

REFLECTIONS ON THE ECCLESIASTICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF 6TH APRIL 1652 AS A SOUTH AFRICAN SYMBOLIC DATE¹

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ABSTRACT

This article verifies the theological interpretation of the 6th April 1652 as a South African symbolic date, which marked the beginning of the European and Christian contribution to the history of Southern Africa. The exposition deals, in particular, with 1752, 1852 and 1952 interpretations by leading ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church, the “oldest and original church of the land.” The three commemorative addresses are scrutinized and presented in terms of the historical and ecclesiastical settings against which each was articulated. Obviously, the orators were subjected to contemporary perceptions, sentiments and experiences. The interpretations of the 6th April 1652 were deliberately theological, but they were however not based on a comprehensive exposition of Scripture. Consequently, theological and cultural inferences that played into the hands of an ideological understanding or appropriation of the past and its symbolic date, hampered a critical and responsible assessment. This was illustrated at the 1952 celebrations. To many blacks the date commemorated inaugurated *three centuries of wrong*. They could not assess it as an event caused by the determinant will of God. The article argues that this is the consequence of a (church) historical interpretation which is not accompanied by a theological-critical reflection and confessional consideration in terms of the Church of Christ with the Word of God as norm. This methodological preference presupposes a fundamentally different way of coming to terms with history (and its perplexing symbolic dates) to what happened in 1992 in Latin America. Instead of advancing radical theology in order to rectify history, what happened should be appreciated in view of Scripture.

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The missionaries did not bring Him He came with the Word
of God.

Unknown Basotho woman.

In the new democratic South Africa, the (re)interpretation of its past is a critical and thorny issue. The symbolic date 6th April 1652, associated with the establishment of a permanent European occupation as well as the introduction of Christianity in the region, elicits divergent feelings. Should it be celebrated as the coming of the Gospel and civilization to the country? Or, should it rather be commemorated as the cause of all injustice? Should the Latin American Council of Churches be followed when the Christian presence was commemorated in 1992 as “Martyrdom and Hope. Five hundred years of resistance by the indigenous peoples?”³ These churches rejected any type of celebration in the name of “discovery”, “encounter between cultures” or “evangelization”.⁴ The commemoration led them to

remember the invasion, the subjugation and destruction of the native cultures, the negation of the indigenous religion and the opposition to the new religion.⁵

It was difficult to believe that “these atrocities were carried out in the name of a God of love...”

This must educe the “rethinking of mission, evangelism, conversion, reconciliation, a missiologically grounded Biblical hermeneutics, etc.”⁶ This article verifies the ecclesiastical interpretations of 6th April 1652 at the commemorations of 1752, 1852 and 1952. One is confronted with the same problem that challenged the Latin American Churches. The question, however, is whether the same answer should be argued in South Africa?

1. “FOR HE HATH STRENGTHENED THE BARS OF THY GATES...” 1752

The year 1752 marked the centenary of the proprietorship of the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch East India Company. This did not go unnoticed at the Cape, which by now displayed the structure of a colony. The celebra-

3 See *International Review of Mission* LXXXII (325) January 1993,3.

4 A. Guzman: “Martyrdom and Hope. Five Hundred years of Christian presence in Latin America and the Carribean.” In *International Review of Mission* LXXXII (325) January 1993, 11.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 3.

tions must have impressed the famous French astronomer, De la Caille (1713-1762), at the time a respected and well-received visitor.⁷ In his *Journal Historique*⁸ he comments on the festive day. Noontime was announced, he wrote, by the firing of an artillery salute. The festivities culminated in an excellent banquet at which the Governor, he added, hosted eminent Cape residents and senior officers of French, Danish, British and Dutch ships calling at the Cape. A special service was conducted in the local reformed church — an item on the programme not mentioned by the Roman Catholic scientist. However, this was an important part of the proceedings at the Cape. The Political Council ruled that religious devotions should be performed publicly in the five existing congregations of the reformed church — four of which were scattered on the outskirts of the settlement.⁹ This arrangement was obvious, as the Company was ecclesiastically involved in the Cape of Good Hope from the outset. Thus a Christian dispensation was created, providing only for the recognized reformed church. This inspired a situation which was maintained and protected by both the Political Council and the Governor.¹⁰

The inhabitants of the principal town at Table Bay gathered in the church building to commemorate the date “that bestows upon our whole

- 7 De La Caille sojourned at the Cape from the 19th April 1750 to the 8th March 1753, fabricating a new astronomical map to replace that of Halley (1677). See R. Raven-Hart (Ed.): *Travels at the Cape 1751-53*; an annotated translation of the *Journal Historique du voyage au Cap de Bonne Espérance* into which have been interpolated relevant messages from *Memoirs de L'Acadè De La Caille, Nicolas Louis*. Van Riebeeck Society: Cape Town, Rotterdam, 1976, 1-3.
- 8 It was published in 1763 in Paris.
- 9 P.J. van der Spuy: *Dank-Altbaar, Gode ter eere opgericht; of eene plechtige Redenvoering, ter gelegentheid van 's Ed. Comps. Hondert Jaarige Possessie des Goevernements van Cabo de Goede Hoop, in eene Verklaaring, en Toepassing van Ps. CXLVII. Vers 12, 13, en 14. Uitgesproken den 8. April des Jaars 1752. Door Petrus van der Spuy Bedienaar des H. Euangelium aan Cabo de Goede Hoop*. G.T. van Paddenburg & A. van Paddenburg: Utrecht, 1753, 2, (4).
- 10 Cf. in this regard J.W. Hofmeyr & G.J. Pillay (Eds.): *A history of Christianity in South Africa Vol. I*. H.A.U.M. Tertiary: Pretoria, 1994, 2 ff., 11 ff.; J.N. Gerstner: “A Christian monopoly: the Reformed Church and colonial Society under Dutch rule.” In R. Elphick & R. Davenport (Eds.): *Christianity in South Africa. A political, social & cultural history*. James Currey: Oxford, 1997, 16 ff.; A. Moorrees: *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika 1652-1873*. S.A. Bybelvereniging: Kaapstad, 1937, 9 ff.

land a new birth.”¹¹ The reverend P.J. van der Spuy, born at the Cape in 1722 and minister of the congregation since 1746 was in the pulpit.¹² For that occasion he chose Psalm 147:12-14 as his text:

(12) Praise the Lord, o Jerusalem; praise the God, o Zion. (13) For he hath strengthened the bars of thy gates; he hath blessed thy children within thee. (14) He maketh peace in thy borders, and filleth thee with the finest of wheat.¹³

Words, he commented, worthy of

our scrupulous consideration particularly at a moment like this when we are gathered together to celebrate the jubilee of the Honorable Company's centennial possessing this remote corner.¹⁴

