

# THE DRC'S ROLE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSITION IN SOUTH AFRICA: MAIN STREAMS OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

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## Abstract

*This paper starts with an explanation of limitations involved in an overview of this nature. It subsequently attempts to profile a number of main theological themes in Dutch Reformed theological circles from 1980 to 1994:*

1. *The struggle for the church's identity.*
2. *The struggle for the relevance of the church via congregational studies and social ethics.*
3. *The reception of Karl Barth.*
4. *The contribution of biblical scholarship.*
5. *The diaconal task of the church.*
6. *The paper closes in point with statements on the general orientation of DRC theology in the overview period. It emerges that DRC theology was only partially able to make a significant contribution to a society in transition.*

## 1. Introduction

The task assigned to me by the conference organisers was to establish the 'concerns, approaches and results' of mainstream academic research emanating from the Dutch Reformed Church in the late phase of apartheid. This is a complicated task subject to a number of limitations which must be addressed in advance to put the interpretation below in context:

### *Limitation of the period of transition*

The period of transition, i.e. 'the late phase of apartheid', has been taken as 1980-1994. The latter date refers to the democratic elections of 27 April 1994 which practically and symbolically brought the long preceding period of struggle on various fronts - including theological and church struggles - to a point of culmination. The first date allows for a long enough period to reconstruct an overview of a dramatic period in SA's history and theologically one of intense debate. As will be highlighted during the rest of this conference, a number of very significant events occurred during this period which require careful analysis<sup>1</sup>.

How would one establish the 'main streams of academic research' which formed the thrust of work done by DRC theologians?

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1. One immediately thinks of the *status confessionis* of 1982, the Kairos-document in 1985, the Belhar confession in 1986; the DRC's revised policy document Church and Society in 1986; the split in the DRC with a loss of approximately 40 000 members to the APK in 1988; the Rustenburg conference in 1988; the DRC's first official reaction to Belhar at the General Synod of 1990 and many more.

*Limitation of the academic basis*

I followed the route of scanning the three journals *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* (Stellenbosch) as well as *Fax Theologica* (Bloemfontein) and *Skrif en Kerk* (Pretoria) over the period 1980-1994. In this regard 1980 is quite significant as it was the commencement year of both *Fax Theologica* (which became *Acta Theologica* in 1989) as well as *Skrif en Kerk*. These journals in conjunction with some other major publications establish a firm albeit restricted base to view 'DRC theology' over the chosen period. It would obviously be a much greater task to take account of every publication by every DRC-aligned academic (including Unisa and other universities) in all journals (nationally and internationally) over all theological disciplines.

Apart from the limited choice from a wider field of academic contributions, the *academia* in itself limits the view of a specific theologian's contribution. Many names mentioned (or omitted) below worked in commissions of the church and in regional and national synodical structures. Others published more popular articles in church and public media. Others may have been active as preachers with little formal publications listed to their credit. The impact of some of these contributions might even have been greater than the academic work underlying them. But in line with the assignment, the focus remains on the limited field of formal academic publications.

*Limitation of interpretation*

Like all overviews with its undeniable choice of what is significant and what not; what constitutes 'contributions to transformation' and what is meant by the latter, the outline below is linked to my own presuppositions and those implicit in the topic of the conference.

The most important of these is that theology as academic discipline - like all other scholarly inquiry - is a communicative practice that not only reflects, but also effects interests, values and visions, so that one can speak about the 'transformative power' of theoretical constructs, the public ethos of science and - more bluntly - the political context of scholarship (see Schussler Fiorenza 1988:4ff).

I understand theory to be a form of social practice with the implication that academic research, including theology, is subject to at least three 'concerns', i.e. contextual, ideological and ethical. All generation of knowledge reflects a contextual concern - even in the 'denial' of its own contextuality. All generation of knowledge reflects/affects power-relations linked to the researchers' social location. All generation of knowledge reflects implicitly or explicitly an ethical concern over the impact (or not) of such knowledge on the context (restricted or encompassing) in which it is practised (see point 6 below).

