

CONSTANTINE OR ABRAHAM – THE CHOICE BEFORE THE D.R.C.

by Dr Jacques R Kriel

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An understanding of the basic issues facing the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), the largest and most influential of the 'white' Afrikaans churches, is important because these issues in one form or another face all Christians and churches in South Africa. The manner in which the DRC will resolve these issues will have an impact not only on religious and socio-political life in South Africa, but even far beyond its borders.

During the PACLA Conference in Nairobi in December 1976, Bishop Simon Ibrahim of Nigeria said of South Africa:

When will the day arrive that Christians in South Africa will take each other's hand in love, the day that you will truly learn what reconciliation means? That day will be like a stone thrown into a dam – the waves will reach the furthest shores of Africa.

(Quoted by Meiring, 1981: 13)

This is particularly true of the DRC, because it has developed the image of being an

... apartheid church, which has drawn a line through the unity and fellowship of believers with its structures and policies which keep brothers and sisters in the Lord apart rather than binding them together . . .

(Quoted by Meiring, 1981: 12)

In this context reconciliation will be seen for what it is: the work of the Holy Spirit.

In Ethiopia there are Christians who are regularly praying for the DRC as a result of Christian fellowship established during PACLA. Greater insights into what is happening within this Church with its long history and strong theological tradition will enable fellow Christians to pray for the DRC with greater urgency and compassion.

The issues raised are part of the very structure of our society and therefore part of everyone of us. But one issue is basic, viz the problem of the church's identification with the reigning socio-political system. The relationship of the DRC

to the Afrikaner Nation and the National Party Government is a classical example of this type of identification which has become known as the Constantinian model of the relationship of the church to society. It is this intimate relationship between Church and State (or party) that has created the image of the DRC as a loveless, racist church. All the negative feelings evoked by the internal policies of South Africa are also projected onto the DRC.

But the temptation to identify with the cultural and socio-political system, whether it be the dominant one or that of the oppressed, faces all Christians and all churches in Southern Africa.

There are strong social pressures in every society that tend to reinforce conformist behaviour patterns. Inter-personal relationships, values and the things that people regard as necessities are determined by social pressures affecting every member of a given society. Individuals are not free to decide most of their behaviour patterns on their own initiative. . . one must be a real hero to stand up against the established, system and pay the price for such a stand (Comblin 1979: 31).

The Church is not called to transfer its loyalty from one worldly system to another, but to adopt a totally new posture in the world.

Like any other institution with a long history, the DRC has structured its posture in South Africa around several traditions. I will try to show how these arose and how each of these traditions has become the focus of a crisis within the church. Because of its size and dynamism, nothing that one can say about the DRC is ever wholly correct; there will always be exceptions. But even among the Judean captives taken in exile to Babylon, the judgments proclaimed by the Prophets over Old Testament society were never true of everybody in that society. They were often referring to the social trends, the 'zeitgeist', the institutionalized, structural sins which pervade the whole social structure and make it guilty before God. What is characteristic of these sins, says Jacques Ellul is that they are not committed by anyone and yet they are committed. Even though there are exceptions

and even though "the structure of social relationships means that no one is personally responsible because all are slaves of the system", we are nevertheless "sent to confront the structure of sinfulness that enslaves human beings" (Comblin 1979: 31).

I will illustrate the crises by referring to recurring themes in the book *Stormkompas* (Storm Compass) the publication of which passed largely unnoticed in the English-speaking society but caused such an unexpected and unprecedented storm in Afrikaner church, cultural and political circles that one reviewer referred to it as "the compass that rocked the boat". The book is a collection of essays written by twenty-four authors and it seems reasonable to assume that the recurring themes represent what sensitive observers of the church feel to be major issues facing it.

THE AFRIKANERS: A PEOPLE DIVIDED ECCLESIASTICALLY

The terminology surrounding the three Afrikaans churches and the three 'ethnic churches' which were established as a result of the missionary activity of the DRC, is usually confusing even to Afrikaners. A word of clarification is therefore needed.

The oldest and largest of the three Afrikaans churches is the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk) with its one-and-a-half million white members. The other two are the Hervormde Kerk, the official name having retained the Dutch version: Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, with approximately a quarter-million members and the Gereformeerde Kerk which has about the same number of white members but is the only Afrikaans church which has one formal church structure linking together all congregations irrespective of colour or ethnicity.

