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Racism as Heresy

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RACISM AS HERESY. COMPLEX CALVINIST INFLUENCES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Piet Naude, South Africa

1. Introduction

It is a privilege to have been invited to take part in this lecture series of the Basel Faculty of Theology, my thanks to the organisers. Basel played an enormous role in the development of the Reformed tradition via the work and lives of both Calvin and Barth. This makes my visit even more special. My thanks also to the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches for the support that made my travel to Switzerland possible. I am deeply humbled by this occasion and trust that my contribution will enlighten our global understanding of the many faces of Calvin in the world today.

2. Heresy and Status Confessionis of Democracy Transition

The church declares a state of confession when a situation arises in which neutral or mediocre matters (*adiaphora*) become issues of grave importance that threaten the very heart of the gospel message, and thus

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compel the church to witness and act over against this threat. Although the threat may be “ethical” in nature, the church interprets this as a theological or doctrinal matter, and considers such threat to the gospel a false teaching or heresy.¹

In the 20th century, three² such occasions arose:

First: In the German *Kirchenkampf* against National-Socialism, issues such as church structure, eligibility for church office and church discipline, became matters that fundamentally threatened the credibility of the gospel and compelled the Confessing Church in Barmen to accept a new declaration of faith in 1934.

Second: The ecumenical rejection of racism – especially as legalised in South Africa – led the Lutheran World Federation in Dar es Salaam (1977) to declare a *status confessionis* on matters of race-based church membership and the political system of apartheid. This was followed by two further declarations on the same matter by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa (1982) and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (1982). It was this latter church who subsequently adopted the Confession of Belhar³ (1986) against the heresy of a false gospel.

The third instance relates to the *Reformierter Bund* in Germany that in 1982 announced a *status confessionis* on the possession of nuclear

¹ For a conceptual and historical analysis read Dirk Smit, “A status confessionis in South Africa?” *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 47 (1984) pp. 21-46.

² A quite recent example that did not yet reach full confessional status is the process confessionis announced by the World Council of Churches on issues of economic and ecological justice. Although the World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted the Accra Confession in 2004 as fundamental critique against the “empire” of global capitalism and its devastating ecological impact, the Alliance itself recognises that Accra is not a confession in the traditional sense of the world. It could however become the fourth example of a status confessionis.

³ For the confessional text, accompanying letter and insightful discussion, see Daan Cloete and Dirk Smit (eds.), *A moment of truth. The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission church 1982* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

arms as they judged that such arms fundamentally threaten the possibility of human life and put the core of the Christian faith at risk.

I was asked to speak about racism as heresy in its relation to the complex Calvinist effects in Südafrika. For the sake of this paper, I therefore focus on the second example of *status confessionis* referred to above: the declaration of racism as a heresy was primarily directed against the formation of separate Reformed churches for different races, and a Christian gospel that supported a political and legal system of state-enforced racial separation.⁴ The neutral matters of church membership and structure, as well as the political order of society, became matters of confession that relate to the core of the gospel message.

"But where does Calvin fit into this story?" one may ask. Let us make a short detour into South African history⁵:

The first permanent settlement of Europeans in South Africa in 1652 was of Dutch descent. As employees of the Dutch East India Company, directed to set up a half-way station between Europe and the East, they brought with them the Christian faith that was primarily shaped by the Calvinist stream of the Protestant Reformation. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) was established under the auspices of the classis of Amsterdam, and held Scripture and the Three Formulaes of Unity (The Belgium Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dordt) in high esteem.

As local people of mixed race and black people converted to the Christian faith, they were baptised into the one DRC church. Due to social and language differences, it was decided by the Cape Synod of the DRC in 1857 that separate communion services would be held for indigenous people. This eventually led to the establishment of new sepa-

⁴ For an analysis of the heresy-debate, read John W de Gruchy, and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Apartheid is a heresy*. (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

⁵ One of the best theological interpretations of South Africa's history, remains John W de Gruchy, *The church struggle in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979).

