

'Our own Point of View...':
An Outline of the Theology of the Dutch
Reformed Church of South Africa since 1950

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This article presents a synoptic perspective on the theological character of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa (DRC), as it found expression in the South African context during the past 50 years. In a new democratic and secular state, this oldest and original church of the country today finds itself in a marginalized position. Five decades ago it was at the center of events and an accredited role-player even in planning the future of the country. In terms of a corporate image of itself, the Church committed itself to 'our own point of view' concerning the South African scene. Aware of the danger of simplification and tendentious church historiography, this presentation is explorative, tracing the theological development and spirituality of the DRC, and the effect it had on society, between 1950 and 2000. A fascinating story revealed itself, beginning at a national commemoration Festival in April 1952.

1. WE BUILD A NATION – A NATION FOR CHRIST!

All roads lead to Cape Town, mother city of South Africa. That was, at least, the case during the first week of April 1952. From all corners of the Union of South Africa ceremonial coaches took the main routes to Cape Town. The venue was the third centenary commemoration of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck to establish a Dutch refreshing and trading post at the Cape of Good Hope. WE BUILD A NATION was the theme officially chosen for the event. 'The oldest and original church'¹ of the country, as the DRC depicted itself at the historical

1. See G.D. Scholtz, 'Ons Kerk, die oudste en oorspronklike Kerk, of die naam van ons Kerk' in: J.N. Geldenhuys (ed.), *Jaarboek van die Gefedereerde Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke*, Kaapstad 1952, 167f. This article not only reflects on the sanctioned interpretation of the history of the DRC as the original Reformed establishment of the country, but also resonated a typical Dutch Reformed spirituality. See also J.J. Lubbe: 'About 1948: What Happened?' in: J.W. Hofmeyr, C.J.S.

date, played a leading role in the celebrations.² A sub-commission of the Van Riebeeck Festival Commission of the DRC, compiled a *Feesboodskap aan ons Kerk en Volk (Festival Message to our Church and People)*. The *Message* was frank and aimed at the spiritual strengthening of the members of the church. The 6th of April 1652, it declares, undoubtedly signifies 'a determinant intervention' of God. It marks 'the start of the onslaught of Christendom on Africa.'³ And, it constitutes 'the planting of the Reformed and Protestant Christianity, in particular the Dutch Reformed Church.'⁴ The extraordinary growth and warm evangelical ministry of the church was blessed by God. 'We regard the Dutch Reformed Church as a gift of God to our people.'⁵ The compilers' concerns were also with those who became indifferent to the church, the many lapsed 'souls,' living in darkness.⁶ The historical date served as a suitable occasion to sound a clarion call (*revueille*) 'to our whole people' ('tot ons hele volk'), to 'return to and faithfully vindicate our spiritual heritage.'⁷ 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.'⁸

Not everybody joined in the festivities at the *rendezvous* of all roads. The date was questioned: Didn't it inaugurate *Three centuries of wrong*? This was the question M.S. Molema asked in a pamphlet also published at the commemoration date. Just as in the case of Afrikaner nationalism, the rising tide of black nationalism and struggle for freedom simultaneously sought arguments in history.⁹ The past, and the Afrikaner nationalistic (and Dutch Reformed) version of the past, was thus concurrently exhibited in publications, as the awakening of

Lombaard and P.J. Maritz (eds.), *Perspectives on Christianity. 1948 plus fifty Years: Theology, Apartheid and Church: Past, Present and Future*, Pretoria 2001, 2ff.

2. See the leading article 'Die hoogtepunt van die Fees' in: *Die Kerkbode* 69/14 (2 April 1952), 678.
3. Van Riebeeckfeeskommissie van die NG Kerk, *Ons bou 'n Nasie: Feesboodskap aan ons Kerk en Volk*, Kaapstad, 1952, 5.
4. *Ons bou 'n Nasie*, 6-7.
5. *Ons bou 'n Nasie*, 13.
6. *Ons bou 'n Nasie*, Voorwoord.
7. *Ons bou 'n Nasie*.
8. *Ons bou 'n Nasie*, 47.
9. See F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse verlede: Geskiedenisideologie en die historiese skuldvraagstuk*, Johannesburg 1984, especially 131ff.

black political and national consciousness inspired the reconsidering of their position.¹⁰ Their interpretation of the South African history and explicitly April 6, 1652, contradicted both the cultural and theological conceptions and considerations of the DRC's *Message* at the national venue that converged in a historical moment of the building of the nation. A moment that was adjudicated contradictively.¹¹

Within the DRC there was an awareness of this contradiction and its implications. The intensifying tension between black and white nationalisms was in fact of major concern to the DRC. Another *Message*, this time addressed to 'the members of our daughter churches,' asked the pending question: 'Die koms van Jan van Riebeeck – was dit ramp of redding?' (The arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, was it disaster or deliverance?)¹² The answer was apparent. The same theological-historical interpretation and line of thought was followed and the blessings and advantages the gospel brought to the indigenous peoples by the whites and by the DRC specifically, emphasized. It concluded with the belief that 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 and in accordance with its own potency and nature.'¹³ The voice of another determined DRC persuasion. In 1948 *Die Kerkbode*, official and weekly journal of the DRC, 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...' ¹⁴ A conviction, and of

10. See the studies of N. Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest. Society of young South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1952, and Mnguni, *Three hundred Years: A History of South Africa*, Cape Town, 1952, that also appeared in the memorial year of 1952. In both one has 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*, Durban 1973, 112ff. During the 20th century differing schools of interpretations of South African history, not without cultural and other assumptions, identified themselves. See in this regard F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse verlete*.

11. Cf. in this regard P.W. Coetzer, 'Die era van Apartheid 1948-1961' in: T. Cameron and S.B. Spies (eds.), *Nuwe geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika in Woord en Beeld*, Kaapstad 1986, 281ff.; C.F.J. Muller (ed.), *Vyfhonderd Jaar Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, Kaapstad/Johannesburg 1980, 502ff.

12. Cf. 'Ramp of redding?' in: *Die Kerkbode* 69/12 (19 Maart 1952), 582.

13. 'Ramp of redding?' in: *Die Kerkbode* 69/12 (19 Maart 1952), 582.

14. See leading article by T.N. Hanekom, 'Apartheid as kerklike beleid' in: *Die Kerk-*

this the DRC was aware, that might lead to a very lonely road.¹⁵ It was to be tried and markedly influenced by the course of events and historical developments in South Africa.

At a historical (and contested) date the DRC did not hesitate to lay down its rendering of the South African past and apply it to the benefit of what was seen as the building of the (Christian) nation. The way in which both *Messages* were publicly disclosed, presupposed a national and political dispensation in which the DRC (and for that matter also the 'English' churches) were free to play a far-reaching role. Was this situation taken too easily for granted? For three centuries South Africa indeed had a Christian heritage. It was thus evident that the DRC, in its own right, would seize the opportunity at a historical date, to be a key role-player and yet again made its impact felt on the South African society. It was seen as a vocation.

