

The South African Dutch Reformed Church and the Apartheid Conspiracy

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explain the influence of some post-Calvinist theologians in their resistance against apartheid in South Africa. There is no doubt the sixteenth-century Calvinist Reformation gave birth to the Reformed Churches, but unfortunately, the South African Dutch Reformed Church was compromised by its support for apartheid. Some important theologians in this discussion include the likes of Allan Boesak, Johan Heyans, and Bayers Naude, who stood against the conspiracy of apartheid by the Dutch Reformed Church. These theologians were outspoken in their sermons or speeches and public advocacy against racial oppression of black South Africans

Keywords:

Calvinist, Apartheid, Dutch Reformed Church, Freedom, South Africa

A View on The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid in South Africa

The Dutch Reformed Church belonged to the imperialist reformed Calvinist congregation with imperialist doctrines in the late medieval era. The Imperial Calvinists are also known for their openness and fearlessness on equality and diversities. The congregation became an official church in nations closely tied to political transformation. Some of these places were: Switzerland, Scotland, Netherlands, France, and South Africa (South African Dutch Reformed Church), etc. Christianity is often referred to as a religion of love, peace, and reconciliation which was the mission of Jesus Christ in the Bible. But unfortunately, the apartheid era in South Africa divided South Africans into racial and religious lines, and the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), cared less about the injustice of racism inflicted by the Afrikaner government on black South Africans. This was because the Dutch Reformed Church adopted an ideology of “Chosen People” which it misinterpreted from John Calvin’s advocacy for elections in the state or political office.¹ Contrary to Calvin; they saw themselves as part of the white race which were the chosen race of God in superiority to their fellow black South Africans. The church aligned itself as Imperial Calvinist and considered themselves as chosen and predestined to be the superior human race above another.² This was contrary to the Holy Bible in Ephesians 2:14, “for He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us”. The DRC in South Africa had recreated a wall of partition in their ideology which was already demolished by Christ Jesus. The church was in deep conspiracy with the white-dominated Afrikaner Nationalist Party who legitimized the Apartheid social-political system. The DRC became prominent in apartheid when one of its ministers, D.F

¹ The Calvin’s Institutes First Edition 1. 1-4, Third Edition 3.21

² The Calvin’s Institutes First Edition 1. 1-4, Third Edition 3.21

Mallan became prime minister 1948-1954 under the agenda of the National Party of South Africa.

The Dutch Reformed Church did not emulate Calvinists in Europe and the United States of America who believed the equality of all humans was ordained by God but rather embraced belief white Afrikaner supremacy over the native blacks. For instance, “The Dutch Afrikaner’s role as interpreter of the Afrikaner heritage began as early in the 1870s as the Voortrekkers were compared to the Lord’s chosen people. Nevertheless, this theme, which had so readily contributed to the development of apartheid (for as a chosen), the Afrikaners, it is argued, justifiably separate themselves from other people and legitimately exercise lordship over them”³. For this reason, the white Dutch Reformed Church supported the ruling National party’s apartheid racial politics which contravened human dignity. For instance, Daniel F. Malan former apartheid prime minister (1948 - 1954) explained during his tenure; “Our history is the greatest masterpiece of the centuries. We told this nationhood as our due for it was given us by the Architect of the universe. God’s aim was the formation of a new nation among the nations of the world”.⁴ Malan’s Afrikaner misconception of racial superiority of the white minority was to create a new nation, based on white supremacy as the creation of God over the black majority. Moreover, this brought European imperialism to chock up the Ubuntu culture to the black South African society, by oppressing their cultural values and identity. Apartheid created a polarization between the blacks and whites in the South African society in which both races developed hatred and annoyance towards themselves.

It is quite unfortunate to say that Calvin’s ideology was misconceived by the Dutch Reformed Church, to support apartheid which Calvinism stood against based on its approach on the law and freedom of all men. The struggle against apartheid became paramount in some branches of the Dutch Reformed Churches, with pastors such as John Heyns, Bayer Naude, and Allen Boesak who later opposed the doctrine. Also, a host of others who spoke against the ungodly apartheid ideology of the church and the National Party some of whom were: Bishop Desmond Tutu (b. 1931) of the Anglican Church, President Nelson Mandela (1918 - 2013), Winne Mandela (1936 - 2018), and Albertina Sisulu (1912 - 2003), etc.

