CHAPTER SUMMARY

This dissertation seeks to offer a historically-based constructive theology of discipleship within Abraham Kuyper and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is driven, principally and more specifically, by the following research question:

how (if actually) does a historical and theological comparison of Abraham Kuyper, as a Dutch theologian and politician from 1894-1905, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as a German pastor then prisoner from 1935-1945, contribute to a concept of discipleship that is for the common good?

To begin, the Introduction frames the dissertation around the theological question of discipleship. First, it is argued, discipleship is an act of theology. As such, this study is about the historical and theological interaction between both the concept and practice of discipleship. It seeks a definition of discipleship that is theologically grounded in catholic orthodoxy, just as it searches for a tenable practice of discipleship that can faithfully yield to the simple, profound call of Jesus Christ. To do so, this study reaches out into notably diverse Christian traditions of the twentieth century in order to discern the potential for theological convergence, refinement, and application for today. Further, this dissertation is faced with the issue of the common good, asking, what good is Christian discipleship if it neglects the world around it? Finally, at its culmination, this study is about possibility and potential, wondering at the profound opportunities for joyous participation in God’s work in and for the world.

Abraham Kuyper and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are then introduced as two historical figures who may exemplify a holistic, theological notion of discipleship. For all their differences, the outlook of both men were markedly similar, especially in their commitment to Christian engagement with the world. While they employed different methods, emphasized different dogmas, and advocated for different outcomes, Kuyper and Bonhoeffer were really after the same thing. Both were convinced that the nature of the Christian faith demanded clear and direct action in the public arena. As a result, they both sought to build a theology that could make sense of—and meaningfully engage with—the pressing issues in their
respective historical circumstances. Kuyper looked to the roots of the Reformed faith in Calvin and worked to construct a theology that was both faithful to its foundations and relevant for the time. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, sought to refine and re-imagine the Lutheran theological tradition in order to articulate a biblical way forward in the context of the rise of National Socialism and the outbreak of war. Their different historical contexts nevertheless led them to a strikingly similar conviction: Christian disciples are called to bear essential witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in the world. Kuyper and Bonhoeffer are therefore excellent resources for exploring the very public nature of Christian discipleship. The remainder of the Introduction situates Kuyper and Bonhoeffer scholarship around the question of discipleship, and concludes that a considerable gap exists in the literature around this important hermeneutical issue.

Part I of the dissertation contains Chapters 1 and 2, and examines the development of Kuyper’s theology and practice of discipleship during his career-culminating years of 1894 to 1905. Specifically, Chapter 1 locates a hermeneutic of discipleship in Kuyper’s Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology by identifying a four-movement theological concept of discipleship: the foundation of discipleship is the revelation of God; the reality of discipleship is the sovereignty of Jesus Christ; the action of discipleship is the necessity of belief-obedience; and the possibility of discipleship is participating in God’s redemptive work for the common good of the world. The remainder of the chapter further explicates these movements in Kuyper’s understanding and practice of discipleship through critical analysis of key primary sources, including Dienst des Woords, Christ and the Needy, and Lectures on Calvinism. Chapter 2, then, focuses on Kuyper’s theological practice of discipleship in the political arena, namely, during his tenure as prime minister of the Netherlands. Specifically, three areas of Kuyper’s political leadership are addressed: his policy regarding international affairs, the railroad worker’s strike, and education reform. Primary source analysis includes “The

Part I concludes that Kuyper was incapable of separating his politics from his theological convictions. He was a Christian disciple with the most furious theological commitments—to God’s sovereignty, grace, love, and power—commitments that directly shaped and motivated his concerns for how the Dutch people could interact with each other and with the world. Kuyper’s faith was not limited to personal piety. On the contrary, his faith was a very public affair—not only out of a concern to motivate his fellow Calvinists, but also because of his theological belief in God’s concern and sustaining grace for the rest of the world. Kuyper saw in God’s providence a commitment to the common good of all creation; theologically, therefore, he had no choice but to live a life of discipleship that was equally committed to the public good of society as a whole.

Part II of the dissertation contains Chapters 3 and 4, and examines the development and practice of Bonhoeffer’s concept of discipleship from the year 1935 to his death in 1945. In Chapter 3, as in Kuyper, the four-movement hermeneutic of discipleship is established through a key work. In Bonhoeffer’s case, his book *Discipleship* serves to frame both his theology and practice of what it means to follow-after Jesus Christ. After the concepts of revelation, reality, action, and possibility are established in relation to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of discipleship, a collection of letters and papers are analyzed from Bonhoeffer’s time as director of the seminary at Finkenwalde. These documents illustrate the outworking of Bonhoeffer’s commitment to theological discipleship in their discussion of such themes as the establishment of the House of Brethren, the practice of meditation, and the challenge of conducting ministry illegally in the eyes of the state. In addition, Bonhoeffer’s teaching on the Sermon on the Mount is examined in the context of the German Church Struggle.
Chapter 4 then continues the exploration of Bonhoeffer’s theological development by tracing his understanding of simple obedience to the call of Jesus Christ. After setting the contextual stage with Bonhoeffer’s decision to leave America in the summer of 1939 and his subsequent participation in the conspiracy against Hitler, the majority of the chapter focuses on Bonhoeffer’s Tegel Prison studies and its implication for an emerging concept of discipleship. Specifically, the chapter argues that Bonhoeffer’s letters from the spring and early summer of 1944 represented the height of his theological reflections. During this time he was giving particular attention to questions of the philosophies of history, human life, and worldview and was looking to Dilthey, Ortega y Gasset, and Weizsäcker for insight. These figures provided a framework for Bonhoeffer to engage critically the historical emergence of science and its perceived companion, secularization. These insights, it is argued, played a significant factor in the articulation of Bonhoeffer’s theology of discipleship. Now, Bonhoeffer discovered, the disciple could serve the world, confess on behalf of the world, repent for the sake of the world, and bear witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in and for the world.

Part III of the dissertation offers analysis and synthesis of Kuyper’s and Bonhoeffer’s theological concepts of discipleship. Chapter 5 unpacks a definition of discipleship that draws deliberately on the unique insights of both Kuyper and Bonhoeffer. The main part of the chapter explores the four movements of discipleship that have been a unifying theme throughout the dissertation—revelation, Jesus Christ, belief-obedience, and possibility—and investigates particular areas of both convergence and divergence between Kuyper and Bonhoeffer through comparison of primary source material. Finally, it argues that followers of Jesus Christ can come to the place of care and concern for the common good when their discipleship finally culminates in the notion of unhindered possibility and potentiality.
The Conclusion of the dissertation offers a summary and further implications of the study. It argues that the call of Jesus Christ is not to a static conclusion; Jesus calls to places and experiences we can hardly imagine. Discipleship, then, gets its form in a process of interchange between context and theory. As the historical, theological, or ethical context changes, it challenges, shapes, and ultimately culminates in a rich theology and practice of discipleship. Abraham Kuyper understood this, as did Dietrich Bonhoeffer. After summarizing key findings, additional avenues of investigation are offered. Ideally, scholars will now be encouraged to pursue further questions about Kuyper’s theology and practice of discipleship. Scholars, too, should be encouraged to re-evaluate the place of discipleship in Bonhoeffer’s life and thought. Indeed, it is the four-fold movements of discipleship that can provide a platform for further explanation and investigation of the divergences and convergences of Kuyper’s and Bonhoeffer’s thought. The dialogue between the two men is an emerging field of scholarship, full of opportunity. In many ways, this study represents an opening conversation between some of the critical theological and practical dimensions of these two significant figures.