2. AS A CITY ON THE MOUNTAIN

Careful consideration of both 1952-messages reveals an underlying ecclesiastical and historical self-assurance, relating itself to South Africa and the changing times. This corresponds with the popular conception 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.¹⁶ Within these parameters members and ministers of the DRC conceptualized their denomination. As such the DRC traditionally understood itself. It was proud of its numbers, counting in 1952 more than one million white and approximately 500.000 non-white 'souls.'¹⁷ Its ministry was well established and

bode 62/12 (22 September 1948), 664ff.; T.N. Hanekom, *Die Kerkbode* 62/13 (29 September 1948), 724ff.

15. See G.B.A. Gerdener: 'Die Wêreldraad van Kerke' in: In *Die Kerkbode* 62/16 (20 Oktober 1948), 928: '... op hierdie punt sal ons bereid moet wees om 'n baie eensame pad te bewandel...'

16. This historical and theological image of a national church that has come of age manifests itself in the ecclesiastical literature of commemoration. The best example in this regard is T.N. Hanekom (ed.), *Ons Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk Gedenkboek by ons Derde Eeufees 1952*, Kaapstad 1952. See also D. Lategan, 'Na driehonderd jaar. Kruispunte op die pad van die Kaapse Kerk' in: *Die Gereformeerde Vaandel* 20/2 (April 1952), 43-97.

17. G.B.A. Gerdener in T.N. Hanekom (ed.), *Ons Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, iii, provides the following numbers: Mother church: 627 congregations with 1.087.948 'souls,' Mission church: 336 congregations with 448.102 'souls.'

embodied structures that effectively were organizing its missionary work, its ministry of compassion, its care for current and social issues, its youth and pastorate.¹⁸ The Church enjoyed the trust of its members and the confidence of the National Party Government, elected to rule the country in 1948 under leadership of D.F. Malan, an ex-Dutch Reformed minister. In more than one way the DRC was a respectable institution. It was 'like a city on a mountain,' as J.D. Vorster, a leading clergyman, pictured his church.¹⁹ At the commemoration of the arrival of Van Riebeeck an appropriate address to 'our Church and our people' (*volk*) was anticipated. As indicated in the referred *Messages*, this ecclesiastical concept not only effected the DRC's views on the South African political situation, but also shaped the convictions regarding its role and calling in society at large.²⁰ Any assessment of the impact that the DRC and its theology made on the South African dispensation during the decades following 1950, must consider this traditional ecclesiastical self-concept. This self-understanding is church politically rooted in a peculiar system in which the synodical meeting was valued as the highest authority, embracing all the congregations and members.

Historically the DRC identified itself during the early 19th century in terms of a presbyterian-synodical structure, adapted to South African circumstances and its tradition.²¹ This ecclesiological substantiated its corporate identity and conception of the church. At the time of the Van Riebeeck Festival four Dutch Reformed Churches or Synods in each of the South African provinces existed: the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (Cape Synod), the Dutch Reformed Church in

18. See Index in: T.N. Hanekom, *Ons Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*.

19. See J.D. Vorster, 'Soos 'n stad op 'n berg' in: T.N. Hanekom, *Ons Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, 342ff.

20. See also 'Na 300 jaar' in: *Die Kerkbode* 69/11 (12 Maart 1952), 503. This editorial article states that 'dit by die Fees gaan om die realiserings van die visioenbeeld waarin kerk en staat uit een gedagte lewe en met verenigde kragte die Christelike beskawing sal bevorder in hierdie land.' Compare also 'Die hoogtepunt van die Fees' in: *Die Kerkbode* 69/14 (2 April 1952), 678. The editor was clear: 'onder die leiding van God is die Calvinistiese lewensbeskouing hier ingedra.'

21. For this development, see 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 DTh-dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1998. See also R.M. Britz, 'Oor die kerkbegrip en ordening van die kerklike lewe by die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk' in: *NGJT* 26/4 (September 1985), 432ff. And E. Brown, 'Die hervortolking van die paradigma in verband met die kollegialisme om die Afrikaanse Kerke kerkregtelik te verstaan' in: *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 48/3-4 (September and December 1992), 691-715.

the Orange Free State, the Nederduitsch Hervormde of Gereformeerde Kerk van Suid-Afrika (Transvaal Synod) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Natal. These four Synods commenced meeting together in a Federal Council of Churches as a structural expression and demonstration of the inward bond that developed within them after the devastating experience of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), in 1907.²² Although its decisions were advisory, the distinctive synods usually accepted them, thus sanctioning them with binding authority. The Federal Council, composed of a few delegates from each synod, thus became the most important meeting of the DRC. From here its influence and imprints on society and culture were spearheaded. In these meetings public issues were discussed and solutions to nation-wide problems reasoned. It continued itself in the labor of permanent commissions. These commissions ascertained to a large extent the agenda of the Federal Council and indirectly also those of the provincial synods. Within this presbyterian-synodical structure the commissions were the engaging instruments (or factotums) behind many decisions. In fact, they were the architects of ecclesiastical policies and programs that shaped the DRC's ministry and role – as a city on an mountain – in South Africa.

3. TWO EXAMPLES: DIRECTIONAL POLICIES FORMULATED

Two examples demonstrate the point. The first relates to the organizing of two national congresses on the appalling poor-white problem²³ during the 1930's through the instrumentality of the Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches and its Poor Relief Commission. The accompaniment and expertise of the DRC had an enormous impact on addressing the poor-white problem in particular and poverty in general. The Church shared in fundamental preliminary work with regards to the formulation of an applicable governmental policy concerning the social upliftment and prevention of poverty. The Church consequently played a decisive role as a committed and accredited partner in formulating policy and establishing a governmental Department of Social Welfare, manned by professionally trained social workers. The

22. See P.B. van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1905-1975*, Pretoria 1987, 21ff. for a review of the history of the Federal Council.

23. See J.F.W. Grosskopf, et. al., *Die armblanke-vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika. Verslag van die Carnegie Kommissie*, Stellenbosch 1932, Five Volumes.

brilliant young professor of the University of Stellenbosch, H.F. Verwoerd, guestspeaker at the 1934 Congress, member of the DRC, headed the new Department of Social Work at his university. Country-wide ecclesiastical Social Councils were brought into existence by the Church and operated ever since as subsidized Non Governmental Organizations.

The second concerns the policy statement on the Church's missionary enterprise, that was officially approved by the Council of Churches in 1935. During the first years of the 20th century it became apparent that the missionary practice of the DRC demanded scientific justification and scrutinizing. In the missionary movement and with the formation of 'younger of mission churches,' new concepts emerged which required re-orientation.²⁴ At the same time black nationalism and political awareness postulated what was called the 'native question' which was identified as the national problem of South Africa. The mission of the Church became related to this question and therefor required the attention of the oldest church of the country. It was accepted that racial segregation in a positive constructive way in church and society would enhance the cause of mission work. It would also further the ideal of establishing self-supporting, self-governing and independent indigenous ('native') churches. At the multi-racial conferences, organized by the Missionary Commission of the Federal Council in 1923 and 1927, this was discussed while the delegates of the DRC became aware of the need of an openly formulated mission policy.

Eventually, after many deliberations, the policy was accepted in 1935.²⁵ It commenced with the 'missionary charge' of Matthew 28. Then follows an image of the past: the first white inhabitants of the Southern corner of darkest Africa were men and women with strongly held religious convictions who had to become the bearers of the light of the gospel to the heathen nations. Thirdly, the oneness of the human race (Acts 17:26) and the equality before God of all people in spite of differences of color, culture and language had to be considered. Evangelization as the preaching of the Word of God, results in the establishing of self-supporting, self-governing and independent churches.