In this sense it becomes indeed possible to reflect on DRC theology and its contribution to shape SA in its transition from an apartheid state to a democracy. A number of themes emerged from the period 1980 -1994 some of which is listed and discussed below.

**2. Main theological themes****2.1 The struggle for the biblical/reformed identity of the church**

An amazing cluster of publications<sup>2</sup> around 1980 put the theme of the church high on the agenda in the DRC and in South Africa in general: JD Vorster: *Veelvormigheid en eenheid*

2. For a fuller list and overview, see Smit 1981. These publications appeared in the midst of important church conferences like the March 1979 meeting of 16 churches in the first full consultation under the WARC-banner since Cottelsoe in 1960 (see Boesak 1979), as well as the inter-denominational SACLA conference of over 6 000 Christian leaders and lay people in Pretoria in 1979.

(1978); Johan Heyns: *Die Kerk* (1977) and *Dogmatiek* (1978: 352-374); PF Theron: *Die ekklesia as kosmies-eskatologiese teken*, completed as doctoral study under Heyns' supervision (1978); Piet Meiring and HI Lederle: *Die eenheid van die kerk* (1979); Piet Meiring: *Die kerk in die nuwe Afrika* (1979); WD Jonker en PF Theron: *Vreemde gemeenskap* (1979); Alan Boesak: *Die vinger van God* (1979); Douglas Bax: *A different gospel* (1979) and John de Gruchy: *The church struggle in South Africa* (1979).

The implicit shared assumption of publications and church meetings from this era was that changes in the churches' view of themselves and their relations with one another would impact directly on the social structure of the broader South African society. De Gruchy puts it unambiguously with regard to the DRC: 'Given this impressive position within society, and the access it brings to the corridors of power at the national and local level, it can be argued that the DRC holds one of the keys to the future of South Africa' (1979:70, my emphasis).

And almost a decade later, in his magnificent speech on obstacles to Christian witness at the Rustenburg Convention, Willie Jonker gives as part of his motivation: 'Our country will benefit if the Church as a whole could be united in its witness about socio-political matters' (Jonker 1991:88) Theologians of the late seventies and eighties knew this and understood the significance of their theological decisions - this explains the emotional and intellectual intensity of debates.

The theological issue at stake was the character or identity of the church and specifically the relation between unity and pluriformity in the aftermath of the 1974 DRC decisions in *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. We need not repeat the background to this struggle as this was ably done by others - specifically Johann Kinghorn et al in *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid* (1986). Kinghorn has argued convincingly that the romantic *volksidee* carried by Warneck's missiology and a specific interpretation of A Kuyper's neo-Calvinism formed the core of mainstream thinking in the DRC.

*In simplified terms: ecclesiology would either be constructed from creation or from recreation.*<sup>3</sup> In this sense the interesting difference between Heyns on the one hand and both PF Theron and WD Jonker on the other is significant. Heyns was fundamentally influenced by the Calvinist philosophy of H Stoker whose creation idea (*skeppingsidee*) provided the totalizing framework to develop a theology of the kingdom where proton and eschaton are linearly linked in a kind of overall scheme (see Jonker *Skrif en Kerk* 1994:16-19 and the dissertation of DF Theron 1984). In his view of the church Heyns therefore finds it very difficult to accept the ecclesial implications of the discontinuity of sin and new creation in Christ. Despite his worthy rejections of some arguments for the pluriformity (read: separateness) of the church, Heyns retains a cultural-ethnic motive linked to what he calls the psychic orientation (*psigiese gesteldheid*) of each *volk*. This motif is the basis for spiritual differences, he contends, which makes true communion very difficult if not impossible, and therefore constitutes a 'legitimate pluriformity' of the church (1977: 127 and repeated in 1987:379).