The churches which arose as a result of the DRC missionary are often referred to as its 'daughter churches' and are the Nederduits Gereformeerde Sendingkerk (Dutch Reformed Mission Church) the N.G. Kerk in Afrika (Dutch Reformed Church in Africa) and the Reformed Church of South Africa. These four are also sometimes referred to as the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches with the DRC itself as the 'Mother Church'.

The differences between the three white Afrikaans churches are mainly historical and not theological. For the first two hundred years after the Dutch colonized the Cape, the DRC was the only church of the emerging Afrikaner nation. It was actually a branch of the Hervormde Kerk in Holland and the terms Nederduitsch Gereformeerde and Nederduitsch Hervormde were used as identical alternatives at the Cape. The Church in Holland underwent a schism with the theologically conservative faction splitting off as the Gereformeerde Kerk. As the Cape was at that time under British rule this split did not have an immediate effect on the Cape Dutch Reformed Church. During the northern migration of the Afrikaner after 1836, the DRC experienced great difficulty in maintaining an effective ministry to its widely scattering flock. The spiritual ministry therefore devolved on laymen, the heads of the households, who took the responsibility for the spiritual welfare and religious education of their families. The specific theological interpretation of the Bible which arose during this time in

which the history of the Afrikaner nation was interpreted in terms of the history of Israel, was later to have profound theological and political implications for the Afrikaners themselves and for South Africa as a whole.

Due partly to shortage of ministers (the traditional Dutch source of ministers being cut off by the English colonial Government) and partly to the Anglicization policy of the Government, a large number of ministers were brought to the colony from Scotland. The Anglicization goals failed as most of these ministers eventually identified with the Afrikaner cause, but it established a strong theological tradition within the DRC which is still bearing fruit today. So for example, the young Andrew Murray, and his brother John "injected a new evangelical enthusiasm into the church, profoundly shaping Dutch Reformed theology and piety at a critical moment in its development" (de Gruchy 1879: 4). Not only did they have a decisive influence on the early development of the Dutch Reformed Seminary established at Stellenbosch in 1859 but Andrew probably became the first South African religious writer to become known and loved far beyond its borders. He was elected moderator of the DRC on six occasions.

In spite of numerous calls for help to the Cape Synod of the DRC, its members in the Transvaal Republic were without any ministers. In desperation the Transvaal Volksraad eventually wrote directly to Holland, where the Church schism had since taken place. In 1852 the Rev van der Hoff arrived (from the Hervormde Kerk in Holland) followed in 1859 by the Rev Dirk Postma from the Gereformeerde Kerk. Although they undertook towards the Cape DRC that they would not transplant the church schism from Dutch to African soil, their personalities were so incompatible that their adherents eventually established two separate churches, viz the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Kerk (nicknamed the 'Doppers' in Afrikaans), The DRC at the Cape, alarmed at the division amongst its previous members in the Transvaal, hastily sent representatives to gather together those who had not become followers of either Van der Hoff or Postma. There was a short-lived unification between the DRC and the Hervormde Kerk which later broke down leading to protracted legal proceedings regarding church property. The last few years have seen renewed discussions about closer union between the three churches but no dramatic advances have been made.

The Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch has become incorporated into the University as the Theological Faculty but it is still strictly controlled by the DRC and trains ministers only for the DRC. The Theological Faculty at the University of Pretoria trains for both the DRC and the Hervormde Kerk while the Gereformeerde Kerk established the University of Potchefstroom for Christian Higher Education. This is the only South African University which does not have a 'conscience clause' in its Act.

The three Afrikaans churches acknowledge allegiance to the same basic confessional documents. They are kept apart by social and functional issues. At the risk of complete superficiality with regard to these issues, one could characterize the three churches as follows.

The *Hervormde Kerk* is theologically weak but on socio-political issues its stand is ultra-conservative and it consciously identifies itself as a 'volkskerk'.

The *Dutch Reformed Church* is theologically strong and has the strongest political influence but is plagued by a fear that any change in its 'political stance' will lead to a massive defection to the *Hervormde Kerk* by the conservative element in its membership. The present theological dissension in the DRC therefore threatens the whole numerical power-base of the church. Again the parallel with the political situation is striking: all National Party leaders since Dr Verwoerd have been ham-strung in their planning for social change by the nearly pathological fear of causing a schism (*skewing*) within *Afrikanerdom*. Again the church mirrors society.

