

## The two faces of Calvin in South Africa: In honour of the 500<sup>th</sup> commemoration of John Calvin's birth Part II

### ABSTRACT

In this two-part reflection, the two receptions of Calvin in South Africa are set out against the background of the *status confessionis* debate in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first reception of Calvin (see previous article) occurred via the neo-Calvinist interpretation of Abraham Kuyper as adopted in the specific context of South Africa. The second reception (this article) stood in direct opposition to this and attempted to interpret both Kuyper and Calvin in a liberative sense. This article ends with a short analysis of the rejection clauses of the Behar confession to demonstrate how the second reception of Calvin played a definitive role in the formulation of this confession.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Contrary to public perception, Calvin's legacy in South Africa is not only embodied in a theology supporting apartheid. His legacy also took another trajectory, namely the resistance against a theology that made separateness a God-willed principle of creation. This points to the ambiguities evident in the reception<sup>1</sup> of Kuyper in South Africa. Scholars like Alan Boesak<sup>2</sup>, John de Gruchy<sup>3</sup> and Russel Botman<sup>4</sup> clearly attempt to retrieve the liberating elements of Kuyper's theology in their struggle to turn Afrikaner civil religion against its own source. Let us look at a few of the important signposts along the way of the "other" Calvin<sup>5</sup>:

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1 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.

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

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

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

5 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

## 2. EXAMPLES OF AN ALTERNATIVE CALVIN

Already in 1969, Beyers Naudé, 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 remarks: “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, 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 summarizes 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”.<sup>6</sup> He then quotes at length from Calvin’s commentary on Habakkuk 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 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 state<sup>7</sup>, 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

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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.

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

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

published an article in *Journal of Religious Ethics* (vol. 14, no.1) called "The revitalization 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.

It is interesting to note how Willie Jonker, influential professor of dogmatics at Stellenbosch Theological Faculty, undermined the notion of an elect people in the biological sense of the word with a clear argument based on Calvin's doctrine of election. Jonker rarely addressed issues of political concern directly. He did, however, undermine the edifice of Afrikaners' self-understanding as a specially elect people of God in his book on the covenant, *Uit vrye guns alleen*, published in 1988 (NG Kerk Boekhandel, Pretoria).

With Augustine, Calvin maintained the notion of the total corruption of all people. He resisted the temptation of the semi-Palagians who held that humans can and do work with God toward their salvation, and also rejected the Arminian position that our salvation is based on the fact that God foresaw our faith in advance and this faith is therefore ground for our salvation.<sup>8</sup> Calvin stands on the notion of *sola gratia* and – according to Jonker – rightfully places election not in the doctrine of God, but in soteriology - understood in a Trinitarian sense.<sup>9</sup> We are saved by the grace of God, shown to us in Christ and realised through the work of Holy Spirit.

Election therefore rests on nothing in human beings, but solely in "die onveranderlike en vasstaande keuse van God".<sup>10</sup> Consequently no single person - nor a specific biological people - can claim to have been elected by God in Christ by virtue of any trait in themselves (race or geography). Jonker specifically warns against a uncritical transferral of God's covenant with Israel to any historical group today, as such argument wrongly reduces God's predestination and election to a covenant that does not encompass the grace of God as embodied in the church.<sup>11</sup>

**One can thus cumulatively 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 Barth<sup>12</sup> and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,<sup>13</sup> but clearly also in John Calvin. The strong relation between the liberative Calvin and Belhar are especially 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.

### 3. THE REJECTION CLAUSES OF 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.

#### **3.1 What does Belhar reject with regard to the unity of the church?**

8 Jonker, *Uit vrye guns alleen*, p. 28, 32.

9 Jonker, *Uit vrye guns alleen*, pp. 50ff, also critically notes that Calvin in some respects falls back into a scholastic treatment of this subject by losing his Christological focus and therefore separates election and predestination.

10 Jonker, *Uit vrye guns alleen*, p. 35.

11 Jonker, *Uit vrye guns alleen*, p. 215.

12 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.

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

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, 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.

### **3.2 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.*

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.

### 3.3. 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.

If God reveals God self 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.

#### 4. 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 is not over. It has just begun.

What are our most urgent tasks?

We would do justice to the liberative legacy of Calvin, expressed centuries later in confessional form, if we continue our struggle for visible unity in the Reformed Church family; if we strive for reconciliation amongst diverse peoples in our country and foreigners who seek refuge with

14 See The legacy of Beyers Naude 2005:55-62 for an incisive and moving account by Beyers Naudé in

1967 on why Afrikaners held racial beliefs as they did.

us; and if we let our deeds demonstrate a search 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 as it was 500 years ago. But is also open to the constant danger of usurping ideological hermeneutics and powers. Like the New Testament injunction, we are called to vigilance and prayer.

#### **KEY WORDS**

Status confessionis  
Reception of Abraham Kuyper  
Confession of Belhar  
Reception of John Calvin  
Heresies

#### **TREFWOORDE**

Status confessionis  
Resepsie van Abraham Kuyper  
Belydenis van Belhar  
Resepsie van Johannes Calvyn  
Valse leerstellings

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