The young minister was requested to publish his address.¹⁵ A year later it was released in Utrecht as a brochure entitled *Altar of Gratitude, set up to the glory of God, or a solemn address on the occasion of the Company's centennial possession of this Government. Performed on the 8th April in the year 1752 in an explication and application of Psalm 147 verses 12, 13 and 14.*¹⁶ Van der Spuy dedicated the brochure to Governor Tulbach¹⁷ and the Political Council, vindicating

11 Van der Spuy: *op. cit.*, 2.

12 For biographical details, see S.P. Engelbrecht: *Die Kaapse Predikante van die sewentiende en agtiende eeu*. H.A.U.M. – J.H. de Bussy: Kaapstad-Pretoria, 1952, 64 ff. See also *Kwartmillenium Gedenboek van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Gemeente, Paarl*. N.G. Kerkraad: Paarl, 1941, 51-59 and *S.A.B.W. II* (South African Biographical Dictionary). Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing: Pretoria, 1986, 800. He studied at the Theological Faculties of the Universities of Groningen and Leiden, before he returned to the Cape of Good Hope.

13 Van der Spuy used the well-known States General Dutch translation (1637) of the Bible. For the purposes of this article, the Authorized King James Version of the Bible is used.

14 Van der Spuy: *op. cit.*, (4).

15 *Ibid.*, 5.

16 E. Brown accepts this commemoration brochure as the commencement of the South African church historiography. See his *Gemeentegeschiedskrywing van die Afrikaanse kerke van gereformeerde belydenis - 'n kompilasie en kerkhistoriese oorsig*. Drakensberg-Uitgewers: Durban, 1972, 82, 197. For a critical assessment, see R.M. Britz: “Die kerklike eeufesgedenkrede van 1752. 'n Kritiese waardeering.” In *Acta Academica* 24(1) March 1992, 110-126.

17 Cf. J.J.F. Joubert: *Die Kaapkolonie onder Ryk Tulbach*. Unpublished M.A.-dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1942. See also C.F.J. Muller (Red.): *Vyfbonderd Jaar Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*. Academica: Pretoria, 1981, 65 ff.

cating the accepted tradition and image of a Christian dispensation in pre-tentious language.¹⁸

In the exegetical exposition¹⁹ of the verses in question, Van der Spuy explained that God granted the four mentioned blessings to Israel upon their return from exile. These constituted the fundamental well-being of the post-exilic community. The minister points out that this state of affairs served as equitable grounds for God to demand praise and worship from his restored people.²⁰ In the second part of the sermon Van der Spuy continued with the practical *application*²¹ of the explained verses. He argued that the issues that formed the foundation of the Israelite community also served as the basis of the Cape society.²² According to him, not only the present situation, but also a century's history provides proof of this. Van der Spuy therefore recalled the history of the Cape. In a short and inaccurate account, he disclosed how Van Riebeeck, "as head of the first settlement"²³ occupied the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 on behalf of the Dutch East India Company. That event signified that the Cape, known in Europe for over 160 years, now became a fixed asset, which had since progressed and expanded. "In this way," Van der Spuy concluded,

we may say that God has up to now strengthened the bars of our gates and enclosed it with his surpassing care and love.²⁴

He drove the point home by referring to the fact that in recent times an enemy was miraculously prevented from occupying the Cape. "In all this the hand of God was with us and against our enemy."²⁵ The merciful Providence of God thus commanded his view of the history of the Cape.

The restoration of Israel provided the *Altar of Gratitude* with a Biblical framework, which Van der Spuy utilised in order to interpret the Cape history and state of affairs in terms of a theological association and reference.

18 See Van der Spuy: *op. cit.*, (2) ff., and also (25)-(27).

19 *Ibid.*, (5) ff.

20 *Ibid.*, (8), (10) ff.

21 *Ibid.*, (14) ff.

22 *Ibid.*, (19) ff.

23 *Ibid.*, (20).

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, (21). In this regard he alluded to the Austrian Succession War between 1741 and 1747. A British fleet secured the Cape of Good Hope for the Netherlands. See M. Boucher: *The Cape of Good Hope and foreign contacts*. UNISA: Pretoria, 1985, 120 ff., 134 ff.

This is evident in the motivation for the commemoration. He stated in the Preface:

This day is noted in order that our thoughts can be filled with amazement, our hearts with cheerfulness and our mouths with thanksgiving. Since here we see all the wonders of God's patience, and illustrious proofs of his undeserving loving-kindness; because this day, which we observe owing to God's Providence, closes a century and presents a new birthday to our whole land.²⁶

The day of commemoration, he emphasized, contains a good message and must therefore be celebrated in thanksgiving to God.

God has taken his merciful residence here, we are called to his Name, He is our God, we are his people and property, He our King, we his subjects. We observe the doors of God's sanctuary still opened before us, the true doctrine of the Gospel triumphant over the Anti-Christendom.

"And does," he asked, "such mercy not deserve our astonishment to all eternity?"²⁷

The favourable lapse of a century — as Van der Spuy pictured it with reference to God's Providence — provided the moral grounds to highlight the unavoidable consequences. It is God's prerogative to demand (as in the case of ancient Israel!) praise, thanksgiving and worship from the Cape society. Abstention from a life of gratitude, he continued, empties itself in unrighteousness and injustices. A similar fate as that of the Jews so destructively in later times, the clergymen warned in terms of his interpretation of Scripture, may also hit the Cape society.²⁸ "We must not think that the present tranquility and peace are our security against future judgements."²⁹ To evade the scare of God's judgements, and to keep "this land" and its inhabitants intact, God must be honoured and praised.³⁰ Therefore, the day of remembrance was an opportunity for introspection and confession of guilt. Van der Spuy assured his flock:

Then God will always embrace us with his favours, and He will constantly bless this land and its inhabitants for the sake of his Name and He will make it a scene of his wonders! He will preserve his fire and hearth-fire amongst us and finally grant us the peace that He has prepared for us and our descendants in eternity.³¹

26 Van der Spuy: *op. cit.*, (1).

27 *Ibid.*, (23).

28 *Ibid.*, (14).

29 *Ibid.*, (18).

30 *Ibid.*, (23).

31 *Ibid.*, (24).

Commemorating the landing of Van Riebeeck for the first time in a Cape publication, the sermon offered the prospect of interpreting the history of the Cape on the basis of theological reference and association, and to use it in terms of a relevant religious message.