Although Heyns - with his strong ties to the Afrikaner establishment - played a significant role in the DRC's later decisions on church unity (as moderator of the general synod from 1986-1990), the theological impulse was carried by Jonker and his later colleague Flip Theron. Jonker's consistent ecclesial contribution from his dissertation in 1955 onward is evident from his many writings on the subject and has been outlined as the

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3. understand the importance of both discontinuity and continuity between creation and recreation, but focus here on the difference in emphasis between Heyns and others.

key feature of his theology (see especially JH van Wyk 1989), In his own words: 'My struggle has especially been against the DRC as *volkskerk* which according to me threatened the identity of the church as the church of Christ. I thought that the best way to change this was simply by doing good reformed theology... (Jonker 1991: 121, my translation). *The church cannot be just another 'samelewingsverband' like volk and state: its uniqueness lies in Christ* (Jonker 1977:4-13) and as the body of Christ it must be seen to be one church (Jonker 1986). 'The church as *kaine ktisis* is through and through an eschatological qualification,' writes Flip Theron (1978:73). As such the church is a sign of the eschaton where incarnation and not nation, the Holy Spirit and not the spirit of culture, determine the new people of God (Theron 1988:170).

The important point is that these somewhat theoretical theological notions carried in them a transformative vision of society. As shown above this was exactly the assumption. It would be very difficult to draw direct lines here, but *one could conclude that the theological base of apartheid theology - and therefore its moral legitimacy - was eroded from this view of the church. The visible unity stood in contrast to a spiritual or higher unity; the normativity in Christ stood in contrast to the norm of pluriformity-as-separateness; the new people of God stood in contrast to the volk as biological determined collectivity*<sup>4</sup>

This was obviously no unique theological position. The significance however lies in the fact that a new generation of theologians and ministers from the DRC accepted this view as is evident from the General Synod's decisions on an open church and church unity in 1986 and 1990. Those in power - and ordinary Christians - understood the societal impact and was perhaps therefore better equipped for the transformation which took special significance as from 2 Feb 1990.

That the transformation in SA also took place despite the church (including the DRC) must obviously be said. The DRC family is still struggling (stumbling) to become one. The verdict of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998, vol 4:65) is clear: Despite their principles, faith communities in SA generally mirror the image of a divided society in their very own constitution.

## 2.2 The struggle for the relevance of the church

A second question about the church lurked beneath the surface and only came to the fore in the mid eighties. This relates not so much to the church's identity as to its relevance. Whereas the first question arose from a pre-critical consciousness, the second arose from a critical consciousness as the implications of the Enlightenment started to become evident in the practical situation of the DRC.

In a paper entitled *The South African bond with Europe: Theology* Willie Jonker marks the Enlightenment of the 18th century in Europe as the hour of birth of the modern European person. This had traumatic consequences for church and theology (1988:148-149). The destruction of 'Christian Europe' as *corpus Christianum* and the radical questioning of all forms of tradition led to a cultural situation where the church and faith became increasingly irrelevant. Because of the basic European orientation of DRC theology, the questions of the *Aufklärung* were unavoidable in South Africa.

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4. I follow Kinghorn's three core elements of an apartheid theology (1986:139-143). The specific role of DRC theologians in requesting the government to withdraw the Immorality Act in 1982 is a sign that theological views had real social consequences.

It is interesting to note that Dirkie Smit in a later article about theological education sums modernity up in the notions of rationalism (flight from authority), historicism (flight from tradition) and individualism (flight from community). Specifically the last issue is important, as people are alienated from the church by a radical emphasis on individual freedom including the freedom of choice and association ‘...resulting in extreme pluralism and the functional differentiation of important subsystems of society’ (Smit 1999: 5). This weakens people’s sense of belonging - including their ‘belonging’ to the church of a specific tradition.