I. **Beyers Naude** (1915 - 2004)

Rev Beyers Naude was a church minister in the Dutch Reformed Church who had previously supported apartheid but later rebelled, against the system when he saw the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960.⁵ In 1961, Naude became the acting moderator of the Southern Transvaal DRC synod despite his outspoken opposition to apartheid.⁶ Also, Naude was banned from

³ Ibid

⁴ Moodie, T. Dunbar, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Apartheid and the Afrikaner civil Religion*, Regents University of California press, 1975, Pp 1

⁵ Beyers Naude (1915 - 2004) Biography, (Retrieved 4/4/2019) https://reference.jrank.org/biography-2/Naud_Beyers.html

⁶ Beyers Naude, *The Spirit of Freedom: An Afrikan of Afrikaners*, UC Press E-Collection, 1984 – 2004, Pp 221 (Retrieved 21/3/2019)

1977-1984 by the ruling Nationalist Party from public life and later in 1990; he became the first white Afrikaner to join the revolutionary African National Congress.⁷ In April of the same year, he was appointed a moderator. Naude was the founder member of a non-racial ecumenical Christian Institute that challenged the established traditional church while providing humanitarian relief.⁸

For Naude, the church was led astray into racial bigotry which later became an accepted norm until people like him rose up in opposition to the same doctrines they once supported. This open rebuke against the errors of the Dutch Reformed Church was a positive step in public renouncement of apartheid. Naude cared-less about the socio-economic largesse enjoyed the Afrikaners while the black South Africans languished in inequality, poverty, and oppression. The situation of the black Africans in Naude's testimonial was like the biblical Israelites who were in bondage but in this case in their own land. The need for a new society is there for possible for both the white and black South Africans when the bigotry of racism is destroyed and there is equity in all spheres of the society. Hence, it is time for the church to stand-tall and never again allow itself to be used religiously to promote racism in the country.

II. **Johan Heyns (1928 -1994)**

Reverend Heyns was a reformed theologian who rebelled against the injustice of the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and their conspiracy with the Nationalist Party on apartheid. Heyns was born in South Africa and became a minister in the same Dutch Reformed Church he later opposed. Although, Heyns became an influential leader within the Dutch Reformed Church (1986-1990) which became a platform, for his revolution against apartheid and thereafter he was shot dead by an alleged white extremist person. Heyns was influenced by Calvinist theologians such as Karl Barth, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, etc. Also, Heyns believed in the idea of applied biblical principles on moral and ethics to promote love, justice and human dignity among all South Africans. Heyns wanted both the social-political structure of apartheid to be removed and the people behind such system be also changed.⁹ For Heyns, biblical ethics was the best solution for an orderly change of the racial discrimination, violations of human rights and injustice of the Nationalist Party and the DRC against the black South Africans. He believed the idea promoted freedom will propel the people into a revolution for their rights in a non-violent way.¹⁰

<https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft4p3006kc&chunk.id=d0e5060&toc.depth=1&toc.id=0&brand=ucpress&query=Southern+>

⁷ Beyers Naude, Biography, South African History online (Retrieved 21/3/2019)

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/reverend-beyers-naude>

⁸Ibid

⁹ J. Strauss, Piet, Johan Heyns and critique in the Dutch Reformed Church against apartheid: The moderator a prophet? HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies, 2018, Pp 74 (Retrieved 22/3/2019) 10.4102/hts.v74i3.4965.

¹⁰ J. Strauss, Piet, Johan Heyns and critique in the Dutch Reformed Church against apartheid: The moderator a prophet? HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies, 2018, Pp 74 (Retrieved 22/3/2019) 10.4102/hts.v74i3.4965