2. “ETHIOPIA SHALL SOON STRETCH OUT HER HANDS UNTO GOD...” 1852

Approximately 100 years later, on Tuesday the 6th April 1852, the Dutch Reformed congregation of Cape Town again gathered in its now enlarged and renovated building to remember the events that took place 200 years earlier on the shores of Table Bay. The South African born Abraham Faure (1795-1875),³² minister to the congregation since 1822, delivered the sermon, which was published by popular demand. The Cape Town publishers Van de Sandt, De Villiers & Tier, printed it as an *Address at the Bicentenary Festival, in commemoration of the establishment of the Christian Church in South Africa...*³³ The text of the sermon was taken from the Book of Psalms — Psalm 68:31b: “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”³⁴ In a *Supplement for Clarification*³⁵ Faure appended over 100 references, based on source material — an obvious proof of historical research.³⁶ The event was

32 For him, see *S.A.B.W. II*, 233-237; H.A. Heyns: “Die kerklike werksaamhede van Abraham Faure.” In *Argief Jaarboek vir S.A. Geskiedenis*. Staatsdrukker: Pretoria, 1941.

33 A. Faure: *Redenvoering bij het tweede eeuw-feest, ter herinnering aan de vestiging der Christelijke kerk, in Zuid-Afrika, gehouden in de Groote Kerk, in de Kaapstad op Dinsdag den 6 April, 1852, door Abraham Faure. Uitgegeven op eenparig verzoek en voor rekening der gezamentlijke leden van den Eerwaarde Kerkeeraad der Gereformeerde Kerk, Kaapstad*. Van de Sandt De Villiers & Tier: Kaapstad, 1852.

34 In the States General translation, which Faure used, verse 32b reads: “Mooreland zal zich haasten zijne handen tot God uit te strekken.”

35 Faure: *op. cit.*, 37-91.

36 As early as 1906 C. Spoelstra referred to the *Address* of Faure as a “true gold-mine of historical material.” See his: *Bouwstoffen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederduitsch-Gereformeerde Kerken in Zuid-Afrika. Deel I*. H.A.U.M.: Amsterdam-Kaapstad, 1906, XLV. Pont saw it as the starting-point of the Afrikaans church historiography. A.D. Pont: “Die geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse kerke in die Suid-Afrikaanse historiografie.” In G. Cronjé (Red.): *Aspekte van die Suid-Afrikaanse historiografie*. Van Schaik: Pretoria, 1967, 44. In 1983 Brown detected an underlying historical consciousness. See E. Brown: “Geskienskrywing by die N.G. Kerk. ’n Oorsigtelike tipering.” In *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae IX*, 1983, 63.

also commemorated in most of the 50 congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church,³⁷ now combined in a presbyterian-synodical structure.³⁸

In January 1852 the Synodical Commission appealed to all congregations in a circular letter, written by its clerk Faure, to declare the 6th April a day of religious festivity to commemorate “the establishment of Christendom in South Africa.”³⁹ The letter was also published in the February 21st-issue of *De Gereformeerde Kerk-Bode* (“*The Reformed Church Messenger*”), an influential Cape ecclesiastical journal. *De Gereformeerde Kerk-Bode* was first published in 1849, with Faure as its editor.⁴⁰ All in South Africa, the letter stated, benefited much from “that salutary event 200 years ago.”⁴¹ Conclusive proof of this, according to the Commission, is the surprising expansion of the gospel of grace in these regions. The prayer of Van Riebeeck — “the founder of this settlement” — in which he pleaded that the true reformed Christian doctrine may in the future be planted and spread among “these wild and brutal savages,” the clerk pointed out, was indeed answered.⁴² Thus God, whose Spirit spoke “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God,” must be beseeched, the letter concluded, to fulfil his pledge that the whole of the earth will ultimately be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.⁴³ The circular therefore bears witness to a significant theological interpretation of the landing of Van Riebeeck. The landing introduced Christianity to South Africa and what has subsequently occurred must be understood as God’s reply to Van Riebeeck’s prayer. This is linked to a missiological motive — the fulfilment of Scriptural promises that ultimately the whole of the earth (including the heathen nations) will have knowledge of the gospel.

37 See *De Gereformeerde Kerk-Bode* IV(8) 17 April 1852, 127-128; *De Gereformeerde Kerk-Bode* IV(9) 1 May 1852, 141 ff.

38 For the development of this structure, see R.M. Britz: “Oor die kerkbegrip en die ordening van die kerklike lewe by die N.G. Kerk.” *N.G.T.T.* XXVI(3) September 1985, 432 ff. For its history, see Moorrees: *op. cit.*, 537 ff.; P.B. van der Watt: *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1824-1905*. N.G. Kerkboekhandel: Pretoria, 1980. See also D.A. Kuyler: *Die ontwikkeling van die Sinode en sinodale dienswerk van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika gedurende die 19de eeu. ’n Ekklesiologiese studie*. Unpublished D.Th.-dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1998.

39 *De Gereformeerde Kerk-Bode* IV(2) 24 January 1852, 32.

40 For the history of this journal, see A. Olivier: *Bode op die spoor van die Woord. 150 jaar met Die Kerkbode*. Lux Verbi.B.M.: Kaapstad, 1999.

41 *De Gereformeerde Kerk-Bode* VI(4) 21 February 1852, 64.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

Compared to the 1752 interpretation, the significance of what happened 200 years previously, is clearly sought along different lines. A missiological consideration articulates the importance of the event. The contours of the 1852-interpretation were expressed for the first time in a leading article of the *Almanac for the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa for the bissextile 1852*.⁴⁴ On the 6th of April, 200 years ago, compiler Faure explained, a small Dutch settlement under Van Riebeeck was founded at the Cape. “That day signified the introduction of the Christian religion to the southernmost part of the Old World.”⁴⁵ From the negligible beginning, he added, the church and Christian religion matured to the present day. Amidst other churches and more than 150 Christian congregations among the heathen, Faure wrote, the Reformed church “as oldest church of the land,” currently recognises the task of accomplishing a missionary enterprise of its own, as well as the establishment of a Theological Seminary at the Cape.⁴⁶

By now the Cape was no longer an asset of the Dutch East India Company, which disappeared with the first British occupation in 1795. Nineteen years later the Cape officially became a British colony. A new dispensation was bestowed upon the land. These political transformations complicated the cultural-historical situation at the Cape.⁴⁷ From 1800 onwards the admittance and recognition of churches of British origin and tradition resulted in the formation of several churches and an increasing number of missionary societies.⁴⁸ The British colonial authority preserved the Christian order. The Dutch Reformed Church, however, became one among many as it no longer enjoyed a monopoly. It was the “oldest church of the land,” in terms of its Dutch and Cape tradition, that observed the “notable year 1852.”⁴⁹ A historical date was identified and had to be commemorated by all.