The phrase used by DRC theologians to describe this intricate phenomenon was ‘secularization’ and its (negative) corollary of ‘secularism’. Three articles by Snyman, Potgieter and Van der Watt respectively, illustrate this:

SD Snyman writes about the role of the DRC family in the future of South Africa, and starts his article as follows: ‘In the formulation of the topic for this contribution there are at least two points of departure. The first is that the DRC family does indeed have a role to play in the future of South Africa. This is a point of departure which is probably still in force in 1987, but which need not be in force indefinitely...’ He then gives two reasons why he doubts this: ‘The inner conflict that weakens the family of the DRC, and the fact that church’s relevance will be questioned critically in a community which is becoming increasingly secularised’ (Snyman 1987:53). PC Potgieter echoes this a year later in the same journal: References are made to the post-Christian era in Europe and the impression that for many religiosity functions without the church community. This pattern is emerging in SA and the church is becoming more and more irrelevant. JG van der Watt refers to the same issue of secularisation in his analysis of corresponding developments between Germany and South Africa and is in the light thereof compelled to make certain suggestions ‘...regarding the relevance of the Dutch Reformed Church in such a changing society’ (1992:200, my emphasis).

The question of relevance (not restricted to the DRC) is the paradoxical outcome of the churches’ own struggle for a political dispensation in which the ideas of the Enlightenment would later receive constitutional and legal protection. This raises the difficult theological question of how to be church in a new situation without giving up the encompassing message of the gospel.

An attempt to address the issue of relevance ‘toward the inside’ of the DRC was the rise of a new theological discipline, namely congregational studies (*gemeentebou*) with its own practical theological paradigm.

An attempt to address the issue of relevance ‘toward the outside’ of the DRC was the rise of social ethics as more autonomous theological discipline with its own themes and topical agenda.

Let us deal with each in turn:

### 2.2.1 Congregational Studies (*Gemeentebou*)

‘In the DRC *gemeentebou* (*Gemeindeaufbau*) has become a household word... *One cannot speak about the contemporary theology of the DRC without reference to gemeentebouteologie*’ (Britz and Erasmus 1994:374, my emphasis). Our topic does not allow full analysis here, but one could say that *gemeentebou* in both its phases of individual ‘equipment’ (1970-1977) and full-blown congregational studies (since 1978<sup>5</sup>) became the

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5. I am discerning a third phase where the focus is on synodical structures and their functioning - analysed and transformed in terms of the groundrules of management practices by church consultants.

depository for the long evangelical tradition in the DRC. This may be argued both historically and theologically.

Historically the focus on the role of individual members grew from the American Evangelism-in-Depth idea, and the focus on small group ministry from Campus Crusade for Christ with McGavern's Church Growth movement a strong influence on a new 'strategic' orientation to mainline churches. Theologically *gemeentebou* focused sharply on the spiritual renewal and building up of the individual congregant who then reaches out to others in a 'person-to-person-action' in the context of a neo-evangelical functional ecclesiology (see Breytenbach and Pieterse 1992). As more serious academic work was completed, the initial personalistic views were slowly transformed and superseded by a broader theological outlook and the establishment of an autonomous discipline (Nel 1986, 1987). It is especially Daniel Louw (1992) and Coenie Burger (1991) who attempted to link biblical and systematic considerations to practical theological considerations thus ensuring that this discipline does not merely become a pragmatic action-theoretical discourse which could be construed as alien to a Reformed way of doing theology.

It is even now too early to judge the impact of *gemeentebou* on the DRC in a time of transition. What is clear, however, is that *its success on congregational level and ascendancy in theological faculties, stems from the fact that it grew from a desire to respond to cultural and political shifts - not unrelated to the Enlightenment legacy - which directly affected the DRC*<sup>6</sup>. Suffice to say is that it surely engendered wide and enthusiastic support for the gospel in its individual - and faith community dimensions. The issue from where the new missionary awakening in the DRC originates, will be addressed later in this conference. I believe it might be an extension of the evangelical tradition which culminated in faith communities accepting responsibility for sending missionaries to 'unreached peoples'.

On the whole, *gemeentebou has succeeded to at least temporarily stem the impact of certain Enlightenment trends and provided a sense of belonging in a time of radical societal change.*

It is not easy to judge whether its effect was much wider than the members and congregations of the DRC itself. A cynical view could reconstruct *gemeentebou* as a neo-evangelical act in self preservation - even as a inward flight to a last safe haven for Afrikaners who had to face a radical loss of power in almost every other social sphere. Before a final verdict, such a view should at least keep the second response to the relevancy question in mind:

The issue of relevance<sup>7</sup> 'toward the outside' of the DRC can be linked to the rise of (social) ethics as more autonomous discipline in theology.