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rate Reformed churches based on race: In 1881 the coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church was established, followed by the black and Indian churches in 1963 and 1968 respectively. Together with the “white” mother church, these four churches formed the so-called “DRC-family” of churches in South Africa.

The European people of Dutch (and later French) descent, slowly built their own language and identity over against the colonial powers of the day – whether Dutch or British. They increasingly saw themselves as Afrikaners (“from Africa and speaking Afrikaans”) with nationalist ideals of political independence and self-determination. These nationalist ideals grew especially strong after the defeat in the English War of 1899-1902 and the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. When the National Party won the white elections in 1948, the path was opened for grand apartheid and an intensification of racial separation.

The political situation at that point sadly mirrored the racial segregation in the DRC-family and drew its moral legitimacy from a specific interpretation of the Christian gospel understood as Calvinism. This represents the first face of Calvin in South Africa. How could such a racial situation in church and society be derived from a call on the name of Christ and the Calvinist tradition? To answer this question, we need to take a diversion to the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper.

3. The first face of Calvin in South Africa: Interpretations of Abraham Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), a self-professed (neo-) Calvinist since 1870, exerted enormous influence on church and society in The Netherlands during his life-time.⁶ Kuyper was a pastor, a brilliant

⁶ For an overview and evaluation of Kuyper’s life and work, read Luis E. Lugo (ed): *Religion, pluralism, and public life. Abraham Kuyper’s legacy for the twenty-first century*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000 and Cornelis van der Kooi

scholar and theologian, and an active public figure who eventually became prime minister. He commenced his reflections on Calvinism with a series of Bible studies in which he worked out the basis for what became his formal dogmatic works published between 1888 and 1917.⁷

One should be careful not to draw a simple, direct line between Kuyper and Afrikaner Calvinism.⁸ However, the weaknesses in Kuyper's theology did create the opportunity for interpretations that could legitimately call on his - and by implication on Calvin's - authority and blessing. In highly simplified terms, three elements of Kuyper's vast thinking are relevant here: his cosmology based on a specific interpretation of general grace, his ecclesiology, and his view of human and social development.

3.1 Cosmology embedded in general grace

One of the key thrusts of Calvin's own thought, and a driving force behind Kuyper's thinking, is its conviction that the whole world and all spheres of society exist under the reign of God in Christ. Christian faith, therefore, does not only have personal significance, but has social transformative power. In the words of Hesselink: "Calvinism can never be accused of having a God who is too small, or a vision that is too narrow... In contrast to Lutheranism's quest for a gracious God, pietism's concern for the welfare of the individual soul, and Wesleyanism's goal

and Jan de Bruijn: *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work*. (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999).

⁷ The most encompassing exposition of his thought is the broad overview of theology as a science in three volumes, *Encyclopaedie der Heiligen Godgeleerdheid* (1893-1894) en *De Gemeene Gratie*, also in three volumes (1903-1905). For fuller literature information, see W.H. Velema, "Kuyper as theolog. Een persoonlike evaluatie na dertig jaar." In *die Skriflig* 23/ 91, September (1989).

⁸ Kuyper's influence should be read in the wider context of other theological influences, as well as the socio-political history of the Afrikaners. It would perhaps be fair to say that Kuyper himself cannot be held responsible for the brand of Kuyperianism that became a specific contextual theology for Afrikaans churches in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century.

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of personal holiness, the ultimate concern in the Reformed tradition transcends the individual and his salvation ... The concern is for the realisation of the will of God also in the wider realms of state and culture, in nature and in cosmos".⁹

One of many attestations to Kuyper's cosmological thinking, is found in the second chapter of his well-known Stone-lectures published as *Calvinism: Six lectures delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton. The L.P. Stone lectures from 1989-1899*.¹⁰