The *Gereformeerde Kerk* is characterized by a strictly orthodox Reformed system of church government and liturgy, but also a very strong awareness of the authority of Scripture in all matters. It was this awareness which led to the development of the unified church structure uniting all congregations regardless of race under the control of one general Synod. In a moving description of how this came about, Dr J.H. van Wyk has this to say:

The establishment of the General Synod did not take place overnight. The background to this is formed by a continuous and in-depth study of Scripture and an obedient acceptance of the result of that study of Scripture (in Meiring 1979: 103).

The story is told of the Elder who attended the Synod where the decision was taken to have one general Synod. Although he must have felt his whole world being shaken or even falling apart, he stood up and with a voice shaking with emotion, said: "If that is what Scripture dictates, then I must support it". Nevertheless, I do not think it either untrue or unkind to say, that very little of the true unity of the body of Christ is to be seen in the daily life of the church or its members. This is true of nearly all churches in South Africa and should not let us miss the significance (both theologically and sociologically) of the decision of the National Synod of the *Gereformeerde Kerk* of 1979 which reads as follows:

The unity of the church as the body of Christ must be acknowledged. It may be that linguistic or cultural differences make the formation of separate congregations, often with their own type of preaching and worship, advisable and, in these cases, it is wise not to force an outward and therefore artificial form of unity but to recognise the differentiation within the circle of God's people. Where different churches for different indigenous groups exist, no person may be excluded from common worship on grounds of race or colour. Common worship, including the Lord's Supper, among Christians regardless of race is an expression of the unity of the body of Christ. Such worshipping together of people of different races, is a sign of the unity of the church and the communion of the Saints and can be a Christian witness to the world (quoted by van Wyk in Meiring 1979:111).

BECAUSE OF THE WEAKNESS OF SOME ... A CHURCH DIVIDED MISSIOLOGICALLY

From its inception at the Cape the DRC was aware of its missionary responsibility and converts were made from among the indigenous *Khoi-Khoi* population and the imported slaves. For the first two centuries it was the practice to accept these converts as regular members of the

congregation. They participated in church services and activities irrespective of race or colour (cf Saayman & Loff in Meiring 1971:44 & 48).

With the development of colour consciousness among the white colonists, pressure must have built up in the church against this practice because it surfaced as an issue for discussion in 1829. The Synod of 1834 confirmed the unity of the church as a Scriptural imperative and in accordance with a 'Christian attitude'. The continued objection against the presence of 'non-whites' at services and especially at Holy Communion, led to renewed pressure on the Synod of 1857 and requests for the institution of separate services for these members. 1857 is therefore a date considered by many to be the official beginning of apartheid in the DRC. However, the Synod's decision reads as follows:

This Synod considers it to be desirable and in accordance with scripture that our members from paganism be received and incorporated into existing congregations whenever possible; however where this practice, because of the weakness of some, constitutes an obstacle to the advancement of the cause of Christ among pagans those congregations already established or to be established from converts from paganism should be given the opportunity to enjoy their Christian privileges in a separate place of worship.

Read correctly this is no justification for apartheid in the church. On the contrary, it re-emphasises the unity of white and black members of the DRC as a scriptural imperative. In a pastoral letter issued to congregations following the Synod, it called upon members of the church to remember that God created the human race from one blood. God does not take social status into consideration. Therefore members may not allow any un-Christian prejudices against non-white fellow Christians to develop in the church. The Synod therefore re-emphasised the decision of the previous Synods regarding the Scriptural primacy of the unity of all Christians. Several participants in the debate urged that prejudice should be actively combated. The Synod obviously saw this concession to 'allow' non-white members to meet in a separate building as a *temporary measure* to accommodate the weakness or lovelessness of some of its white Christians, but the establishment of separate congregations or even a separate church was clearly never envisaged.

Subsequent Synods between 1857 and 1881 never challenged or changed this basic policy. As to how exactly this decision eventually gave way to the establishment of a separate church in 1881, the *Dutch Reformed Mission Church*, is therefore still a problem that has to be cleared up satisfactorily by historical research. Despite the fact that racial prejudice was judged as 'the weakness of some' the 'mother church' actually closed her doors as a matter of policy to all but white members.