### 2.2.2 Social ethics as distinct 'discipline'

In his article on the DRC's orientation toward Europe, Jonker makes the important observation that the DRC never fully understood the combined effect of World War Two and the Second Enlightenment as expressed in the critical theories of philosophers like Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas and Marcuse. The abhorrence of nationalism and racism with a radical focus on the social-ethical implications of the Christian faith exactly at a time when apartheid theology was in the making; and a reliance on earlier, pre-critical European

6. See Burger 1991:14 and the introduction to Hendricks 1992.

7. It remains a pity that Jonker's study on the relevance of the church which he completed for the HSRC in 1987 was never published - perhaps as part of the Du Rand-Jonker dogmatic series?



theology at a time when ideology-critique became an indispensable part of any theoretical construct, delayed the DRC's full confrontation with new European theological trends and led to its almost total ecumenical isolation. 'From the view of the outside world as a whole, the theology of the Afrikaans churches is too uncritical, too naive with regard to the ideological presuppositions of our thoughts, too much orientated to period in the *Geistesgeschichte* that has passed, and shows too little willingness to accept the implications of the Enlightenment' (Jonker 1988:154, my translation).

With regard to ethically orientated work, the two giants of DRC theology in the seventies and eighties, Heyns and Jonker, laid the foundation. Heyns published his reflections on the decalogue already in 1970 followed by his more elaborate theology of obedience (1972), philosophical reflection on the essence of the ethical (1979), and popularised *Etiëk van liefde* (1981). Then followed his theological ethics in three parts published in 1982, 1986 and 1989 (social ethics) which in sheer volume and scope are unsurpassed until this day.

Jonker wrote about the importance of social ethics as early as 1973 in the *Festschrift* for inter alia BB Keet (Jonker 1973a). He also published an article on Calvin's social ethics in the same year (Jonker 1973b), but, despite contributions on issues like human rights and medical ethics, he never saw himself as making a specific ethical contribution in the technical sense of the word.

The promotion in ethics on the distinctiveness of Christian morality under Kuitert in The Netherlands (1978) saw Etienne de Villiers return to SA to make a sustained contribution during the period under discussion. His co-operation with Danie du Toit who became known for his original work in medical ethics and human rights (Du Toit 1984); with Johann Kinghorn, Bernard Lategan and others on the Mixed Marriages/Immorality Acts and values for inclusive democracy (see Kinghorn 1990), and since 1994 with Dirkie Smit on pluralism in ethics, ensured theologially that the DRC retained a public face and therefore at least some social relevance in a changing and changed SA context.

What is particularly significant about De Villiers' work is that he combined his ethical reflection with a definitive focus on the DRC's ecumenical position (De Villiers 1986, 1989). *He therewith placed ethics on the 'outer circle' of the church and by implication in the midst of its ecclesial and social relevance.*

That DRC ethicists were indeed sensitive to their changing context, can easily be established by a chronological ordering of topical issues: conscientious objection and the freedom of conscience in the militarised SA of the early eighties (De Villiers 1983); mixed marriages (De Villiers en Kinghorn 1984); issues in medical ethics like abortion and genetic engineering (1982 -1985 and onward); human rights (Du Toit 1984); disinvestment (P de Villiers 1985), the theology of apartheid and democracy (Kinghorn 1986) the question of peace in SA (De Villiers 1988); the church's pastoral responsibility in the growing Aids crisis (DJ Louw 1988); civil disobedience (Taute and Du Toit 1990); the ethics of distributive economic justice (1991-1993) and a growing understanding of the radical pluralistic nature of moral language as the new South Africa is seen to undergo a moral collapse (1994 and further, see De Villiers and Smit 1996).