24. Cf. in this regard J. du Plessis, *Gaat dan henen! Handleiding tot de studie der zending*, Stellenbosch 1909; G.B.A. Gerdener, *Studies in the Evangelisation of South Africa*, London 1911; J. du Plessis, *Wie sal gaan? Of die sending in teorie en praktyk*, Kaapstad 1932.

25. See J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 3ff.

Evangelization must therefor not lead to 'de-nationalization.' Nationalism and culture must be saturated and purified. Education, medical services and agriculture development are put forward as aids in this regard. The Afrikaner's fear of 'gelykstelling' (equalization) and anything that might lead to racial mixing, was to be avoided. This policy realized itself within a Christian tradition and development and it was related and described in terms of the Afrikaner's image and interpretation of South African history. And, it received much academic attention and reflection.²⁶

Both examples reflect how a functional and centralized notion of the church stimulated formulating directional policies that had an effect on the South African society.

4. AND THE REFORMED CONFSSIONAL STANDARDS?

Understanding the functional self-concept of the DRC is therefore a prerequisite in order to appraise its theology and value its effect on the cultural, political and historical environment. Strictly scrutinized, this functional and centralized notion of the church is based on the assumption that the church represents a peculiar phenomena (or attribute) of (Christian) society. It is inoculated rather on sociological and philosophical categories, than the confessional presumptions of the Reformed doctrine as expressed in the Formularies of Unity. It differs in many respects from the view of the church depicted in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession. Theologically the emphasis in this centralized ecclesiastical structure is shifted from the epibacterial ministry, based on the Biblical *ordo salutis* and the *praesentia*

26. For e.g. W.J. van der Merwe, *The Development of Missionary Attitudes in the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa*, Hartford 1934; G.B.A. Gerdener, *Two Centuries of Grace: A Sketch of missionary Endeavor in South Africa*, Stellenbosch 1937; G.B.A. Gerdener, 'n Eeu van genade, 1838-1938: Die sending van die Ned. Geref. Kerk in Suid-Afrika in oënskou geneem in die eeujaar van die Groot Trek, Kaapstad 1938; E.A. Venter, *Die historiese ontwikkeling van sekere aspekte van die Ned. Geref. Kerk se sendingbeleid, veral sedert 1900*, Unpublished MDiv. Paper, Unisa, Pretoria 1941; G.B.A. Gerdener, *Reguit koers gehou: Die wording, wese en werking van die Ned Geref. Kerk se sendingbeleid en praktyk van die 1951*; J.A. Lombaard, *Ontwikkelinge in die sendingbeleid, Kaapstad/Pretoria 1951*; J.A. Lombaard, *Ontwikkelinge in die sendingbeleid 1932-1962*, Unpublished DTh-dissertation, University of the North, Pietersburg 1985; N.J. Smith, *Die planting van afsonderlike kerke vir nie-blanke bevolkingsgroepe deur die nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika*, Stellenbosch 1973.

realis Christi, to the care and decisions of the assemblies of the church. Which means, that another question arises: How determining did (and do, for that matter) the Formularies of Unity (i.e. the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt) operate in the ecclesiology and theology of the DRC? The answer discloses an interesting, and for the purpose of this composition, relevant story. At the Cape Synod of 1837 the DRC accepted the *qua* position in subscribing to the doctrinal standards – by a margin of 21 to 19 votes. This must be attributed to the influence of the Scottish clergymen that came to South Africa during the 1820's to minister to the Cape Dutch Church. In terms of their background and evangelical-puritan convictions ('Auld Light Presbyterians'²⁷), they would not allow for a broad church and ecclesiastical fellowship in which ministers could take up incompatible doctrinal positions. Unlike the case of the Dutch Reformed Church in The Netherlands (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*), modalities and schools of thought in the fellowship of the Cape Dutch Reformed Church were not conceded.

The history of the DRC, however, designates that the prevention of modalities (or was it in fact the securing of an evangelical school of thought?) did not safeguard the normative (and *qua*) position of the Confessions in the real Reformed sense of the word. During the 'Liberal Conflict'²⁸ between 1860 and 1875, when modernists challenged (i.a.) the traditional view of Scripture and its proclamation of Christ as God and man, the Formularies of Unity functioned in a formal and judicial way as ecclesiastical documents by which the signatories (i.e. the 'liberal' ministers) were bounded to the doctrine of the DRC. It did not prevent Andrew Murray, outstanding minister and gifted leader of the orthodox-evangelical party in the DRC, to embrace an Armenian disposition. In fact, the very popular insistence on revival and spiritual awakening in the DRC at that time, discloses a typical evangelical Armenianism.²⁹

And, 70 years later, professor J. du Plessis, another leading evangelical and 'missionary statesman,' busied himself with a 'new orien-

27. See A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843*, Edinburgh 1981, 45ff., 180ff.

28. See T.N. Hanekom, *Die liberale rigting in Suid-Afrika: Die Christen-Studentevereniging-Maatskappy*, Stellenbosch 1951; A. Moorrees, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika 1652-1873*, Kaapstad 1937, 881ff.

29. Cf. A.D. Pont, 'Enkele aantekeninge by die debat oor die uitleg van die Dordtse Leerreëls wat in 1871 deur ds. J. Kotzé van Darling en ds. Andrew Murray (jnr.) gevoer is' in: *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 15/1 (1959), 29-38.

tating movement' which had a wider theological reference. He was charged with heresy and got himself engaged in a doctrinal dispute with the DRC concerning the historical-critical method of exegesis and authority of Scripture.³⁰ The Church was not prepared to accept a liberalizing reorientation of its theology. Those who defended the orthodox position, used the Formularies of Unity in an apologetic and fundamentalist way.³¹ It served as an arsenal of ammunition against heresy and – polemically – furthered the cause of neo-Calvinistic philosophy. This school of thought³² was gaining ground amongst theological students and the younger generation ministers. It was linked to an international movement, which had its roots in the explicit Calvinistic orientation of the Free University in Amsterdam as well as in the reformational philosophy of (i.a.) Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and Stoker. Was the standards of doctrine again implemented for the benefit of a predominantly group (a modality?) within the DRC?³³ In these circles the 'Calvinism' of the oldest church of the country and 'Calvinistic character' of the Afrikaner people were developed into a basic and integrating principle.³⁴ No wonder that Cape Town was on the 2nd April 1952 also the venue of a Calvinistic conference on the theme: Our heritage.³⁵

30. See *Die Kerksaak tussen Prof. J. du Plessis en die Ned. Geref. Kerk in Suid-Afrika*, Kaapstad 1931; F.S. Malan, *Ons Kerk en Prof. Du Plessis*, Kaapstad 1933; A.S. Erasmus, *Die bediening van Johannes du Plessis (1868-1935) in die Ned. Geref. Kerk, met besondere verwysing na sy teologiese denke*, Unpublished DTh-dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch 1986, 298ff.