III. **Rev. Allen A. Boesak** (b. 1943)

Boesak is a theologian and former minister in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa. He also served as the first non-white president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1982-1991. He started his struggle against apartheid in 1982 while he declared the doctrines of the DRC on apartheid as heresy, and appealed for justice and equality towards all black South Africans. Boesak eventually left the DRC in 1990 and focused his theological experience in advocacy against the injustice of apartheid in South Africa. Boesak identifies himself with Calvinism and used his pulpit to criticize the deviation of the DRC from the original doctrines of Calvin's Protestant Reformation.¹¹ This means the Afrikaner Reformed Church had dehumanized the black South African Christians and its entire people by its compromise on apartheid.¹² Boesak was deeply concerned about the social injustice of apartheid among the black communities in their own native land which led to poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and poor health, etc., of the people. He explained, "If we are to believe white pastors, all of this humiliation and dehumanization is the declared will of God, God's holy ordinances, which human beings, specifically blacks, may not change. Whites are God's elect. They alone have the right to health, wealth, education, and humanity. They may designate their status to God-given, though it may be an idolatrous status. As in so many other instances, whites may erect a signpost with the warning 'For Whites Only' to describe and define humanity. For blacks, obviously, there are criteria other than those involved in defining what is 'human'. That is the matter of the heart".¹³ That is, the injustice happened before the eyes of the white Afrikaner Churches who were to criticize the ruling Nationalist Party and preach the love of God to all South Africans. Apartheid was cancer in South Africa and unfortunately, the Afrikaner Reformed Church failed to be the healing pill over racism, injustice and all forms of human rights violations against the blacks. Therefore, the blacks lost their human dignity when they were rejected by the Afrikaners who they accepted into their nation. Boesak believed that it had become obvious that the humanity of black and colored South Africans was confirmed on the whites; which colonized their humanity as a way of white racial superiority.¹⁴ He called for courage on all black South Africans in rejection of the theology of the Afrikaner Churches because apartheid is as slavery to the black race.¹⁵

For Boesak God's righteousness is reflected on the rights of all humans regardless of their race or social background. This explains, "human dignity for all is a fundamental biblical right, nevertheless, many whites seem to think that live by the grace of the blacks".¹⁶ The notion of the whites contradicted Apostle Paul's advice on freedom of all people in Galatians 3:28 in the Bible; "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for

¹¹ Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Sweetman, (First published Oris books, 1984), Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2015, Pp XV

¹² Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Sweetman, (First published Oris books, 1984), Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2015, Pp XIII

¹³ Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Sweetman, (First published Oris books, 1984), Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2015, Pp 3

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Pp 4

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Pp 4

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Pp 6

you are all one in Christ Jesus”. Moreover, the whites who claimed to be Christians failed to examine themselves and made themselves lords over the Black South Africans in their own homeland without Godly conscience. Boesak explained, “Black now which to make it clear to the white that this whole process is sinful. We can no longer continue to live in this manner without bringing God’s consuming wrath upon us. How shall we correct this neglect, this evasion of our responsibility, to realize our humanity, the potential God has structured into us? How it must grieve the Holy Spirit that God’s creation is destroyed, is denigrated to a “thing”, in the name of God. We, therefore, shall not beg for the right to live as human beings. That we need not do, no person has the right to take our life in their hands and to exercise the power to give our life to use or to withhold it from us”.¹⁷ For Boesak, it was so clear that the church was in a devilish conspiracy against God’s creation and there was no need for the blacks to beg for what truly belongs to them since it was already given freely by God to all the people of South Africa. The white South Africans brought religion to the blacks and took their human dignity depriving them of their freedom and inheritance. For the white church to re-embrace God’s righteousness, they must believe they are equal with their black countrymen and desist from the conspiracy of apartheid.

Furthermore, the Bible was a powerful weapon in Boesak’s campaign against apartheid as he spoke on the liberation of Israel from the Egyptian oppression in the book of Exodus 19: 4-5 in the Bible. Boesak explained, “God acts openly so that the world may know that Israel’s God lives, lives for the people of Israel; that Yahweh is the liberator of the oppressed. ‘You have seen I did to the Egyptians, and that I have borne you up on eagle’s wings and have brought you to me’”.¹⁸ The struggle for freedom by the black South Africans from their whites was like the freedom of Israel, just as God saw their oppression while in Egypt. This means it was just a matter of time that the liberation of the black South Africans was actualized, and this will not be an exodus movement but a non-violent struggle for justice and equality. Boesak argued that oppression cannot be associated with the God who liberated Israel from the bondage of Egypt; (“I am the Lord your God that who led you out of the house of bondage, out of Egypt”, Exodus 20:1).¹⁹ Thus, Boesak affirmation showed a strong anti-apartheid rebuke to all white perpetrators of apartheid who used what God hate as part of the religious cover-up for racism and oppression against the black South Africans.