In line with this tradition, Kuyper's aim was to provide a theological basis for bringing the whole of reality under the rule of God. He accomplished this by constructing a cosmology in which there is a close analogy between Creator and creation, based on the notion of common grace (*gemeene gratie*). The created order is marked by a rich pluriformity and develops through time according to different particular life-principles. There are God-willed orders of creation like family, state and church that exist in sovereign spheres, but they are held together by God's common grace, which prevents the world from degenerating into chaos. General grace allows for the evolutionary development of life streams inherent to creation. In this way creation, including the different peoples of the world, fulfils its potential under God's reign and to God's glory.¹¹

Critique

Dutch theologian W.H. Velema's critique of Kuyper's over-emphasis on general grace is unambiguous: Velema argues that the dia-

⁹ John Hesselink, *On being reformed*. (Servant: Ann Arbor, 1983).

¹⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six lectures delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton. The L.P. Stone lectures from 1989-1899*. (New York: Revell, 1899).

¹¹ See Velema, "Kuyper as theolog", p. 58; Willie Jonker, *Die Gees van Christus*. (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1981), pp. 93-94; Cornelis Van der Kooi, "A theology of culture. A critical appraisal of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace." In *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work*, edited by Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn, pp. 98. (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999).

lectic relationship between common and special grace is an element of Kuyper's idealistic philosophy and cosmology couched in Calvinistic terms, but not drawing on the intentions of Calvin himself. The only way out of this idealistic system, says Velema, is a radical break with common grace in order to restore some of Kuyper's Reformed intentions.¹²

This is confirmed by Kees van der Kooi from the Free University in Amsterdam. He refutes Kuyper's claim that he (Kuyper) merely developed Calvin's notion that some Divine indulgence remains beside the total corruption of creation and humankind. "It should be clear, however, that Calvin's point in speaking about general grace is entirely the opposite of Kuyper's. While in Calvin this general grace receives no further attention and the focus remains on mankind's total dependence on God's grace, Kuyper turns his attention to the subject of this common grace."¹³ Common grace in fact becomes a broad theory of culture based on an optimistic view of Western society, civilisation and scientific achievements.¹⁴

If through common grace God establishes orders of creation such as family, state and church, surely one can further argue that the existence, development and protection of different peoples – each as a separate people according to its own potential and law-stream ("*wetstroom*") – be seen as the will of God? This is especially relevant for a people, like the Afrikaners, who are Christians and who believe that it is through God's providence that they were planted on the southern tip of Africa to be bearers of the light of the gospel.

It does not require a lot of imagination to see why Kuyper's Neo-Calvinist theology became so influential in Afrikaans South African

¹² Velema, "Kuyper as theolog", p. 69.

¹³ Van der Kooi, "A theology of culture", p. 97-98.

¹⁴ Van der Kooi, "A theology of culture", p. 98.

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churches of Dutch origin.¹⁵ His own glowing respect for the Boers who resisted British colonisation, and who – inspired by God – trekked into the darkness of Africa to set up republics as a result of their Calvinistic heroism¹⁶, added a very personal dimension to this relationship. Afrikaners reinterpreted their own history as sacred history, analogous to the Israelite people of God. In short, “The blending of Afrikaner ‘sacred history’ and neo-Calvinism with its ‘sovereignty of spheres’ thus provided a powerful ideological base for Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid,” writes John de Gruchy.¹⁷

3.2 Ecclesiology

It is important to note that for Kuyper the institutional (i.e. external) form of the church does not belong to its essence. This implies that the traditional marks of unity, holiness, catholicity and Christian, are marks of the unseen church that will only be realised eschatologically.

The formation of various institutional churches (like in The Netherlands after 1886) is thus no threat to the spiritual unity of the church. In fact, the search for external, institutional unity is a form of “churchism” (*kerkisme*) that is to be resisted. The freedom of people to form their own churches should not be diminished. Differentiation amongst peoples will naturally lead to the development of different institutional

¹⁵ As early as 1882, the Rev S.J. du Toit attempted to translate Kuyper’s ideas into the political and ecclesial situation at the time. After 1907 post-graduate students chose to attend the Free University in Amsterdam rather than the State University in Utrecht, some of them returned to South Africa as avid Kuyperians. In the Gereformeerde Kerk, Kuyper’s ideas were carried forth by J.D. du Toit and H.G. Stoker, professors of theology and philosophy respectively. In the Dutch Reformed Church academics, F.J.M. Potgieter and A.B. du Preez, and church leaders, J.D. Vorster and A.P. Treurnicht, became the most significant proponents of a neo-Calvinistic revival in the 1930’s and beyond (see Kinghorn, *Die NG Kerk*, chapter 6).