31. See for instance C.R. Kotzé, *Die dwaling in ons Kerk*, Bloemfontein, 1932.

32. See *Die stigting van die Kristelik-Nasionale Bond van Calviniste in Suid-Afrika*, Potchefstroom 1929. The foundation of the Bond was the Word of God as it is interpreted in the Calvinistic world-view in accordance with the Christian-national tradition of the nation. The aim of the Bond was to enlighten and to realize 'the demands of the unalterable principles of the Word of God pertaining to the different spheres of our modern life as a nation and to co-operate on the international front with organizations of an equal foundation' (*ibid.*, 23).

33. Many in the Dutch Reformed Church would not be limited to what they regarded as a narrowly defined inclination of its theological and evangelical heritage. This was voiced by Bekommerd ('Worried') in a pamphlet *Christus die deur: die twee rigtings van die Calvinisme*, Kaapstad 1936.

34. It is perhaps best reasoned in H.G. Stoker and F.J.M. Potgieter (eds.), *Koers in die krisis. Vol. 1*, Stellenbosch 1935; H.G. Stoker and J.D. Vorster (eds.), *Koers in die krisis. Vol. 2 and 3*, Stellenbosch 1941. See also R.M. Britz, 'Die begrip 'Calvinisme' in die Afrikaanse geskiedskrywing: 'n Oorsigtelike tipering' in: *Skrif en Kerk* 14/2 (1994), 196-218.

35. See R.M. Britz: "'n Belangrike samekoms' in: *Die Kerkbode* 69/23, 1129.

To return to the point: Officially there was consensus: the Formularies of Unity were authoritative ecclesiastical documents. But, subscribing to this doctrinal standard obviously did not guarantee a confessional church without any modalities. It also did not ensure a confessional ministry in unity with the living Christ. He, who is the cause and preserver of the very faith confessed according to its Scriptural sense giving and relevance in the said doctrines. It did not prevent the development of a very powerful and popular concept of a corporate and national church, with its regulations and policy documents, addressing current issues according to the demands of the context. In both the policy documents concerning its Poor Relief and Mission Work, formulated in the 1930's, the Formularies of Unity actually played no normative role. It was this church that had a *Festival Message to Church and People* at hand in April 1952. It was signed by J.C.G. Kotze, convinced evangelical, E.A. Venter, neo-Calvinist and professor of Philosophy and reverend J.N. Geldenhuys, a dedicated synodical official. A pregnant illustration of its miscellaneous character and spirituality.

5. A COMPREHENSIVE MINISTRY AND 'OUR OWN POINT OF VIEW' CONCERNING THE NATIONAL PROBLEM OF RACE RELATIONS

Against the background of everything said thus far, it is comprehensible why the DRC at the beginning of the 1950's related itself to South Africa and why its concern was with 'our people' ('*ons volk*'). After 1940 it was sensed that this Church was no longer a rural and pastoral church. The Commission for Poor Relief of the Federal Council of Churches conducted a comprehensive investigation between 1944 and 1947, called a *Volkskongres* during 1947 in Johannesburg and published its findings 'of the urbanization of our people' in a rapport *Church and City*.³⁶ The proven way was again followed. And, it was decided to issue a *Church and People-Series*, covering the burning social and political issues and written by 'acknowledged and trustworthy leading churchmen.' This series portrays the practical-theological thinking of the DRC in the context of the 1950's. Matters of immediate concern 'for church and people' were selected and treated in terms of a 'Christian-reformed point of view.' Moral decline

36. J.R. Albertyn, P. du Toit and H.S. Theron, *Kerk en stad. Verslag van die Kommissie van Ondersoek oor Stadstoestande*, Stellenbosch 1947.

was combated, especially in the areas of abuse of liquor, gambling, indecent publications, prostitution. As 'oldest church of the country,' the assemblies and authorized commissions of the DRC insisted on bilateral talks with officials and cabinet ministers, that government should act in a proper Christian way with appropriate legislation against social decay. Modern and threatening ideologies, such as communism, liberalism, the new-sprung African *uhuru* (freedom) movement, Freemasonry, etcetera, were identified. Members of the church were informed. And warned. Evangelization was at the same time regarded as a most important aspect of the church's ministry. The DRC could not be apathetic towards ecclesiastical indifference. The church's traditional way of ministry was effected. Adjustments, such as forming smaller congregations which could act dynamically to attract people, was made. The ministry to the youth of the church, received penetrating analysis. The Federal Council of Churches' Commission for Evangelization and Church Restoration mobilized the church.³⁷ One is reminded of the expressive addition to the motto of the Van Riebeeck Festival several years earlier in the *Festival Message to the church and people: WE BUILD A NATION - A NATION FOR CHRIST!* This reveals the heartbeat of the Church's evangelical approach and spirituality.³⁸

The second 1952 DRC message, embodied its 'own point of view' on the most confronting and critical issue of race-relations in South Africa. Organized by the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies, a *Volkskongres* on the racial issue met in 1944. A Scriptural basis for supporting 'apartheid' as fundamental solution of the race problem was argued by J.D. du Toit of the Gereformeerde Kerk. Others followed.³⁹ The Commission of Current Issues submitted a report on the separation (apartheid) of nations and their calling toward one another at the meeting of the Federal Council of Churches in 1947. The purpose was to clarify the principle of apartheid in the light of Scriptures. The result was positive. Lubbe remarks that 'the first four decades of the 20th century brought some developments in this regard: from practical missionary experience and from existing opinions, a mission

37. See *Die Ned. Geref. Kerk en sy evangelisasietak vandag. Handeling, referate en besluite van die Eerste Uniale Evangelisasiekongres, gehou in die Stadsaal, Bloemfontein, 28-30 September 1959*, Pretoria-Kaapstad.

38. On this church's evangelical character, cf. R.M. Britz: 'Is the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa Evangelical? A Church Historical Perspective' in: *Theological Forum* 25/1 (May 1997), 16-25.

39. See J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 6ff.

policy was formulated... an addendum dealing with the Scriptural grounds for racial apartheid was then added to the policy.⁴⁰

Some questions in this regard must be pondered: Was, in reality, a contextual theology born? One of the first post-war political theologies, in which justice and righteousness would be rolling along like waves? A policy gave birth to a theology. This theology was exciting, provided a logical comprehensive analysis of the situation, had a biblical frame of reference and laid claim to God's involvement and blessing. It lodged a thrilling vision: a communion of separate and independent peoples, based on Christian principles. And, a future situation was projected in which the Gospel would have free access. The accepted mission policy could be used as a cornerstone in this school of thought.⁴¹ As formal ecclesiastical documents,⁴² the Formularies of Unity did not prevent its development. In fact, in the construction of the theological arguments to support apartheid, even reference to the doctrinal standards lacked.

In supporting apartheid,⁴³ the concern of the DRC was, considering its approach Scriptural and theological, with a realistic policy to enable human relationships and equal opportunities for the different peoples in South Africa. It was considered as the answer to the pressing national and racial problem.⁴⁴ For this reason the DRC co-operated with the Tomlinson Commission, appointed by the National Party Government, in which dr. Verwoerd now served as Minister of Native Affairs. His secretary was the well known Pretoria professor of Ethnology and son of a German missionary, W.W.M. Eiselen. The Tom-

40. J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 9.

41. J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 14ff.

42. See for a discussion and church historical survey, R.M. Britz, 'The Formularies of Unity and the Dutch Reformed Church - a preliminary survey' in: *In die Skriflig* 27/4 (December 1993), 519-536.