*One could perhaps draw the conclusion that (social) ethics at least attempted to steer the naive, uncritical theology of the DRC to a more critical consciousness and simultaneously to a church with a public face despite its ecumenical isolation. One could therefore also mark ethicists' contribution to the transition as theologially and*

*socially significant as - at least academically - certain shifts of opinion on topical issues were fostered.*

There are two further 'critical' lines within DRC theology which are less obvious but theologically of great significance: The first is the reception of Karl Barth and the second - of much wider scope - is the major developments in hermeneutics and biblical scholarship.

### **3. The reception of Karl Barth**

There is no room to fully develop the intriguing and complex reception of (the equally complex) Karl Barth within DRC theology. One could refer to the extended encounters with Barth<sup>8</sup> in the dogmatic series written by Du Rand and Jonker; in Johan Heyns' dogmatics; and in Adrio Konig's attempts (inter alia) to develop a reformed view of the covenant. For the sake of this paper, *the fundamental issue in Barth's relation to DRC theology is not so much differences on views of revelation, Scripture, election and universalism, but on the critical element introduced against all forms of natural theology in its religionistic, anthropocentric and humanistic formation.*

Jaap du Rand's well known view in this regard is worth repeating: He argues that Afrikaner civil religion was formed and sustained by both Scottish evangelicalism and Kuyperian neo-Calvinism. Kuyper's cosmology and emphasis on the orders of creation - though not as crude as German *Ordnungstheologie* - '...combined with orthodox Reformed Christology in such a way that any effort to subject theology to a Christological criticism was defused from the start. As a result the dominant natural theology was never recognised for what it was. One of the great tragedies in the development of Afrikaner Reformed theology in the three decisive decades of its evolvement (1930-1960) was *that Karl Barth's criticism of religion and natural theology was never really heard or given the opportunity to be heard in those Kuyperian circles that needed it most.*' (Du Rand 1985:40, my emphasis; Du Rand 1988:121-123)<sup>9</sup>.

Due to the elements of natural theology and nationalism in his theology, Heyns could not really set forth and appreciate the critical element in Barth's theology<sup>10</sup>. Contrary to some other churches (see Villa-Vicencio 1988), there was also not a DRC reception of the 'socialist' and 'political' Barth introduced by Marquardt and Gollwitzer (see few comments in Verster 1991). *The 'public' and 'social' value of Barth for the DRC lies in his ability to (on the one hand) dismantle the natural theological elements in Neocalvinism which provided the theological base for apartheid and (on the other hand) expose the anthropocentric tendencies of pietism in its Gestalt as inner-focused religion*<sup>11</sup>.

Jonker - in his Barth centenary lecture - sums it up as follows: 'The complacency of the church, the self-satisfaction of some forms of Neocalvinist theology with which we were acquainted, the shallow moralism of Christianity as a whole, the self-deception of pietistic, Arminian and Methodist preoccupation with personal holiness and perfection with which we

8. Despite their academic merit, I would not judge the philosophical-theological encounters with Barth by e.g. Van Huyssteen (1986:23-36) and Van Niekerk (1984) and Potgieter's discussion of personal faith in the theology of Barth (1987) of specific transformational significance as used in this paper.

9. See Bennie Keet's overview of theology at the centenary of the Stellenbosch seminary in 1955 which he specifically pleads for greater attention to Karl Barth than was seen as acceptable at that stage.

10. See Heyns 1977: 126-127; 1978:379; 1991:47-49 and Jonker's comments in Jonker 1994, and 1998:133-134.

11. One should not bundle pietism or evangelicalism together as purely inner-focused Christianity. A case could be made that someone like Beyers Naude came from an evangelical background and translated the passion for mission into a social vision for SA (see Du Rand 1985:48)



were perpetually confronted within our circles - these were the things for which Barth opened our eyes' (Jonker 1988: 30-31)<sup>12</sup>.

In an indirect way, one could conclude, *Barth's theology looms over the erosion of apartheid's theological base (negative) and provided the thrust for a confessing church (positive) exemplified in the status confessionis (1982) and Belhar-confession (1986)*. For the latter, the mainstream DRC-thinking was (and is) not ready (Naude). The 'confessing' Barth has since then been carried with great impact by the DRMC/URCSA, destroying the last shreds of theological respectability of the apartheid system and enriching the Reformed tradition with a dynamic confession in the SA context with definite universal significance.