By the time the synodical circular reached the congregations, Faure had requested the Governor on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church to declare the 6th of April a public holiday of remembrance and festivity. The histori-

44 *Almanak voor de Nederduitsch-Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid-Afrika voor het Schrikkeljaar 1852*. N.H. Marais: Kaapstad, 1852.

45 *Ibid.*, 17.

46 *Ibid.*, 18.

47 See Muller: *op. cit.*, 104 ff., 120 ff., 185; T. Cameron & S.B. Spies: *Nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis in woord en beeld*. Human & Rousseau: Kaapstad/Pretoria, 1986, 75 ff., 94 ff., 161 ff.

48 See Hofmeyr & Pillay (Eds.): *op. cit.*, 36 ff. See also P. Hinchliff: *The church in South Africa*. S.P.C.K.: London, 1968, 13 ff.

49 *Almanak ... op. cit.*, 18.

cal date, he motivated the position of the Church, bears reference to all inhabitants of the colony. Faure informed the Governor:

In memory of all the blessings imparted unto the whole population by the Most High and the chastisements with which He visited them since the Europeans took possession of this land, and the variety of privileges we enjoy, all must be united to foster with combined power the welfare and civilization of the neighbouring peoples through spreading the blessings of the Christian religion.⁵⁰

The public commemoration of the introduction of the Christian religion would serve the cause. To the disappointment of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Governor did not see his way clear to meeting the request.⁵¹ Obviously, the colonial government and the churches of British origin did not value the historical significance of the 6th April. The “oldest church of the land” had to observe the commemorations locally. On that occasion, it collected offerings for the founding of a Theological Seminary, which opened its doors 7 years later in Stellenbosch.

When the Cape-Dutch and reformed congregation gathered in the “Groote Kerk” on Tuesday 6th April to commemorate the “introduction of the Christian church in this territory,”⁵² the peculiar interpretation of the occurrence and its theological implications had already been voiced. As indicated above, Abraham Faure was its main exponent. Not surprisingly, on the day of remembrance Psalm 68:31b served in his address as a fixed Biblical point of reference. In his exposition he used it for the purpose of the festive day, in terms of his previous interpretation. Hence he explicitly assured his audience that this very verse, a solemn promise, is being fulfilled. “The southern regions of Africa, the remotest parts of which we are inhabiting, are implied here.” The south of Africa, he continued, — “inhabited by the Chamites” — would just like Abraham’s descendants, partake in the same dividends and enjoy the equivalent spiritual blessings.⁵³ The fulfilment of this prophecy thus gives the ultimate reason to commemorate the events of 6th April 1652.

To emphasize the consequences of this theological-historical understanding and association, Faure, referring to Romans 1:26-32, compared the lamentable state in which salvation and knowledge of Christ are lacking, with the prosperity of regions in which it was introduced and accepted.⁵⁴ It

50 See *De Gereformeerde Kerk-Bode* IV(7) 3 April 1852, 112.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Faure: *op. cit.*, 3.

53 *Ibid.*, 5.

54 *Ibid.*, 6 ff.

could be assumed that, according to Faure, this is true of South Africa. Prior to the introduction of the Christian religion the land suffered from deplorable circumstances. The establishment of the Christian religion in this region, must therefore “be seen as a blessing.”⁵⁵ Faure concluded:

God has planted the church here and we are called to remember today how and when it occurred and in which ways the church expanded.⁵⁶

The remarkable expansion of the church, especially since 1800, forms an important theme in his presentation of the history.⁵⁷ He finally concludes that, given the outcome of the history and its exceptional beginning, the day of commemoration emphasises the development and extension of the church as an obligation of thanksgiving.⁵⁸

3. “YEA, I HAVE A GOODLY HERITAGE...” 1952

Another 100 years have passed. On Sunday 6th April 1952, the “Groote Kerk” in Cape Town was yet again the venue for a festive oration. The preacher was the local minister, dr. A.J. van der Merwe (1897-1978), at the time a well-known and leading clergyman of the Dutch Reformed Church.⁵⁹ The Scripture reading was taken from the Book of Psalms — Psalm 16:6: “The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.”⁶⁰ The last part of the verse introduces the theme of the sermon: *Our great heritage*. As was the case on the previous occasions (1752 and 1852), the address was also published.⁶¹ A comparison of the three pamphlets clearly reveals the difference, or rather evolvement, of the interpretation of the 1652 event. This is expressed in the significantly divergent titles of the festival pamphlets. Van der Spuy had an *Altar of Gratitude* erected to mark the cente-

55 *Ibid.*, 8.

56 *Ibid.*, 9.

57 *Ibid.*, 10 ff.

58 *Ibid.*, 27 ff.

59 See a biographical outline in *S.A.B.W.* V, 843-844.

60 Van der Merwe read from the Afrikaans translation of the Bible completed in 1933. It replaced the old States General Version.

61 *As Ons groot erfenis. Feesrede ter herdenking van die 300 jarige bestaan van ons volkplanting. Gelewer deur dr. A.J. van der Merwe in die Groote Kerk, Kaapstad, op Sondag 6 April 1952.* Nasionale Handeldrukkery: Elsiesrivier. Sonder datum. (“*Our great Heritage. Festival oration to commemorate the 300 years’ existence of the planting of our people. Delivered by dr. A.J. van der Merwe in the Groote Kerk, Cape Town, on Sunday 6th April 1952.*”)

nary of the Company's government and possession of "*this remote corner*." Faure delivered an *Address* in memory of the introduction or establishment of the Christian Church "*in South-Africa*." Van der Merwe entitled his oration *Our great heritage*, in terms of which he commemorated the tercentenary "*existence of the planting of our people*."

In the context of his discourse, Van der Merwe uses the term "people" in its nationalist sense as denoting the Afrikaner, a white group within the South African set-up that not only historically identified, but also socially distinguished itself deliberately in the 20th century.⁶² The most wonderful outcome of the landing of Van Riebeeck, Van der Merwe explained in this regard,

was the birth of a people, with a soul of its own, an own character, an own way of living and mental attitude, and an own destination, determined by God.⁶³

This provides a deep and rich "significance to our past and has an inspiring impact on our future strivings,"⁶⁴ the reverend emphasised. This is "our" great and spiritual heritage.⁶⁵ Our grateful retrospection, Van der Merwe insisted, must be accompanied by dedication

to what should be holy for everyone of us, so that the generation that will gather in 100 years' time, God willing, to commemorate, will have reason to restate, in view of what they have received from us: Yea, I have a goodly heritage.⁶⁶

Unlike the sermons delivered in 1752 and 1852, *Our great heritage* was not preached exclusively to the local congregation. It took place on the occasion of the spiritual and ecclesiastical culmination of a comprehensive and grandiose national commemorative festival. The government organised and

62 An almost incalculable number of publications and convictions concerning the Afrikaner people, its nationalism and its origins, exist. Cf. in this regard F.A. van Jaarsveld: *Wie en wat is die Afrikaner?* Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1981, 1-72; F.A. van Jaarsveld: *Omsingelde Afrikanerdom*. H.A.U.M.-Uitgewery: Pretoria, 1978, 1-150; F.A. van Jaarsveld: *Afrikaner quo vadis?* Voortrekkerpers: Johannesburg, 1971. See also Muller (Ed.): *op. cit.*, 445 ff.; and Hermann Gilliomee: *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people*. Tafelberg: Cape Town, 2003.