43. Recent publications paid intensive attention to the role the Dutch Reformed Church played in this regard. As contemporary and contextual church historiography, they are not free of tendentious interpretations. See E. Brown, 'Onverantwoorde kontekstuele kerkgeskiedskrywing in Suid-Afrika' in: *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 19/1 (June 1993), 110-140. For an orientation, see J.W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, Grand Rapids 1979, 53ff.; J. Kinghorn (ed.), *Die Ned. Geref. Kerk en Apartheid*, Johannesburg 1986, 86-116; J.W. Hofmeyr and G.J. Pillay (eds.), *A History of Christianity in South Africa*, Pretoria 1994, 246ff.; E.M. Klaaren, 'Creation and Apartheid: South African Theology since 1948' in: R. Elphick and R. Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa: A political, social and cultural history*, Oxford 1997, 370ff. An excellent exposition of the matter came from J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 1ff.

44. P.B. van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1905-1975*, 102ff.

linson Commission was to launch an in-depth inquiry into the socio-economic implications of geographical apartheid.⁴⁵ The government undertook to 'plan' the future of the country for all the different races, according to which each one would maintain its separate and respective cultural identity. The policy of the church ('our own point of view'), and the policy of the country joined in a partnership. It was a time of idealism. With its policy of apartheid the DRC could play a keyrole in the management and solution of the current national race issue and its concrete problems. During the years 1949 to 1957, several church conferences discussed the issue. In April 1950 more than 600 delegates met in Bloemfontein to listen to experts on the 'Native Problem'.⁴⁶ And, to take responsible decisions. Four regional conferences with black leaders from the Dutch Reformed Mission Churches met at the end of 1952 and assured the 'Mother Church' of their appreciation and loyalty.⁴⁷ The official position of the church became consolidated.⁴⁸

At an inter-church conference⁴⁹ - November 1953 - on 'Christian principles in a multi-racial South Africa' differentiating opinions among the leaders of the DRC surfaced. Some, like professors F.J.M. Potgieter, G.B.A. Gerdener and the reverend C.B. Brink consequently pointed out that the apartheid (separate development) is the only righteous and Scriptural solution to the tense South African national situation. Others, like Professors B.B. Keet and B.J. Marais, would not defend apartheid along Biblical lines. To their mind it was a realistic policy, based on practical circumstances. Clergymen from the 'English' churches were outspoken: apartheid is impractical, unjust and unscriptural. In Dutch Reformed circles the differences amongst own ranks caused embarrassment. A meeting of the theological professors in December of that year could not settle the differences. It became clear that within the DRC a number of theologians and lay members

45. Cf. F.R. Tomlinson, *Verlag van die Kommissie. Unie van Suid-Afrika. Kommissie vir die sosio-ekonomiese ontwikkeling van die Bantoegebiede binne die Unie van Suid-Afrika*, Pretoria 1956, 17 Volumes.

46. See *Referate van die Kerklike Kongres van die Gefedereerde NG Kerke insake Naturellevraagstuk*, Bloemfontein 4-6 April 1950.

47. See *Besluite van die Uniale Konferensie met Bantoe-Kerkleiers gehou te Bloemfontein 9-11 Desember 1952*, Bloemfontein 1953.

48. J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 30ff.

49. Federale Sendingraad van die NG Kerke, *Konferensie van kerkleiers oor 'Die toepassing van Christelike beginsels in ons veelrassige land, met spesiale verwysing na die uitbreiding van Gods Koninkryk onder die nie-blanke mense van Suid-Afrika*, 17-19 November 1953, Pretoria.

could not adhere to the Scriptural foundation and the practices of the policy of apartheid or separate development or developmental freedom (Eiselen). The differences of opinion were carried in a number of sensational publications by DRC theologians.⁵⁰ The Federal Council of Churches appointed an Ad Hoc Commission for Race Relations to provide a clearer exposition of the church's policy in order to bridge the differences and address the growing criticism of the 'English churches'⁵¹ and that of the World Council of Churches.⁵² Accepted by the Federal Council in 1957, the report opted for a mediatory position. There were no references to Old Testament parallels. The diversity of creation and pluriformity of the church now served as points of departure. The report focussed less on the context and more on the church, which indicated the change of direction.

6. DEFENDING ITS 'OWN POINT OF VIEW' AND AN EFFECTUAL MINISTRY

At the same time the South African social order was questioned and rejected. From abroad, and from inside South Africa. By governments, the United Nations, as well as churches and ecumenical bodies. The 'oldest church in the country' experienced a time of growing tension. Its history, its missionary policy, its theological support for 'separate development' as a comprehensive social and political solution for the demanding and strained inter-racial South African context, were academically⁵³ and publicly disputed. The DRC had to defend its posi-

50. A.B. du Preez, *Die Skrifuurlike grondslag vir rasseverhoudinge*, Kaapstad 1955; F.J.M. Potgieter, *Veelvormige ontwikkeling - die wil van God*, Bloemfontein 1956; B.B. Keet, *Whither South Africa?*, Stellenbosch 1956; A.B. Du Preez, *Eiesoortige ontwikkeling tot Volksdiens - die Hoop vir Suid-Afrika*, Pretoria/Kaapstad 1959; B.J. Marais, *Die kleur-krisis en die Weste*, Johannesburg 1952.

51. See *The Christian Council of South Africa: Race - What Does the Bible Say?*, Roodepoort 1952; *God's Kingdom in a multi-racial South Africa. A Report on the Inter-racial Conference of Church Leaders*, Johannesburg, 7-10 December 1954; D. Paton, *Church and Race in South Africa*, London 1958; T. Huddleston, *Naught for your Comfort*, London 1956.

52. See for instance W.A. Landman, *Ons rassevraagstuk die wêreldmening en ons toekoms*, Stellenbosch 1955.

53. See the Roman Catholic O. Niederberger, *Kirche-Mission-Rasse. Die Missionsauf-fassung der Niederländisch-Reformierten-Kirchen von Südafrika*, Schöneck-Bechenried 1959; G. Beckers, *Religiöse Faktoren in der Entwicklung der südafrikanischen Rassenfrage*, München 1969; J.J. Buskes, *Zuid-Afrikas apartheidsbeleid: Onaanvaardbaar!*, Amsterdam 1956.

tion.⁵⁴ And, from within, more Dutch Reformed theologians became convinced that the accepted Scriptural principles and foundation of apartheid contradicted Biblical teaching on the essence of the church of Christ.⁵⁵ The focal point of this younger generation theologians was therefore on the ecclesiology. In a multi-racial and divided country the issue of the unity of the church was of crucial importance and must accommodate all diversity, pluriformity and devidedness.⁵⁶ Theologically speaking, the policies of mission and apartheid, was thus ecclesio-logically scrutinized and accounted for.⁵⁷

Nine years after the Van Riebeeck Festival the Union of South Africa became a free Republic. Its own political and social affairs could now be handled outside the British Commonwealth. An event that was welcomed by the DRC. The gaining of independence occurred at a turning-point in African history. 'Winds of change' had started to blow over Africa, as the period of decolonization of the continent set in. The question of the future of the country settled by different and differing peoples, cultures and communities, forced again to the surface. Violence amongst the black urban societies erupted. The year 1960 was a time of crisis in South Africa.⁵⁸ After the murdering of a number policemen and white civilians, the shooting at Sharpville Police Station, where 69 blacks were killed, spread-

54. See *Dutch Reformed Churches of South Africa: Statements on Race Relations, November 1960*. This pamphlet embodied the Report of the Ad Hoc Commission for Race Relations of the Federal Council of Churches (the addendum was omitted), the resolutions of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod on race relations at its meeting in Potchefstroom 1958, a statement on the riots in South Africa (March 1960) and the resolutions of the national mission conference of the Dutch Reformed Church during April 1960 in Kroonstad. See also: Inligtingsburo NG Kerk, *Die NG Kerk in Suid-Afrika en rasseverhoudinge. Opsomming van belangrikste uitsprake en besluite vanaf 1950 - Desember 1960*, Pretoria 1961. See also R.T.L. Lombaard, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke en Rasse-politiek met verwysing na die jare 1948-1961*, Silverton 1981.