¹⁶ Strauss “Abraham Kuyper, apartheid”, p. 13; Kuiper, “Groen and Kuyper”, p. 78.

¹⁷ John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating reformed theology. A South African contribution to an ecumenical debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 27.

churches. "The people amongst whom the church is formed are not the same. They differ according to origin, race, country, region, history, potential and psychological orientation, and also do not stay the same, but go through various stages of development."¹⁸ Because of this, the differences that separate person from person had to form a wedge in the unity of the external church. This pluralistic church-formation is "according to my firm conviction a phase of development to which the church should have come".¹⁹

Critique

Willie Jonker, an influential South African systematic theologian in the period after 1960, notes that Kuyper constructs the pluriformity of the church not on Scripture, or the intention of Calvin and the Reformation, but on his evolutionist and organic concept of history. Kuyper, under the influence of the nineteenth century individualism and idealism, introduces a subjectivist element into his ecclesiology. Church-formation becomes an issue of personal choice and the exercise of personal freedom. This can lead to the conclusion that it is a normal and God-willed development to establish separate institutional churches for groupings based on culture, psychology, or any other human factor. As Kuyper himself argues, these separate churches in no way detract from the unity of the church as a fundamental spiritual reality in Christ.²⁰

3.3 Human development

With regard to human and social development, Kuyper was a man of his times. He therefore shared the cultural biases of Europe in the latter

¹⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *Die gemeene gratie III* (Amsterdam: Hoveker, 1904), p. 223, my translation.

¹⁹ Kuyper, *Die gemeene gratie III*, p. 231, my translation.

²⁰ Willie D. Jonker, *Die Gees van Christus* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1981), pp. 91-94; Willie D. Jonker, "Die pluriformiteitsleer van Abraham Kuyper. Teologiese onderbou vir die konsep van aparte kerke vir aparte volksgroepe?" In *die Skriflig* 23/3 (1989): 16-18.

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half of the nineteenth century. Based on general grace, all people have a natural knowledge of God, and in principle the human race and all nations stand equal before God. This general grace forms the basis and stepping stone for special grace that leads to a higher knowledge of God in Christ. On the one hand, Kuyper follows Calvin by maintaining the unity of humanity based on God's counsel.²¹ On the other hand, his conception of common grace allows him to see the confusion of the Babel events as setting forth each nation or people according to their own type and law-stream.²²

According to Kuyper, a hierarchy then follows: The first level consists of people (for example in Africa) where natural or common grace has not yet developed to its full potential. Then there is a second level where one finds a greater impact of common grace, with pockets of developed areas, for example, in India and Japan. Following this, is a level of social systems where special grace dominates. This is the highest level of development where there is a maximum Christian effect on the whole of society. The pivotal examples of this are the European and North American civilisations.²³

This differentiation amongst people based on their participation in levels of grace is the hermeneutical key to understand, for example, Kuyper's view of the three children of Noah. They reflect the various developmental levels. The children of Shem received both common and special grace; those of Japhet benefited to a lesser sense from special grace; and the descendants of Ham show a lack of both forms of grace. Therefore, the descendants of Ham are to be temporarily subservient to

²¹ Velema, "Kuyper as theoloog", p. 66.

²² P.J. Strauss, "Abraham Kuyper, apartheid and the Reformed churches in South Africa in their support of apartheid." *Theological Forum*, XXIII/1, March (1995): 12.