63 Van der Merwe: *Our great heritage* ... *op. cit.*, 4.

64 *Ibid.*, 4-5.

65 *Ibid.*, 6.

66 *Ibid.*, 10.

funded the festivity events.⁶⁷ The Dutch Reformed Church welcomed this.⁶⁸ A central Van Riebeeck Festivity Committee, chaired by the distinguished dr. A.J. van der Merwe, was set up to co-ordinate the commemorations. WE BUILD A NATION was the theme officially chosen for the celebrations. The landing of Van Riebeeck was commemorated throughout South Africa. From all corners of the Union of South Africa, an appraised member of the British Commonwealth, ceremonial coaches took to the main roads en route to Cape Town. During March and in the first week of April 1952, the “mother city” staged the ultimate culmination of the festivities. Exhibitions, displays, cultural festivals and two great pageants portrayed the development of South Africa as a nation. On the 5th April approximately 100 000 people saw the spectacular pageant in the Van Riebeeck Stadium, specially shipped from Britain and constructed in Cape Town.⁶⁹ The pageant included representations of Martin Luther (1517), the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), the flight of the French Huguenots (1685) and the arrival of Scottish ministers in South Africa (1822).⁷⁰ These were powerful expressions of how subservient to a strong religious and ecclesiastical tendency the interpretation and commemoration were conceptualised.⁷¹ The procession was led by a display of “Darkest Africa,” another powerful symbol of the interpretation of South African history at the time.

“The oldest and original church”⁷² of the country, as the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa depicted itself at the historical date, played a

- 67 See in this regard P.H. Kapp: “Ons Volksfeeste.” In P.W. Grobbelaar (Red.): *Die Afrikaner en sy kultuur III*. Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1975, 121.
- 68 See the leading article in *Die Kerkbode* LXIX(11) 12 March 1952, 492: “Ná Driehonderd Jaar” (“After Three Hundred Years”). With integrated strength Church and State, motivated by a common ideal, should foster together the Christian civilization in this country, the editor noted. In another editorial (*Die Kerkbode* LXIX (14) 2 April 1952, 678) it was thought that the particular role of the Church was to reveal to the people the spiritual significance of the commemoration.
- 69 See in this regard the official publications: *The Festival in Pictures — a pictorial record of the Van Riebeeck Festival (1952)*. C.N.A.: Parow, 1952; *The Van Riebeeck Festival. Pictorial Souvenir*. Cape Times Ltd.: Parow, 1952.
- 70 See *The Festival in Pictures...* 6, 7, 9, 14.
- 71 See Kapp in Grobbelaar (Red.): *op. cit.*, 121 ff.
- 72 See G.D. Scholtz: “Ons Kerk, die oudste en oorspronklike Kerk, of die naam van ons Kerk.” In *Jaarboek van die Gefeedereerde Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke*. Geredigeer deur ds. J.N. Geldenhuys. N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1952, 167 ff. This article not only considers the sanctioned interpretation of the his-

leading role in the celebrations.⁷³ It was proud of its numbers, amounting in 1952 to over one million white and approximately 500 000 non-white “souls.”⁷⁴ *Ons Gemeentelike Feesalbum* (“*Our Congregational Festival Album*”), published in 1952, accounted for over 600 (white) congregations.⁷⁵ Its ministry was well established and embodied structures that were effectively organizing missionary work, ministry of compassion, care for current and social issues, youth and pastorate.⁷⁶ At the time of the Van Riebeeck Festival there were four Dutch Reformed Churches or Synods in each of the South African provinces: the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (Cape Synod), the Dutch Reformed Church in the Orange Free State, the Nederduitsch Hervormde of Gereformeerde Kerk van Suid-Afrika (Transvaal Synod) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Natal. In 1907 the four Synods met in a Federal Council of Churches as a structural expression and demonstration of the inner bond that developed between them following the devastating experience of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902).⁷⁷

tory of the Dutch Reformed Church as the original reformed establishment of the country, but also echoed a typical Dutch Reformed spirituality. See also J.J. Lubbe: “About 1948: What happened?” In J.W. Hofmeyr, C.J.S. Lombaard & P.J. Maritz (Eds.): *Perspectives on Christianity. 1948 plus fifty years. Theology, Apartheid and Church: Past, present and future*. I.M.E.R., University of Pretoria: Pretoria, 2001, 2 ff. See also P. du Toit: “Die stigting, uitbreiding en roeping van ons kerk.” In *Jaarboek ... op.cit.*, 93-165. Because of an act of divine guidance, Du Toit remarks,

the church of Christ and European civilization came to a dark continent to stay. Trusting in God a young nation during the following three centuries joined the nations of the world. To the glory of God its church carried the flame of the eternal gospel into the north (95).

- 73 See the leading article “Die hoogtepunt van die Fees.” In *Die Kerkbode* LXIX (14) 2 April 1952, 678.
- 74 G.B.A. Gerdener in T.N. Hanekom (Red.): *Ons Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. Gedenkboek by ons derde eenfees 1952*. N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1952, iii, provides the following numbers: Mother church: 627 congregations with 1 087 948 “souls,” Mission church: 336 congregations with 448 102 “souls.”
- 75 P.L. Olivier: *Ons Gemeentelike Album. 'n Oorsig van die ontstaan en groei van gemeentes van die Gefed. Ned. Geref. Kerke by geleentheid van die Van Riebeeck-Fees 1952*. N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers: Kaapstad, 1952.
- 76 See Index, Hanekom: *op. cit.*
- 77 See P.B. van der Watt: *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1905-1975*. N.G. Kerk Boekhandel, Pretoria, 1987, 21 ff. for a review of the history of the Federal Council.