The desire for true freedom was advocated by Boesak to the black South Africans as that which is not negotiated, just like in Galatians 5:1 when Apostle Paul admonished in the liberty of Christ above any form of bondage.²⁰ This type of freedom involves separation from the canal affairs of this world which the Afrikaner Reformed Church, failed to do by gaining special socio-economic and religious status with the government of the Nationalist party. The Afrikaner Reformed Church now had a choice to repent and be true Christians by fleeing the

¹⁷ Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Sweetman, (First published Oris books, 1984), Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2015, Pp 7

¹⁸ Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Sweetman, (First published Oris books, 1984), Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2015, Pp 8

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Pp 8

²⁰ Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Sweetman, (First published Oris books, 1984), Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2015, Pp 9

bourgeois lifestyle, embracing their fellow black men and commending apartheid. Boesak condemned the use of Dutch slave ships which was used to transport the blacks to their death camps because Jesus Christ has already died for the redemption of all offenders.²¹

Boesak also advocated for Black Theology as a way of bringing back the true humanity of the black man, which will help to banish the intolerance of the Afrikaner Reformed Church.²² Therefore, the white church who had brought the Bible, are now coequal with the masters of oppression who took the land of the blacks.²³ Thus, the blacks now know God for themselves and a new course for self-liberation must be embraced by the black churches by proclaiming the authentic truth about God's freedom and liberation to all South Africans. The aim of Black theology is to give a reflective direction to black Christians in the struggle against apartheid and advocacy for better conditions for all its countrymen.²⁴ Boesak explained, "Black theology is a black understanding of the gospel. This understanding is not confirmed to one group or denomination only, nor is it an automatic universal revelation to all blacks. It is rather the result of a painful, soul-searching struggle of black Christians with God and with the meaning of God's word for their lives today".²⁵ Boesak's thoughts was an admonishment for all blacks to resist any form of enticements from the government, and to stand against racism, humiliation and all forms of sufferings inflicted into black communities by the white Afrikaners in South Africa.

In Conclusion

The Calvinist originated churches had a mandate to ensure the existence of God's law and love in the society because it served as a biblical vessel to bring positive societal change. The movement promoted a kind of freedom that allowed for the expression of rights persons without force, intimidation or compulsion of any form.²⁶ The idea corresponds with Apostle Paul's conviction on human equality in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus".²⁷ The South African Dutch Reformed Church on its part failed in understanding the truth about freedom and equality in the Bible when it conspired with the apartheid National Party in its policy.

I believe no human being be discriminated against or deprived of their freedom in any form, regardless of their race or social classification. People should be allowed to express their religiosity, assemble, express unhindered movement and speech, own property, education, participate in politics, to freedom amongst other rights.²⁸ For instance, the need to restore

²¹ Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Sweetman, (First published Oris books, 1984), Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2015, Pp 11

²² *Ibid*, Pp 17

²³ *Ibid*, Pp 17

²⁴ *Ibid*, Pp 20

²⁵ *Ibid*, Pp 21

²⁶ Calvin, John (1509-1564), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, First Edition 1.19

²⁷ Galatians 3: 28, There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus

²⁸ 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reprinted 2015, Preamble

human dignity propelled the abolition of slavery across the British Empire in 1833, in the United States of America in 1865, and also colonialism in Africa and Asia in the twentieth century, and 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights after World War II.²⁹

Furthermore, there is an indissoluble tie between religion and human freedom that must be sustained for the betterment of our society. Witte explained, “certain rules and structures are necessary for internal discipline (and) the maintenance of peace, honesty, and good order in the assembly of Christians”.³⁰ These ethical roots of freedom are affirmed by the moral law in the Bible such as the Ten Commandments and the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians on freedom from the law to the grace of Christ. The assembly of Christians must not only be confined to church doctrines but, also a gathering for freedom and advocacy for the rights of all people in the society as portrayed by Beyers Naude, Johan Heyns, and Allan Boesak, etc. To this end, religion must uphold human rights and avoid the mistakes of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa on apartheid.

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²⁹ Rev. Jesses L. Jackson. Sr., *Transatlantic Slavery: An Introduction*, (International Slavery Museum Liverpool) Liverpool University, Press, 2010, foreword, Pp 5

³⁰ John Witte. Jr., John, and Robert M. Kingdom, M. Robert, *Sex, Marriage, and Family Calvin's Geneva: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage (Religion, Marriage, and Family Series volume 1, 2005, Pp40*