²³ See Strauss, "Abraham Kuyper, apartheid", p. 11; and the discussion of the Stone lectures by D.T. Kuiper, "Groen and Kuyper on the racial issue." In *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work*, edited by Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn, pp. 74-75. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999.

the other groups until they have reached the same level of development and civilisation.²⁴

Critique

Based on the analysis of Roman Catholic scholar, Alexandre Ganoczy, John de Gruchy²⁵ points to the ambiguity of Calvin's life and work. On the one hand stands the "young Calvin" with his positive, evangelical and liberating theology. On the other hand we find the "older Calvin" shows trends of domination and constriction. The historically first reception of Calvin in SA – and dominant until at least the mid 1970s – was via "imperial Calvinism" that was in essence "fearful of spontaneity, openness, equalities and diversities".²⁶ The neo-Calvinism espoused by Kuyper found public expression in his political activities. Jan de Bruijn argues that Kuyper was a child of European Romanticism and that his Calvinist politics were in part influenced by his romanticising of the glorious Dutch past and a specific brand of Dutch nationalism.²⁷ This nationalism was based on a theology that accorded undue weight to "a value of separateness".²⁸ And because it was embedded in a hierarchical view of civilisations, it paved the way for Afrikaner nationalists to claim legitimate *voogdyskap* (rule over) black people in South Africa as an expression of God's will, as well as a practice of equal but separate justice. For Kuyper "circumstances claimed victory over doctrine".²⁹

²⁴ See Strauss, "Abraham Kuyper, apartheid", p. 14, and the fine analysis by Kuiper, "Groen and Kuyper", pp. 74-78 based on original Kuyper sources.

²⁵ John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating reformed theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p.32.

²⁶ Woltersdorff as quoted by De Gruchy, *Liberating reformed theology*, p. 18.

²⁷ Jan De Bruijn, "Abraham Kuyper as a Romantic." In *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work*, edited by Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn, pp. 45-58. (Amsterdam: Vu Uitgeverij, 1999).

²⁸ Botman, "Is blood thicker", p. 355.

²⁹ Kuiper, "Groen and Kuyper", p. 81.

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When these ideas blended with the socio-economic position of the Afrikaner people after 1929,³⁰ the scene was set for the development of Kuyper's (and Calvin's!) legacy into a theologically guided ideology. This close link between Calvin, *volk* and church, is quite evident in the journal series, *Koers in Krisis* ("Direction in crisis") started by Proff HG Stoker and FJM Potgieter in the mid 1930s. In the first editorial they write: "May this work be to the honour of God and the benefit of the volk, and may it conquer the heart of our volk. And may it unite all the Calvinists in South Africa, whatever their church, province or profession, to common Calvinist action in South Africa."³¹

(In fairness, one has to mention the ambiguities evident in the reception³² of Kuyper in South Africa. Scholars like Alan Boesak³³, John de

³⁰ I refer here to the rapid urbanisation of Afrikaners when both economic depression and severe droughts forced them to turn from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. For this they were not skilled, and they found themselves in an environment dominated by English capital. The well-known Carnegie Commission was set up to investigate the problem and make recommendations. It found that by the early 1930's about 300 000 Afrikaner people were living in poverty. (A similar study was undertaken for black people in the late 1980s.)

³¹ HG Stoker and FJM Potgieter, *Koers in Krisis* I, p.xii, 1935. I got this reference from the chapter by Robert Vosloo referred to below.

³² Kuyper has left a wide-ranging, complex and even contradicting legacy, which is, like any comprehensive oeuvre, open for more than one interpretation. No wonder Russel H. Botman, argues that Kuyper was indeed both liberative and oppressive! Read his "Is blood thicker than justice? The legacy of Abraham Kuyper for Southern Africa." In *Religion, pluralism, and public life*, edited by Lius E. Lugo, p. 354. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) The bases in Kuyper's work for a liberative understanding of Calvinism must be read against the historical context and specific occasion for which they were constructed. See specifically the discussion of Kuyper's rhetorical strategies for American and French audiences by Kuiper, "Groen and Kuyper". The reclaiming of Kuyper for liberation in South Africa should also be seen in its rhetorical context of fighting Kuyperianism at its worst with Kuyper himself. Whatever contrasting evidence, or even direct quotations are found to support contrasting views; it is the underlying and permeating structure of Kuyper's thought that should ultimately lead our interpretation. I declare my South African Reformed presuppositions openly, and probably err in the direction of a more critical, rather than an appreciative reading of Kuyper.