55. See P.B. van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1905-1975*, 102ff.

56. See G.J. Swart, *Die vraagstuk van die eenheid, verskeidenheid en verdeeldheid van die kerk. 'n Ekumenies-ekklesiologiese ondersoek*, DD-dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1959; J.J.F. Durand, *Una Sancta Catholica in sendingperspektief: 'n Analise van die probleme rondom die kerklike pluriformiteit en ekumenisiteit in die sending*, Amsterdam 1961; J.C.G. Kotze, *Principle and practice in race relations*, Stellenbosch 1962; W.D. Jonker, *Die sendingbepalings van die Ned. Gereformeerde Kerk van Transvaal*, Die Studie-Groep oor Kerk en Wêreld, Potchefstroom 1962.

57. See J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 36ff.

58. See T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa. A modern History*, London, 1978, 257ff., 285ff.

ing unrest, the attempt to assassinate Prime Minister Verwoerd on April 9, a state of emergency was declared. The Pan Africanist Congress as well as the African National Congress were banned. Churches considered in the situation and stood in opposition towards one another. At the end of the year the World Council of Churches intervened and brought its South African members (The Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa, Congregational Union of South Africa, Church of the Province of South Africa, the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika and the Transvaal and Cape Synods of the Dutch Reformed Church) in consultation at Cottesloe, Johannesburg. The Transvaal and Cape Synods of the DRC therefore participated in the deliberations. Its delegates played a clarifying role and substantially contributed to the decisions taken on the burning South African racial issues.⁵⁹ The alarm was sounded by leading clergymen of the DRC. 'Our own point of view' was experienced as a unjust system. It is increasingly rejected by the majority of South African blacks and invokes violent protest actions. It could not serve as a national solution for the national problem of race relations.⁶⁰ That was the message of Cottesloe!

A few months later the Republic came. C.R. Swart, one time Sunday school teacher and devote member of the DRC, was officially inaugurated as State President on the 31st May 1961 in the Bosmanstreet DRC in Pretoria. Although the intervention of the World Council and the decisions of Cottesloe were rejected by the synods of the DRC, the Church was forced to reconsider its 'own point of view' on the racial issue. The functionary in this case was the Commission of Current Affairs, of the 1962 formed General Synod. The old Federal Council was dismantled and the regional synods constituted a General Synod as a centralized policy synod. In Dutch Reformed thinking this synod is recognized as the most authoritative major ecclesiastical assembly.⁶¹ This hypothesizes an associated and synodical view or representation of church government and the ecclesiastical fellowship ('kerkverband'). The General Synod and church hence become equivalent

59. See in this regard Cottesloe Consultation, *The Report of the Consultation among South African Members Churches of the World Council of Churches, 7-14 December 1960, at Cottesloe, Johannesburg*, A.H. Lückhoff, Cottesloe, Kaapstad 1978.

60. Vide also A.S. Geysers, et al., *Delayed Action*, NG Kerk Boekhandel, 1961.

61. See E. Brown, 'Die spoor wat die Ned. Geref. Kerk in sy kerkregering gedurende die 20ste eeu gevolg het' in: *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 20/3 (September 1979), 277ff.

terms. This church (or synod) represents the denomination, and speaks on its behalf. It advances and develops the community of saints. In current issues it guides its members and ministers. It determines the course and never hesitates to intervene on behalf of its members and the people to which its members belong. As in the case of the old Federal Council, the General Synod, which was composed as a *synodus contracta*, continued itself in the labor of permanent commissions and their secretariats. These commissions ascertained to a large extent its agenda. Yet again commissions became the engaging instruments behind synodical decisions. The self-understanding of the DRC as a national church prevailed. And, it was deposited in an expanding and well organized ministry that included missionary work and the support of the Mission churches, work of compassion, the youth, publications, etc.⁶² Historically it is erroneous to interpret the history of the DRC exclusively on the basis of its involvement with the issue of race relations.

For the next 12 years the General Commission for Current Affairs was involved in a process in which the DRC checked its traditional views on the structure of the South African context.⁶³ This process was concluded at the General Synod of 1974. An official statement on *Human Relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture* was accepted and published.⁶⁴ In this cautiously formulated contextual document many years of DRC thinking and official theology were deposited. Criticism offered in the earlier years were accommodated and processed. According to *Human relations and the South African scene* the Bible accepts the diversity of peoples as a fact. It does not however elevate it to a position of an only and highest principle. All human relationships, it remarked, must stand under the sign of the law of love, righteousness, truth and peace. The unity of the church is a unity in Christ, in which the diversity continues to exist. The unity of the church must be seen, heard and experienced, as it is a visible reality.⁶⁵ Pluriformity as a Scriptural development had a right to exist.⁶⁶ It was agreed that a historical development with regards to the DRC's missionary enterprise led to the present 'pluriform existence' of the Church among different populations group. The document also ob-

62. See P.B. van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1905-1975*, 190-305.

63. See for instance W.A. Landman, *A Plea for Understanding*, Kaapstad 1968.

64. *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, Cape Town/ Pretoria 1976.

65. *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, 12-38.

66. Cf. *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, 43ff.

served that a political dispensation that is built on autogenous development of different population groups can, according to Scripture, be justified in principle.⁶⁷ Land ownership must receive fair and just attention of the state,⁶⁸ as well as the socio-political position of the colored people.⁶⁹ Migrant labor, a common practice in South Africa, led to the disruption of married and family life and cannot be defended.⁷⁰ Says Lubbe: The report 'was satisfied largely to legitimize the status quo and to take 'a waiting stance' regarding government initiatives.'⁷¹ The idealism of 20 years earlier, made way for realism.

In the same year the DRC launched a country-wide Youth-to-Youth Action (an initiative of the General Youth Commission) in which the Church's evangelistic idealism culminated.⁷² The church as a whole was mobilized. The aim was to confront every young baptized member of the Church with the Gospel of Christ. The emphasis was on conversion, sanctification, ecclesiastical commitment. It became the most extensive action the DRC ever launched. At the end of the year it was concluded at an enormous rally in Pretoria, where Prime Minister B.J. Vorster, delivered his personal confession of faith in Christ. Once more the DRC came to its own. This time not only a message was delivered – its words were put into action. On a national scale the ministry of the DRC reached a high-water mark.