The Church enjoyed the trust of its members and the confidence of the National Party Government, elected to rule the country in 1948 under the leadership of D.F. Malan, an ex-Dutch Reformed minister.⁷⁸ It was outspoken on the national issue of race relations. In 1948 *Die Kerkbode* (“*The Church Messenger*”), official and weekly journal of the Dutch Reformed Church, wrote:

We, as the oldest church of the country, hold our own point of view concerning the situation ... also that our understanding and policies differ strongly from those of other Christian churches, namely the Roman Catholic Church and most of the English churches ...⁷⁹

The Dutch Reformed Church was aware that such conviction might “lead to a very lonely road.”⁸⁰ It was to be tried and markedly influenced by the course of events and historical developments in South Africa.⁸¹ In many ways the Dutch Reformed Church was a respectable institution. It was “like a city on a mountain,” as J.D. Vorster, leading clergyman, pictured his church.⁸² In this church the third centenary was seized as “an unequalled opportunity to equip our people spiritually for the distressing times that lie ahead.”⁸³ On Sunday, the 30th March, all the Dutch Reformed congregations, who paid tribute to God for establishing civilization and Christendom in its Protestant and Reformed articulation in South Africa, observed a day of thanksgiving.⁸⁴

A sub-committee of the Van Riebeeck Festival Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church compiled a *Festival Message to our Church and People*.⁸⁵ The question was asked: “Why are we here?” to which an immedi-

78 See P.W. Coetzer: “Die era van apartheid, 1948-1961.” In Cameron & Spies (Reds.): *op. cit.*, 271-272. Muller (Red.): *op. cit.*, 477 ff.

79 See leading article by T.N. Hanekom: “Apartheid as kerklike beleid.” In *Die Kerkbode* LXII(12) 22 September 1948, 664 ff.; *Ibid.*, LXII(13) 29 September 1948, 724 ff.

80 See G.B.A. Gerdener: “Die Wêreldraad van Kerke.” In *Die Kerkbode* LXII (16) 20 October 1948, 928: “... op hierdie punt sal ons bereid moet wees om ’n baie eensame pad te bewandel ...”

81 See in this regard Hofmeyr, Lombaard & Maritz (Eds): *op.cit.*

82 See J.D. Vorster: “Soos ’n stad op ’n berg.” In Hanekom: *Ons Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk ... op. cit.*, 342 ff.

83 A remark of J.N. Geldenhuys, the secretary of the Van Riebeeck Festival Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church. See *Die Kerkbode* LXIX(3) 16 January 1952, 11.

84 *Die Kerkbode* LXIX (13) 20 March 1952, 631.

85 Van Riebeeckfeeskommisjie van die N.G. Kerk: *Ons bou ’n nasie. Feesboodskap*

ate reply was given in terms of a theological interpretation of what really occurred on the 6th April 1652.

That seemingly negligible event was in fact an act of God's will by which He decisively intervened in the history of future generations.⁸⁶

The date, it declared, undoubtedly signified "a determinant intervention" of God,⁸⁷ which resulted in the planting of Christianity in this region. It marks therefore "the start of the onslaught of Christendom on Africa"⁸⁸ in its Reformed and Protestant configuration. This Christendom was introduced unto African soil by, in particular, the Dutch Reformed Church.⁸⁹ Over the past three centuries "our church" undeniably played a vital role in the founding of our nation. "We made an unique contribution and developed an identity of our own."⁹⁰ This "own character," in many respects different from other churches and intended to effectuate God's Council on this continent in a particular way,⁹¹ must never be sacrificed lest we "fail our distinctive calling for the future."⁹² God blessed the extraordinary growth and warm evangelical ministry of the church. "We regard the Dutch Re-

aan ons Kerk en Volk. N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1952. It was compiled by dr. J.C.G. Kotzé, full-time secretary of the Commission for Evangelization of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (Cape Synod), and dr. E.A. Venter, a member of that Commission. See *Die Kerkbode* LXIX (11) 12 March 1952, 493.

- 86 Daardie skynbaar eenvoudige gebeurtenis was inderdaad 'n wilsdaad van God waardeur Hy beslissend ingegryp het in die geskiedenis van toekomstige geslagte (Van Riebeeckfeeskommissie van die N.G. Kerk: *op. cit.*, 5).
- 87 See in this regard the April 1952 issue of *Die Gereformeerde Vaandel* XX(2), a Dutch Reformed theological journal. In commemorating the landing of Van Riebeeck "After three hundred years," Lategan attributes the establishment of an European civilization and church to the "supreme providence of God" (44).
- 88 Van Riebeeckfeeskommissie van die N.G. Kerk: *op. cit.*, 5.
- 89 *Ibid.*, 6-7. *Die Kerkbode* in its first issue of April 1952 also followed this very popular interpretation. The editor frankly stated that Van Riebeeck and his people did not arrive with a civilization without God. They were bearers of the Christendom in its Protestant and Reformed presentation, the descendants of the 16th century reformers, and they introduced the Calvinistic view of life. *Die Kerkbode* LXIX (14) 2 April 1952, 678.
- 90 Van Riebeeckfeeskommissie van die N.G. Kerk: *op. cit.*, 8.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 13 ff.
- 92 *Ibid.*, 9. The *Message* also stated that "we were planted here by the Hand of the Almighty. Thus we are planted here with a holy calling as bearers of the Gospel." See *ibid.*, 23.

formed Church as a gift of God to our people.”⁹³ The Afrikaner people was thus regarded as the leader of the Christian civilization in Africa,⁹⁴ and the Dutch Reformed Church as “elected to banish the darkness of heathendom from our fatherland.”⁹⁵ The compilers were also concerned about those who became indifferent to the church, the many lapsed “souls,” living in darkness.⁹⁶ The historical date — and its interpretation — served as a suitable occasion to accentuate what was identified as the calling of the church and people. The brochure thus urges the readers to subscribe to a solemn commitment:

to work for the preservation of the Christian principles of our nationhood, to be loyal (faithful) to the church of our fathers, to uphold family devotions and to embrace the glorification of God as the only rule of life.⁹⁷

Many (black) people did not join in the festivities or could not associate themselves with either the interpretation or the consequences implied by the Dutch Reformed rendering of the symbolic date. The question was fundamentally posed: Did the 6th April 1652 not inaugurate *Three centuries of wrong*? This was the question M.S. Molema asked in a pamphlet published at the commemoration date. As in the case of Afrikaner nationalism, the rising tide of Black Nationalism and struggle for freedom simultaneously sought arguments in history.⁹⁸ The past, and the Afrikaner nationalist (and Dutch Reformed) version of the past, was thus concurrently exhibited in publications, as the awakening of black political and national consciousness inspired them to reconsider their position.⁹⁹ Their interpretation

93 *Ibid.*, 13.

94 *Ibid.*, 31.

95 *Ibid.*

96 *Ibid.*, Voorwoord.

97 *Ibid.*, 47.