³³ Alan Boesak, *Black and Reformed. Apartheid, liberation and the Calvinist tradition*. (New York: Orbis, 1984), p. 87.

Gruchy³⁴ and Russel Botman³⁵ clearly attempt to retrieve the liberating elements of Kuyper's theology in their struggle to turn Afrikaner civil religion against its own source).

4. The second face of Calvin: Status confessionis and the Belhar Confession

Calvin's legacy in South Africa also took another trajectory, namely the resistance against a theology that made separateness a God-willed principle of creation. Let us look at a few of the important signposts along the way of the "other" Calvin³⁶:

4.1 Examples of an alternative Calvin

Already in 1969, Beyers Naudé, the well-known anti-apartheid activist, called Afrikaner South Africans back to the "real Calvin". He wrote a newspaper article, "What Calvin really stood for" in the *Rand Daily Mail* of 29 April 1969, and remarked: "If Calvin were to come alive and be in South Africa today, he would be the first to protest against and combat many of the concepts proclaimed by and posturing as Afrikaner Calvinism." Naudé made clear that a close reading of the *Institutes* (Book I, chapters 3, 5, 10 and 15), would find no support for the principle of diversity expressed in racial domination. What Calvin did profess,

³⁴ John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in dialogue*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 107.

³⁵ Botman, "Is blood thicker," p. 354.

³⁶ What is discussed here, is obviously no exhaustive list. There are many other important voices not mentioned here. For a fuller version of Calvin in anti-apartheid memory, read Robert Vosloo, "Calvin and anti-apartheid memory in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa", published as chapter 8 in Johan de Niet, Herman Paul en Bart Wallet (eds.), *Sober, Strict, and Scriptural: Collective Memories of John Calvin 1800-2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 217-244. The newspaper article by Beyers Naudé is sourced from this discussion. For a broader and incisive analysis of Calvin's reception in South Africa, read Dirkie Smit, "Views on Calvin's ethics: reading Calvin in the South African context", *Reformed World* 57 (4), 2007, pp. 306-344.

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was the unity of humanity created in the image of God and our solidarity in sin before God. Nor would Calvin support such a close and exclusive link between *volk* and church, and - despite being a leader in the reformation - Calvin maintained an remarkably open, ecumenical spirit as exemplified in his relations with German and Swiss Lutherans, as well as his letter of 29 March 1552 to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Beyers Naude's reinterpretation of Calvin, his early writings (1962) about a confessing church in South Africa, as well as his own example in the Christian Institute after he officially broke ranks with the white DRC in 1963, were powerful forces to build up an alternative view of Calvin and his work. In true prophetic spirit he wrote that, if only South Africans would heed the true message of another Calvin, "how vastly different our whole church and political life would be".

A very close link between Calvin, racism and heresy is exhibited in the contributions of Allan Boesak in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His work and leadership in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa, provide perhaps the closest link between a reinterpretation of Calvin and the declaration of apartheid theology as a heresy.

In a speech at the South African Council of Churches conference in Hammanskraal north of Pretoria (1979) Boesak speaks on the struggle of the Black Church for justice. He summarises the classical nature of a confession by saying: "The struggle is not merely **against** an oppressive political and exploitative economic system, it is also a struggle **for** the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ."³⁷ He then quotes at length from Calvin's commentary on Habbakuk to muster support for the oppressed against the actions of tyrants, because God hears the "cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice" (p.26).