7. DOING THEOLOGY IN A LASTING CRISIS

On the 16th of June 1976 Soweto,⁷³ a large cluster of black townships near Johannesburg exploded, igniting nation-wide riots, protests and a violent rejection of the government and its policies of separate development. The national context changed dramatically to one of a liberation struggle, of isolation, economic sanctions and the breaking down of an old order. It was years of one state of emergency declared after

67. *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, 64ff.

68. *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, 73.

69. *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, 77ff.

70. *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, 74ff.

71. J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 42. See also *ibid.*, 40ff. for an exposition of this important document. See also J.A. van Wyk: 'Latente motiewe in die Verklaring van die NG Kerk oor Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkerverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif' in: *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 17/2 (March 1976), 98ff.

72. See M. Smuts, *Die saak is van God*, Roodepoort (1975).

73. See J.W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 169ff.

the other. And, uncertainty of the future dispensation of the country. By now it was clear that the days of the policy and theology of apartheid were counted in an ill-fated South Africa. The churches and church members in South Africa were divided on to how to understand and act in the unpredictable circumstances. It was amongst theologians meeting in ecclesiastical and ecumenical structures,⁷⁴ that a new contextual (black) theology of liberation was argued.⁷⁵ Leading ministers from the Dutch Reformed Mission Churches – some of which furthered their theological training at the Kampen Theological University of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*) – played a significant role in the development of this practical and ethical theology.⁷⁶ The context gave birth to yet another influential theology in South Africa. It provided a comprehensive social analysis of the South African context, it related itself very powerfully to a Biblical frame of reference (God sides with the poor and oppressed and in freeing them, overthrows oppressive structures and regimes) and claims God's involvement and blessing. The struggle was thus theologically justified. Its vision was a free society within an inclusive democracy, in which righteousness and justice would be rolling along like the waves of the sea. In the realization of this 'new' South Africa by way of an extensive struggle, liberation theologians argued, the only way in which the church (and the Christian faith) could sustain its credibility, was to get involved in terms of a committed and relevant contextual liberating proclamation and deeds. For a second time since 1950 the theological and ecclesiastical scene in South Africa was dominated by a theology that pretended to make a difference in society and culture. Characteristic of this practical and political theology was its employment of social criticism and social ethics, as is evident from numerous studies that it evoked.⁷⁷ In

74. The South African Council of Churches, SPRO-CAS, Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa, Broeder Kring, Christian Institute and the Institute for Contextual Theology, for example.

75. See J.W. Hofmeyr and G.J. Pillay (eds.), *A History of Christianity in South Africa*, 277ff.; J.W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 149ff.

76. To name a few: A.A. Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A social-ethical Study of Black Theology and Black Power*, Maryknoll/Johannesburg 1977; S.P. Govender, *In Search of Tomorrow. The Dialogue between Black Theology and Marxism in South Africa*, Kampen 1987; J.C. Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou: Die verstregeling van die sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika*, Amsterdam 1982.

77. Cf. B. Moore (ed.), *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, Atlanta 1973; D. Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, Johannesburg/Grand Rapids 1984; I. Mosala and B.

this theology, the Reformed confessions did not play a normative role. In fact, South African liberation theology gave birth to a confessing movement (against apartheid and its theological justification⁷⁸) and a number of contemporary confessional documents⁷⁹ of its own, which was signed by a number of ministers and theologians from the Dutch Reformed Mission Churches. The DRC was thus in a difficult situation. Its vision for a Christian South Africa was knocked out of its hands. It now had to contend with a reality that it feared and tried to avoid in terms of 'our own point of view.' This view no longer could be upheld.

While the National Party lead the country through a process of reform, voices of DRC protest swelled. In a 'Reformation Day Witness' eight theologians designated the apparent inability of the institutionalized church in South Africa to meaningfully and credibly fulfill its 'God-given calling of reconciliation.' The church had to strive towards eradicating unloving and racist attitudes, exhibiting Christian solidarity with everyone who suffered because of social practices, economic disproportion and political measures, and striving towards a visible form of church unity on the basis of shared confessional creeds. Racial discrimination was in opposition to the ethical norm of brotherly love and contradicted the Bible. At the General Synod of 1982 the DRC declared racism sin and requested for 'penetrating revision' of.

Among theologians and ministers of the DRC the ministry of reconciliation was now stressed as the primary task of the church. A system in which irreconcilability was elevated to a communal princi-

Thagale (eds.), *The unquestionable Right to be Free: Essays on Black Theology*, Johannesburg 1986; A. Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel*, Cape Town 1989; P.G.R. de Villiers (ed.), *Liberation Theology and the Bible*, Pretoria 1987.

78. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (of which the Dutch Reformed Church was a member) at its meeting in Ottawa in 1982 declared that apartheid is sin and that the preserving theological justification of it is a heresy. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church took the same decisions in 1982 at its Synod and professed its position in terms of a 'status confessiones.' In 1986 the Church accepted the Confession of Belhar. See D.J. Smit and G.D. Cloete, 'n Oomblik van waarheid, Kaapstad 1984.

79. Cf. J.W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 103ff. See also J.W. de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio, *Apartheid is a Heresy*, Cape Town/Grand Rapids/London 1983; *The Cairns Document: Challenge to the Church. A theological Comment on the political Crisis in South Africa*, Johannesburg 1985; *Evangelical Witness in South Africa. A Critique of Evangelical Theology and Practice by Evangelicals Themselves*, Johannesburg 1986.

ple and in which laws concerning mixed marriages, race classification and group areas assist such estrangement, could not be Scriptural founded. The unity of the church, which was a gift and charge of God, had therefor to be made visible.⁸⁰ In 1986 a new policy document *Church and Society*⁸¹ bear testimony of a turning tide. It still held to the known principles of unity and diversity in creation, which is not wiped out by the unity of the church, but is being transcended. But, the departure point now has become the church: 'God's unique miracle of recreation.' It stated that membership of the DRC is open and prophetically by its witness. Corporately the church changed course, accommodating both the neo-Calvinistic idea concerning the church in a Christian society and the Barthian view of the church as a peculiar institution in this world.⁸²

The corporate church could however not keep all its members together. Some 30 000 members withdrew and formed the *Afrikaans Protestantse Kerk*, a church for white Afrikaners, based on the *Formularies of Unity*.⁸³ On the local level it was evident that the DRC was losing its influence and credibility in the changing society, and amongst many members. Something had to be done. The doctrinal standards of the Church were not thought of.⁸⁴ The evangelical idealism gave birth to an American influenced and much followed DRC growth movement that primarily regards the congregation as a religious and social entity.⁸⁵ Strategic planning, liturgical renewal, experimenting with alternative structures, adopting charismatic tendencies,

80. See J.J. Lubbe, 'About 1948: What Happened?', 45ff.

81. *Church and Society. A Testimony of the Dutch Reformed Church*, Bloemfontein 1986.

82. See in this regard J.J.F. Durand, 'Church and state in South Africa: Karl Barth vs Abraham Kuyper' in: C. Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, Grand Rapids 1985, 121ff.; P.J. Strauss, 'Op die tweesprong? Die NG Kerk oor die tema "Kerk en samelewing"' in: *Die Kerkorde en Kerk en Samelewing-1990*, Bloemfontein 1992.