98 See F.A. van Jaarsveld: *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse verlede. Geskiedenisideologie en die historiese skulduraagstuk*. Lex Patria: Johannesburg, 1984, especially 131 ff.

99 See the studies of N. Majeke: *The role of the missionaries in conquest*. Society of Young South Africa: Johannesburg, 1952, and Mnguni: *A history of South Africa*, Cape Town, that also appeared in the memorial year of 1952. These studies reveal a consistent expression of black consciousness. For some introductory remarks on the inauguration of the black historiography after 1950, see E. Brown: “The necessity of a “Black” South African church history.” In H.-J. Becken (Ed.): *Relevant Theology for Africa*. Missiological Institute Mapumulo: Durban, 1973, 112 ff. During the 20th century differing schools of interpretations of South African history, not without cultural and other assumptions, identified themselves. See in this regard Van Jaarsveld: *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse verlede ... op. cit.*

of the South African history and, in particular, the 6th April 1652, contradicted both the cultural and theological concepts and considerations of the Dutch Reformed Church's *Message* at the national venue symbolizing a historical moment in the building of the nation. A moment that was contrarily adjudicated.¹⁰⁰

Within the Dutch Reformed Church there was an awareness of this contradiction and its implications. The rising tension between black and white was a concern. The editor of *Die Kerkbode* was alarmed by the “dangerous conduct” of agitators who animated a spirit of resistance and insubordination at the time of the national festivities. He also regretted the impeachment of “our race policy” overseas.¹⁰¹ Another Dutch Reformed *Message*, this time addressed to “the members of our daughter churches,”¹⁰² asked the inevitable question: *The arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, was it disaster or deliverance?*¹⁰³ Reflecting on the “facts,” the pamphlet stated that Van Riebeeck and his people brought the European race, civilization and development, and the gospel to South Africa. “The coming of the light of Christendom to South Africa,” it declared, “was the will and command of God.” With regard to the European race, the drafters admit the presence of friction, despite which both races (black and white) can peacefully co-exist

even though we follow the principle that each of the racial groups should develop along its own course, in terms of its own capacity

100 See in this regard P.W. Coetzer: “Die era van Apartheid 1948-1961.” In Cameron & Spies (Eds.): *op. cit.*, 281 ff.; Muller (Red.): *op. cit.*, 502 ff.; Gilliomée: *op. cit.*, 487 ff.

101 *Die Kerkbode* LXIX(6) 6 February 1952, 247, 246.

102 The missionary policy of the Dutch Reformed Church, officially formulated in 1935, provided for the establishment of self-supporting, self-governing and self-expanding black churches. See this policy document in J.W. Hofmeyr, J.A. Millard & C.J.J. Froneman (Eds.): *History of the Church in South Africa. A document and source book*. UNISA: Pretoria, 1991, 184 ff. In 1952 there were four Mission (or daughter) Churches: in the Cape Province, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, for blacks, and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church for coloureds. See D. Crafford: *Aan God die dank I. Geskiedenis van die sending van die Ned. Geref. Kerk binne die Republiek van Suid-Afrika en enkele aangrensende Buurstate*. N.G. Kerkboekhandel: Pretoria, 1982, 121 ff.

103 See *Die koms van Jan van Riebeeck — was dit ramp of redding?* (*'n Boodskap van die Van Riebeeck- feeskommissie van die NG Kerk aan die lidmate van die dogter-(sending) kerke*. Pro-ecclesia: Stellenbosch, not dated. Cf. also “Ramp of redding?” In *Die Kerkbode* LXIX(12) 19 March 1952, 582.

and in accordance with its own potency and nature, it does not deprive anyone of true freedom and life.¹⁰⁴

This is demonstrated in practice by the existence of autonomous Dutch Reformed mission churches for each population group.¹⁰⁵ “The coming of the white man was therefore no disaster.” This was undoubtedly preferred by a determined Dutch Reformed Church persuasion.

Secondly, the *Message* told members of the mission churches that civilized South Africa was the result of the coming of Van Riebeeck and his descendants. Europeans, with their superior experience, ability and level of education led the way in building a civilized country. “We sincerely thank” the non-whites for their aid and assistance in this regard.¹⁰⁶ Then the pamphlet touched on another very sensitive issue:

Instead of commemorating this God-given deliverance together in gratitude and joy, there are still many who, influenced by malevolent, ignorant and ingrate agitators, characterize the whites as intruders and therefore a disaster.¹⁰⁷

Members of “our daughter churches” are warned not to be misled. In raising the third point — the introduction of Christianity — the pamphlet admits that all whites are unfortunately not bearers of the light of the gospel. It also regrets the lack of more intentness and commitment “among us” for the Kingdom of God.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, this was crucial. A South Africa without Christianity would have been a disaster. The coming of Van Riebeeck delivered the country.

A final question — “how can we in future together build our common fatherland?” — had to be answered expressively: (1) By means of mutual love and trust; (2) by respecting differences in origin, national character and way of living in order that each group may develop in accordance with its own potential and make a contribution in its own way; (3) by cautiously avoiding foreign advisors; (4) by letting the Kingdom of God and its coming be our highest priority, and (5) “Our fatherland is a heritage that the Lord had given us to love, to protect and to cultivate.”¹⁰⁹

104 *Die koms van Jan van Riebeeck ... op. cit.*, 5.

105 *Ibid.*

106 *Ibid.*, 6.

107 *Ibid.*

108 *Ibid.*

109 *Ibid.*, 7.

How did the younger mission churches receive this message? *Die Ligdraer* (“*The Herald of Light*”), monthly journal of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa, reported that a festivity greeting had been received from

our Mother church, which addressed the question of whether the coming of the white race must be regarded by the non-white races as disaster or deliverance.¹¹⁰

According to the editor W.F. Loots, a white missionary, the unprejudiced reader of the *Message*, will encounter goodwill and openheartedness.¹¹¹ In this regard he referred to the admittance that not all whites acted in sympathy and love in accordance with their civilization and in terms of the principles of Christendom. He also picked up the reference to, as the *Message* portrayed it, the many cases of amity between whites and coloured persons on farms, in workplaces, in kitchens, etc. White and coloured can live together in harmony and prosperity in this land. The editor also quoted the sincere appreciation for the non-whites’ collaboration in building “our common fatherland.”¹¹² However, Reverend Loots indicated to his readers that the most important matter “is the coming of Christendom to South Africa.”¹¹³ This, he stated, had resulted in the establishment of four autonomous daughter churches. Again he recognises the commendable partnership of many non-whites in the founding of indigenous churches.¹¹⁴ The *Message* concludes with a summary of the prerequisites for a prosperous co-existence in South Africa.