In the same year (1979) Boesak wrote an open letter to the then Minister of Justice to explain the actions of civil disobedience supported by

³⁷ Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, p. 25; original emphasis.

black Reformed churches. He puts forward three fundamental ideas derived from Calvin: The Bible as Word of God that requires from us more obedience to God than to an unjust state³⁸; the Lordship of Christ over all spheres of life, including political life (p.37) and the notion that the state is called to justice and to serve its people. Boesak (p.42) refers directly to Calvin's letter to Francis I (preface to the *Institutes*): "For where the glory of God is not made the end of government, it is not a legitimate sovereignty..." The later call in 1985 for the fall of the National Party government was thus based on the idea of freedom so forcefully argued for by Calvin when he discussed the freedom to be indifferent to human, cultural, ecclesial and political obligations (*Institutes*, Book IV, chapters 8-12 and 20).

In 1986, the year in which the Belhar confession was formally adopted, John de Gruchy published an article in *Journal of Religious Ethics* (vol. 14, no.1) called "The revitalisation of Calvinism in South Africa". He made a strong argument, later developed into his well-known book, *Liberating Reformed theology* (1991), that Calvin's legacy needs to be appropriated via a critical, prophetic theology of social transformation that acts as vibrant alternative to the neo-Calvinist tradition that dominated South African church and political life for such a long time.

One can thus rightly argue that the same Calvin who was called upon to set up and defend a heretical gospel of racial separation, was called upon to witness and struggle against this heresy. The roots of the *status confessionis* in Dar es Salaam, Ottawa and Belhar, lie not only in the legacy of Karl Barth³⁹ and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,⁴⁰ but clearly also in

³⁸ Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, pp. 40-41.

³⁹ For a discussion of Barth's relation to the Belhar confession, read Piet J Naudé, "Would Barth sign the Belhar confession?" *JTSA* 129 (2007), pp. 4-22 and the earlier article by Dirk J. Smit, "Social transformation and confessing the faith? Karl Barth's views on confession revisited." *Scriptura* 72 (2000), pp. 67-85.

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Jean Calvin. This will become even more evident if we look at the rejection clauses of the Confession of Belhar, written in October 1982, and formally adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986.

4.2 The rejections of a heresy in the Belhar Confession

Let us immediately focus on the content of the rejection clauses attached to the three middle articles on unity, reconciliation and justice.

4.2.1 What does Belhar reject with regard to the unity of the church?

Therefore, we reject any doctrine which absolutises either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutisation hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation.

Belhar does not deny the reality of “natural diversity” amongst people. To do that, would be to deny actual empirical realities. Contrary to an interpretation of Calvin that absolutises diversity to the point of making separation a principle of creation and the gospel, this diversity of background, culture and convictions is seen from the perspective of reconciliation in Christ. It is Christ who turns diversity and pluralities from threatening divisions to opportunities for reciprocal service and enrichment within the one visible people of God. The establishment of separate churches for different races is a denial of Christ’s reconciliation and therefore a sinful practice.

(We reject any doctrine) which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;

Belhar clearly witnesses against the inadequacy of a mere “spiritual” unity. Obviously unity in and amongst churches is of a spiritual nature,

⁴⁰ The many contributions of John de Gruchy comes to mind. See his *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in dialogue*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

but when people share the same confession in the same country their "bond of peace" requires a visible unity. If one goes the route of separation here, you make diversity an aim in itself and you show yourself to be in despair of Christ's reconciliation.

(We reject any doctrine) which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;

If an ecclesiology is built on the assumed God-willed differentiation in creation and a view of the church as cultural prolongation of this separation, there will be no need nor urgency to pursue unity. Unity in the church is a priceless gift from God that is to be embraced. A doctrine that teaches otherwise, is sin and heresy.

(We reject any doctrine) which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the Church

The "weakness of some" not to receive Holy Communion with new converts from a different background, language and culture, and the missiological practice and method of converting people as an ethnic entity, became the principle for separate church formation. Once this ethnic or cultural principle comes to determine actual membership of the church, a false requirement beyond faith in Christ is set down. This doctrine is to be rejected as a false vision of the church in which human and social factors supersede our being in Christ.