83. Cf. Die Voortsettingskomitee, *Geloof en Protes*, Pretoria 1987.

84. See R.M. Britz, 'Vergeetboeke? Die Drie Formuliere van Enigheid en die NG Kerk' in: F. Snyman (ed.), *Is die NG kerk nog die NG Kerk? Antwoorde op die identiteitskrisis in die Kerk*, Wellington 1998, 89-96.

85. For this development, cf. L.M. Erasmus and R.M. Britz, 'n Oorsig oor die ontwikkeling van 'n gemeenteboutologie by die Ned Geref Kerk 1970-1994' in: *Nederlands Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 35/3 (September 1994), 374-388.

etc., caused on local level a unprecedented diversity and even division, at the time when the officially the ecclesiological emphasis was shifting to structural unification of the Dutch Reformed family of churches.

The picture can not be completed without reference to the shift in the way Scripture is viewed and understood. During the 1950's the Reformed conviction that Scripture is Gods revelation in terms of salvation history principally disputed a fundamentalist elective and philosophically based (as exposed in the theology of apartheid) qualification of this notion. Since the 1970's, under the influence of the new-hermeneutics, a historical-critical view of Scripture, regarding it a religious document concerning God, was accommodated in practicing theology. Although the General Synod of 1986 affirmed the church's traditional position,⁸⁶ the historical-critical hermeneutics and (post-modernist) theology are gaining influence,⁸⁷ and presents a different theological paradigm.⁸⁸ Theological convictions in which the DRC's doctrinal base (i.a. the virgin birth of Christ) was questioned, did not meet with disciplinary action or official inquiring. Some local churches and ministers have recently voiced their concern for the retaining of the Reformed confession, church order, liturgy and ministry.⁸⁹ Theologically and academically, Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States of America (and its theology) was in the mean time identified as an important an influential foreign beacon point to depend on. The General Synod also decided that the DRC should join the South African Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches as observer.

8. A 'VIA MEDIA' FOR THE MOMENT?

The historic turning-point arrived in 1994 with the success of the

86. *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk te Kaapstad*, Bloemfontein 1986, 592.

87. See T.J. Pienaar and R.M. Britz: 'Van akkommodasie tot kwessie: die verhaal van Skrifbeskouings in die NG Kerk sedert 1963' in: *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 42/3-4 (September and December 2001), 369-384. See also R.M. Britz: 'Twee standpunte oor die Skrif ... en 'n dilemma vir die NG Kerk,' Paper read at the *Conference 350 Years Reformed*, held in Stellenbosch, 7-10 April, 2002.

88. Cf. In this regard B. du Toit, *God? Geloof in 'n postmoderne tyd*, Bloemfontein 2000; S. Spangenberg, *Perspektiewe op die Bybel – God se Woord in mensetaal*, Pretoria 1998.

89. See R.M. Britz: 'Twee standpunte oor die Skrif...', 12 ff.

democratic elections. The South African Communist Party-African National Congress-Congress of South African Trade Unions-alliance won to govern the country. This time all roads lead to Pretoria in the north of the country. Yet again the motto was: *WE BUILD A NATION*. Off course, defined along different lines. The 'oldest church in the country' accepted the new dispensation.⁹⁰ But, there were no messages to 'our people and our Church' this time. Nobody thought of associating the DRC to a city on a mountain. No articulation of 'our own point of view.' The DRC could no longer picture itself as a national church. In fact, the distressing discovery was made that it had to operate from a marginalized position on matters of public policy. The national problem was no longer that of race relations, but boils down to poverty and HIV Aids.

Which way will the DRC now choose? On October 8, 2001, I was surprised by a letter from the ecclesiastical office in Pretoria. It was a pastoral message to the ministers of the DRC, drawn up by the General Synodical Commission. The contents covered our calling in SA, the church service, the ministers and his/her interrelationships – racism and sexism are sin, I was reminded – the order in the church – 'Thank you to the many ministers who keep to the Church order and decisions of the assemblies of the Church upon which we have agreed together' – and our Reformed Theology – to be Reformed comprises the conviction that amidst questions concerning the authority and understanding of the Bible, it is Gods Word that must be interpreted anew for our time. Amidst indifference, the Confessions, as subscribed to by the DRC, express our faith conclusive. 'In the spirit of the reformation we must strife to confessional renewal and the formation of contemporary doctrinal standards.' The letter speaks for itself. It reflects a pragmatic 'via media,' a road whereupon the dissimilarities and modalities could be kept together in a corporate church, embodying its unity and strength in a presbyterian-synodical structure and evangelical spirituality.

The time to conclude has by now arrived. Above is the story of a Reformed Church in Africa, trying to come to terms with the situation in which it must live and work as Church of Christ. It is the story of a church that played a determinant role in the shaping of the South African society 50 years ago. As a city on a mountain it made its presence felt on the whole spectrum of South African life. With the change of

90. See '27 April 1994' in: *Die Kerkbode* 153/13 (22 April 1994), 8; 'President Nelson Mandela' in: *Die Kerkbode* 153/14 (6 Mei 1994), 4.

the context it however lost its elevated position and had to re-adjust. Taking everything into consideration, it is clear that, in order to meet the demands of its (changing) context, the DRC in terms of its traditional corporate ecclesiastical self-concept, vindicated itself in the official assemblies, meetings, congresses and the work of ecclesiastical commissions, and practiced an adjustable contextual theology, which has a remarkable ability to accommodate differentiating theological convictions and reflections. An own, unique Dutch Reformed theology and spirituality? That had expressed itself very powerfully in 'our own point of view'? The story detected the inadequate application and even lack of the Formularies of Unity as the presumed normative confessional bedrock of the DRC. Was this the reason for formulating an 'own point of view' and developing an own contextual theology and spirituality? As a comprehensive expression of the Christian faith the Formularies of Unity do not lay claim to an 'own' persuasion. They confess the faith received from Christ through grace alone. This faith conquers the world. Not the church and its own contextualized point of view.

A Reformed-Theological Perspective on the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika and Apartheid

Dries le Roux du Plooy

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a country which has been associated, and is still being associated in many people's minds, with apartheid (racial segregation) and related sins, such as racism, oppression, injustice and discrimination. During the latter half of the twentieth century the country had come under increasing pressure from South African as well as foreign powers and forces to bring an end to the apartheid era.

From a church and theological perspective, Reformed church groupings – including the *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk*, *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* and *Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika* – suffered heavy criticism from ecumenical institutions and councils, such as the Reformed Ecumenical Synod/Council (with regard to the *NG Kerk* and the *Gereformeerde Kerke*).

The fundamental issue with which governments and churches in this country had wrestled for many centuries was how the diversity of peoples, languages and cultures should and could coexist in a constitutional and an ecclesiastical context. The reality was that both politicians and church leaders frequently opted for a policy of no racial mixing, that is, for segregation, which became known as apartheid.

Van Wyk¹ discusses the origin and source of the apartheid philosophy, and lists the following factors which may have contributed to it:

- The idea of a Christian-nationalism
- Neo-Calvinism
- Pietism
- Nationalism
- Ideological Calvinism

1. J.H. van Wyk, 'Homo Dei. 'n Prinsipiële besinning oor enkele mensbeskouings, waaronder dié van Calvyn' in: *In die Skriflig* 27/Supplementum (1993), 39-40.