers a different path to self-empowerment at work; service to others, submission to others, and glory to God.

## 2 Expert-Religion

Seattle is a culture that loves spiritual “experts” like Yoga teachers, psychics, life coaches, celebrity authors, gurus, and holistic wellness speakers. There are many who look to experts for direction, meaning, and purpose. Looking to them for answers and affirmation, asking them how to live, work, eat, and prosper.

Abraham Kuyper argues that while these spiritual experts promise liberation, empowerment, and self-actualization, they ultimately make us dependent on them. They set themselves up as permanent mediators between people and the “truth.”

Once again Christians can fall into this trap as well. Rather than cultivating a direct relationship with the living God, we look to celebrity Christian preachers and speakers to connect us to God in new and inspiring ways. We look to worship leaders to connect us to God through the use of musical skill and emotion. We feel alienated from God and we look to Christian experts to reconnect us.

But depending on experts and mediators does not liberate or empower us—it weakens and constrains us. Rather than being empowered to live out the gospel freely in our daily work we continually run back to experts to tell us what to do, to give us the answers.

Kuyper argues that we live every day coram deo (directly before the face of God). We live and work everyday in the presence of our creator. We don’t need a priest, guru, pastor, or worship leader to connect us to God, we can meet God everyday and everywhere.

The reality is the God of the universe has established a direct and unmediated relationship with us through Jesus Christ. We were not saved by any expert. The experts can’t tell us “God’s plan for our lives.” We don’t need a sacred place, song, or leader to hear from God. We don’t need to wait until Sunday to connect to God. We can meet Him on Monday. He is Emmanuel—God with us. He’s with us in our offices as we go about our work, he’s in the board rooms and conference rooms and cafeterias and coffee shops where we go about our daily lives. God is already there. God is already speaking.

### 3 Partial-Religion

The culture around us shouts: “Faith is something personal and private.” In this statement is the temptation to believe that religion and spirituality is something that helps us in those quiet, dark, and secluded corners of our lives. Religion is there to help us with our marriage issues or our depression. It is there to fix our alcoholism or our stress. It is there to provide us with some community when we are lonely. While that is true, the gospel does speak into these places. This is only a portion of what the gospel does.

This practice of religion is private, personal, or, what Kuyper calls, “partial religion.” The belief that religion is here to serve or fix some small dysfunctional part of our “personal” life.

Once again Christians do this as well. We speak of Jesus as our “personal” Lord and Savior someone who helps us when parts of our lives don’t work right. Jesus ends up being our personal God of the gaps. Whenever a gap appears in our lives, God is invited to fill or fix that part.

Kuyper’s critique of partial religion is that when we see him as just personal we never give God the whole of our lives, the whole of our careers, we give him the parts that are safe, that are limited, private, or personal.

The problem is this.

Jesus is not simply our “personal” Lord and Savior. He is Lord and Savior—full stop. Jesus did not come to earth to simply live in our hearts and be our personal “pocket-sized” Savior. Jesus is the lord of the cosmos who came to renew and restore all of life and all of creation.

The cosmic work of Christ means that our faith can no longer be limited to the personal, private, or partial. It has to spill out into every aspect, artery, and avenue of our public and working lives. The implications, Kuyper argues, are clear, “every labora (work) shall be permeated by ora (prayer)... Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or in his mind, in the world of art, and science, he is, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of God...” (53).

God's calling on our lives is not partial, it is holistic; touching, changing, empowering, and using every aspect of our collective beings to bring about his Kingdom in the world.

#### **4 Normal-Religion**

It is common today for people to resort to spiritual platitudes like “people are basically good,” “do your best,” or “believe in yourself.”

In such a culture religion and spirituality are not concerned with radical human rebellion, repentance, and transformation. Instead modern spirituality focuses on self-empowerment and the gradual improvement of one's life and world. When this is the focus of religion, spirituality becomes a tool for elevating one's personal awareness and mindfulness. Life is basically OK, everything is basically “normal.” The purpose of religion is simply helping normal people become just a little better.

Christians do this as well. We all too often think faith is about “being good.” Being a Christian is about trying and trying hard. Praying harder, working harder, being good even when its hard. Ultimately, we convince ourselves that the gospel is about our effort. That if we work hard we will get a promotion, we will succeed, and God will be on our side.

In the classic film Monty Python and the Holy Grail, a knight has had his legs and arms cut off in battle. Rather than admit defeat, he stubbornly demands that the fight continue insisting that he is “OK.” It is, after all, “just a flesh wound!”

Abraham Kuyper argues that this is the message of “normal religion.” Such spirituality looks at the broken, selfish, and rebellious state of our human hearts and world and says “it's ok” it's “just a flesh wound.”

But everything is not ok. Everything is not normal, It is not just a flesh wound.

According to the gospel, we are mortally wounded. We are dead in our sins. We don't need reassurance—we need a resurrection. We don't need a band aid—we need a surgeon.

Our culture's message that you are basically good and just need to believe in yourself and try harder, is actually a terrifically cruel thing to say to a person. First of all, it isolates them and tells them that they can believe in nothing but themselves. Second, it tells a person that their improvement depends entirely upon them. Third, that there is no excuse if they can't succeed. Fourth, every time they fail the only response is to keep working and self-actualizing.

This is what makes Christianity abnormal in our culture. Its message fundamentally does not make sense to a world that believes everything is "ok."

For those who finally recognize that they suffer from more than a flesh wound, the message that you need resurrection is good news.

This does not mean that Christians have no confidence or power. It simply means that our confidence rests, not in ourselves, but in our God, who is capable of doing what only He can do: resurrect and redeem.

## **Conclusion**

In opposition to "bad religion" Kuyper upholds that:

- We exist to serve and glorify God. (We do not "use" God at work.)
- We work directly with God. (We do not need experts to meet God at work.)
- We give our whole lives and our whole work to God. (We should not limit God to our private lives.)
- We are in need of God's redemption. (We do not need just a little improvement, but a whole overhaul.)

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