It is a strange quirk of history that this decision of the 1857 Synod initiated a phase of tremendous missionary interest and zeal in the DRC which lasted for more than a century and which was richly blessed. Thousands were reconciled with God as the church's activity stretched deep into Africa. But the hope of the church fathers that the next generations would overcome their prejudices and that the DRC would be one unified and reconciled church was never realised. Strengthened by the 'Three selves'

missionary theory of Anderson and Venn and the writings of Bavinck and Warneck the DRC established three churches on ethnic and cultural grounds i.e. the Dutch Reformed Mission Church working mainly amongst the so-called 'coloured' population with a present membership of slightly more than half a million; the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the so-called 'black' church with a membership close to a million but not differentiated further according to African Ethnic groups; and the Reformed Church of South Africa (not to be confused with the Afrikaans Gereformeerde Kerk) which is still in its infancy and working among the Asian population. What was formulated as a temporary concession to the weakness and lack of Christian love and concern of some white members of the church in 1857 has now become the firm policy of the church. It has also become a fundamental part of the world view of its members, who now cannot conceive of any alternative system of relationships between races.

The missionary activity of the DRC was greatly blessed, but its missionary policy has now precipitated the most serious crisis in the church's history: the three 'daughter churches' (also referred to as 'sister churches') demand that the confessional unity of the four churches should also find expression not only in a structural unity but also in a unified rejection of discrimination and apartheid.

In this context it is worthwhile noting the decision of the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1978:

The church wishes to express the conviction that the policy of apartheid and/or of separate development as maintained by the Government is in conflict with the Gospel:

- (1) Because, contrary to the Gospel of Christ's emphasis on the reconciliation of man with God and his fellowman, the forced separation of people on the basis of race and colour is based on the conviction of the fundamental irreconcilability between people so separated;
- (2) Because the system based on such a policy inevitably had to lead and has led to the increasing polarization between people, especially where in practice there is no doubt that within the system one part of the population, the whites, are privileged and the demand of the Gospel of justice for all has not been met, and
- (3) Because this has not only affected the humanity (menswaardigheid) of the disadvantaged part of society but also the humanity of all who are associated with it. (*My translation*).

The DRC is therefore being challenged by its own daughter churches on the biblical accountability not only of its own internal missiological policies, but also its support for the political policy of apartheid. David Bosch (1982) argues convincingly that this missiological policy is not part of the Reformed tradition but is in fact heresy that strikes at the very foundation of the Church.

What I have attempted to show in this section is that the missiological tradition of the DRC has not only reflected but also strengthened the socio-political policy of

Apartheid. The church is now however discovering that both its Scriptural and its Reformed base is being questioned and its relationship to its daughter churches threatened. The integrity of its avowed acknowledgement of the ultimate authority of Scripture is at stake. It is a theological and a sociological and a political crisis all rolled into one. Bosch states:

Those of us who plead for the re-unification of the four Dutch Reformed churches, currently separated along racial lines, and for open church doors during the period that negotiations regarding church union are still in process, are often asked *why* we make an issue of these matters. The answer is simple. The breaking down of barriers that separate people is an intrinsic part of the Gospel ... evangelism as such itself involves a call to be incorporated into a new community, an alternative community (1982).

This reference to the church as an alternative community forces me to sound a warning note. The striving for structural unity and open church doors is only a first phase in the establishment of the one body of Christ which must express itself as a loving, caring, united community in its daily life. There are many churches and denominations in South Africa that do not have any structural or functional apartheid, but very little if anything of the true, lived unity of the body of Christ can be seen in their daily life. Prof Jaap Durand says: "to proclaim *and to live* reconciliation is the very ground for the existence (die bestaansgrond) for the Church of Christ in South Africa" (in Smith 1981:23).

It is a farce to integrate at church services and church functions, but to live socially as if the others who belong to a different social class or racial classification do not exist. The unity of the body of Christ must transcend in daily life all the divisions of class or economics; of race or politics; it must transcend the divisions caused by group areas, racial classification and prohibitions and it must do so *now*, when there is a risk and a suffering involved. It must establish the one, loving, caring, integrated alternative community *now* as a visible social reality that impacts on every moment of the daily life from Monday to Saturday. And it must do so regardless of social pressures or government sanctions.

Only then will the unity of Sunday worship and the structural unity have any real meaning and any prophetic witness. Only then can christianity in South Africa truly claim that it is not an opium for the people.

In 1 Peter 3:8 the Apostle characterises the unity among Christians as 'being of one mind' and immediately links it with compassion, brotherly love, kindheartedness, humility, not returning evil for evil or insult for insult but giving a blessing instead. These are not Sunday-go-to-worship-graces, but down to earth, nuts-and-bolts attitudes and actions of daily living. The Apostle Paul goes further and says that within the Church no cognisance may be taken of *any* natural or sociological or economic or political differences. And this must be seen to be true in our *daily life*. □