The editor thought that an answer to the *Message* was appropriate. Despite the differences between the population groups, the unity of faith must continually be emphasised and maintained. Although the various groups are organised in different churches, the spiritual unity may never sustain damage. “And Christians, whether white or non-white, in mutual love and trust must ever be willing to help one another.”¹¹⁵ The worsening of race relations is regretted. Racial co-operation should be advanced as much as possible according to the norm of the Word of God.¹¹⁶ Every Christian, irre-

110 See Editorial, *Die Ligdraer* XIII(4) April 1952, 73.

111 *Ibid.*, 73.

112 *Ibid.*, 74.

113 *Ibid.*

114 *Ibid.*

115 *Ibid.*

116 *Ibid.*, 75.

spective of his/her population group, must be an apostle of goodwill, the reverend Loots wrote on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church.

In *Die Ligstraal* (“*Ray of Light*”), official journal of the black mission churches, published in Afrikaans, Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu, Sepedi and Tswana, reference was made to the Van Riebeeck festivity. Reflecting on the coming of Van Riebeeck, *Die Ligstraal* echoed the current Dutch Reformed interpretation of the event.¹¹⁷ In the context of the black communities and those who are hostile toward that event, regarded as a symbol of white domination of the indigenous people of Africa, it defends the accepted interpretation of South African history. “Many people think,” the journal said,

that the whites deprived the whole country from the blacks. This is not true There were more or less no Bantu peoples in South Africa at the time of the arrival of the whites.

According to the article, when the whites settled at the Cape and started to migrate into the interior from the west, the Bantu simultaneously moved in from the east. Many years later white and black, both newcomers to the land, met each other at the Fish River. It is therefore wrong to argue, as

one of the leaders of the Bantu did recently in Bloemfontein, that the whites took away everything from the blacks.¹¹⁸

“Our motto” at the festivity was: “we build a nation.” The intention is not that black and white should “melt together” but rather that all whites should ultimately amalgamate into one people and all blacks into one Bantu nation. Then perhaps the whites can dwell in the western region of our land, and the blacks in the eastern part.

That would enable each group to develop in terms of its own potency. That would probably bring more contentment and would help us all along the road to peace.

This road, however, demands hard work, patience, love and faith.¹¹⁹

Without admitting it, *Our great heritage* was presented at a time when the commemoration date and the (theological) significance ascribed to it were fundamentally questioned. On this historical (and contested) date the Dutch Reformed Church did not hesitate to lay down its rendering of the South African past and apply it to the benefit of what was regarded as the building of the (Christian) nation. Careful consideration of both 1952 mes-

117 See *Die Ligstraal* VIII(18) 15 April 1952, 10 ff.

118 *Ibid.*, 10.

119 *Ibid.*, 11.

sages reveals an underlying ecclesiastical and historical self-assurance, relating itself to South Africa and the changing times. This corresponds with the popular concept of “the oldest and original church of the country.” This particular self-concept presupposes an association with a corporate and collective notion of the church. Within these parameters members and ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church conceptualized their denomination. As indicated in the above Messages, this ecclesiastical concept not only affected the Dutch Reformed Church’s views on the South African political situation, but also shaped the convictions regarding its role and calling in society. *Our great heritage* was therefore a contextual document, manifesting a historical and theological image of a national church that has come of age.

But enough! Some concluding remarks must now be made.

4. A CONTROVERSIAL DATE: WHICH WAY NOW?

The article focused on the commemoration of the 6th April 1652 as a South African symbolic date, which marked the beginning of the European and Christian contribution to the history of Southern Africa. The exposition dealt with the 1752, 1852 and 1952 interpretations of the “oldest and original church of the land.” The three commemorative addresses were scrutinized and treated in terms of the historical and ecclesiastical settings against which each was articulated. As contextual documents, they speak for themselves. It is clear that the orators were subjected to contemporary perceptions, sentiments and experiences. Van der Spuy’s reflection was absorbed by the centennial of the Company’s possession of “this good land” conferred upon them through the Providence of God. Faure’s interpretation — “the establishment of the Christian Church in South Africa” — echoed a historical awareness and the commitment to an indigenous missionary responsibility. Van der Merwe comprehended the event along the lines of Christian nationalism — the birth of “our people,” — determined by God. If the *Altar of Gratitude* comprised a “historical minimum,” the *Address of 1852* accommodated a “historical maximum,” whereas *Our great heritage* embodied a postulated historical image.

The assertiveness in terms of which the different interpretations are related to and understood as an intervention of God is obvious: from God’s Providence (1752) to an active deed of intervention (1952). The interpretations were therefore not empty words. They communicated a theological significance to the South African history, pregnant with meaning. The commemorations of 1852 and 1952 did not do justice to Scripture. It rather served the occasion. It was different in 1752, although Van der Spuy’s ex-

planation and application of the biblical text is highly questionable. One must therefore assume that the interpretations evoked by the 6th April 1652 were deliberately culturally and theologically motivated, and not based on Scripture.

Consequently, the theological and cultural inferences played into the hands of an ideological understanding or appropriation of the past and its symbolic date, hampering a critical and responsible assessment. This was illustrated at the 1952 celebrations. To many blacks, the date commemorated *Three centuries of wrong*. They could not assess it as an event caused by the determinant will of God. It was in fact against the will of God! They therefore did not celebrate the occasion, thus creating an unsettled state of affairs. This echoes an interpretation that was not accompanied by a theological-critical reflection and confessional consideration in terms of the Church of Christ with the Word of God as norm.¹²⁰ This methodological preference presupposes a fundamentally different way in coming to terms with history (and its perplexing symbolic dates), to what took place in Latin America a decade earlier. Instead of advancing a radical theology in order to redress history, what happened should be appreciated in view of Scripture.

A few years ago I took part in a theological training session in Lesotho. The congregation assembled in a dilapidated church building. I started with what I thought was a provocative question: "When did Christ come to the land of the Basotho for the first time?" A very old woman indicated that she would like to answer. She was born in a Christian family that was converted by French missionaries. "In 1833," she said. Apparently she had a good knowledge of the history of the church in Lesotho. In that year the first missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society¹²¹ arrived in the Mountain Kingdom in central South Africa. "Did He come with the missionaries?" "No." She was convinced. "The missionaries did not bring Him He came with the Word of God."

120 See E. Brown: *A discussion of the theological method of church history with reference to the church historiography of South Africa*. University College of Zululand: Empanjeni, 1969.

121 See V. Ellenberger: *A century of Mission Work in Basutoland 1833-1933*. Sesotho Book Depot: Morija, 1938, 11 ff.

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Historiese interpretasie

Kaap die Goeie Hoop

Van Riebeeckfees

6 April 1652

Afrikanervolk