4.2.2 What does Belhar reject with regard to reconciliation in society?

Therefore, we reject any doctrine which in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

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Article 3 of the Belhar confession moves from the unity of the church to reconciliation in society. The rejection clause refers to “in such a situation” and draws on the earlier statement of forced racial separation in a country that claims to be Christian. Note that Belhar does not make any reference to apartheid as political system. Belhar remains at the level of Christian doctrine. If the Bible teaches that the message of reconciliation is entrusted to the church, and a new doctrine is professed that sanctions enmity and forced racial separation as being the will of God or even the good news of Christ, such a teaching should be rejected as heresy and ideology.

Such a false teaching takes as its assumption that people from different racial groups are in principle not to be reconciled, except by physical and spatial separation. In this way the very possibility to minister and actually experience reconciliation in Christ, is obstructed in advance.

4.2.3 What does Belhar reject with regard to social and economic justice?

Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

Article 4 builds on unity and reconciliation to proclaim justice to the poor, to those who suffer, and to those who are treated unjustly. In this particular case, Belhar rejects both an ideology and a false doctrine. It is not the task of a confession to write definitions. But one could infer with some certainty what the assumed notion of “ideology” in article 4 is, namely a belief system that legitimates and upholds a socio-economic dispensation that works for the unjust advantage of some and the exclusion from basic life necessities of others.

Belhar obviously addresses the specific situation of South Africa by around 1980. At that point the bitter irony of Afrikaner history had already emerged. Those who were poor and downtrodden under British

rule and who built themselves up with enormous effort; those who drew in great piety on the spiritual resources of being an elect people of God in a country where they were predestined to proclaim the gospel: those very same people became oppressors themselves. Those who were in their own self-understanding "slaves in Egypt", used their newly gained political power after 1948 to intensify racial privileges through numerous laws that excluded black people from the land, the education system, and the economy of South Africa. Like Israel whom they sought to emulate, the former "slaves" became masters of new slaves. The false doctrine in this case is to see such injustice as the will of God.

How do good Christian people turn injustice into justice? Keeping our discussion above in mind, this was possible on three inter-connected bases.

First the understanding that white people were called by God to be guardians of the lesser black people and therefore should decide for them. Second the sense of justice that Afrikaners held and which they believed found best expression in equal rights, exercised in territorial separation so that blacks were not dominated by whites, but could actually develop to their full capacities. Third, there is the universal problem that theological convictions are, but for the grace of God, to a considerable degree shaped and then determined by socio-economic and other "non-theological" factors. The same theology that lifted Afrikaners up, was in a strange psychology of both sympathy and fear, used to keep black South Africans marginalised.⁴¹ The isolation of apartheid meant that Afrikaners were not exposed to the spirit of the Enlightenment that promoted democracy based on universal human rights. In fact, when the rest of the free world accepted that view formally in 1948, the grand project of apartheid moved directly in the opposite direction.

⁴¹ See The legacy of Beyers Naude 2005:55-62 for an incisive and moving account of Beyers Naude from 1967 on why Afrikaners held racial beliefs as they did.

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If God reveals Godself to be in a special way the God of those who suffer, and if the church is called to stand where God stands, then a doctrine that legitimises separation and unjust privilege, and a gospel that is unwilling to resist such injustice, is a heresy.

5. Conclusion

The Belhar Confession ends with a call to obedience based on the Lordship of Christ. In the spirit of Calvin, it requires from us to witness against human laws and earthly powers, no matter what may follow.

Now that South Africa has gained political freedom, our task not over. It has just begun. We would do justice to the legacy of Calvin if we continue our struggle for visible unity in the Reformed Church family; reconciliation amongst diverse peoples in our country and foreigners that seek refuge with us; and if we strive for gender, ecological and global economic justice.

Calvin – no, the gospel of Jesus Christ as interpreted by Calvin in the sixteenth century – is as relevant today as it was 500 years ago.