#### 4. The contribution of Biblical scholarship

Any South African theologian will feel justifiably proud about the international quality of biblical scholarship from this country. This is also true of the DRC whose Old and New Testament scholars played a magnificent role in establishing and maintaining several academic associations and journals of international repute. No justice can be done to the varied contributions over such a wide field in the space of this paper. Suffice to say: The heart of the battle for ecclesial and social transformation in the period 1980-1994 lied in the interpretation of the Bible.

The relevance of the bible for socio-political matters was a *sine qua non* of both the defence (e.g. EP Groenewald, JD du Toit, WJ Snyman) and rejection (e.g. B Marais, BB Keet, Albert Geysler) of apartheid in the years between 1947 and 1960. This assumption of the link between 'the bible' and 'the current situation' surfaced again in the late eighties with the publication of JA Loubser: *The apartheid bible* (1987) and two volumes edited by C Breytenbach: *Eenheid en konflik* (1987) and *Church in context* (1988) as well as the establishment at Stellenbosch of a Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics (by 1987).

Because of their strong international orientation and sensitivity for developments in the North, SA biblical scholarship, however, suffered the same fate so well expounded by Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza in her 1987 SBL presidential address (published 1988) and subsequently echoed by Francis Schussler-Fiorenza in an article on Scriptural authority in *Interpretation* (F Schussler Fiorenza 1990):

In its struggle to free itself from dogmatic and ecclesiastical control, biblical scholarship increasingly adopted the nineteenth century positivist view of history. 'For the sake of exactitude the historical method excludes seeking the meaning of the text for our contemporary situation or for our faith. As critical, this method seeks to investigate in a historicist fashion what the text meant in its original context by excluding consideration of any ecclesial or confessional tradition' (F Schussler Fiorenza 1990:356). Biblical scholarship also became increasingly specialised to the point of sharing in the pathology of modernity (Habermas) where a technocratic or means-end rationality associated with 'objectivity' and 'value neutrality' led to a total separation of the expert and everyday reader of the bible.

In summary: by the late 1980's, and reflecting over a period of 40 years, the president of the SBL and others find biblical scholarship wanting in a number of respects: an assumed value neutrality oblivious to the political context of interpretation; an inability to translate meaning beyond the historical investigation of the text; little or no consideration for

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12. The value of Jonker's contribution lies in his argument - following D Schellong: *Karl Barth und die Neuzeit* (1973) - for an interpretation of Barth as *modern* theologian who responded to the Enlightenment challenge in a unique manner.

ecclesial or confessional traditions; and the creation of a closed world of expert scholarly inquiry which denies the interests and values underlying their communicative practice (E Schussler Fiorenza 1988:4).

She then calls for an ethics of interpretation which encompasses both the historical reading and an accountability for the ethical consequences of the text's meaning in contemporary socio-political settings.

South African biblical scholars were confronted with this ethical imperative and a call for a responsible hermeneutics from outside their professional ranks: It was systematician and ethicist Dirkie Smit who challenged the New Testament scholars (see Smit 1988, 1990) and heavily criticized their attempt to write an ethic of New Testament books, *Geloof en Opdrag* (1992:303-325). Two years later he poses the same challenge to Old Testament colleagues (Smit 1994): He closes his address with a series of rhetorical-critical questions which ends with: 'In short, what are those who are seen as Old Testament scholars doing with their enormous 'power to read'. Now *that* is an ethical question' (Smit 1994:292, his emphasis).

In a rough overview like this, generalizations are unavoidable, and I probably owe an apology to exceptions of what is described here. But this 'scientist ethos' - where the true interlocutors are other biblical scholars (Smit 1992:322), where a kind of in-house discourse is created (Botha 1993) and the medieval notion of a tropological sense of the bible is lost - explains the relative silence of expert biblical scholars on the great issues facing SA society in the crucial period between 1970 and 1985. It was mostly left to others 'to let the bible speak' on issues ranging from ordination of women, conscientious objection and inclusive democratic values to the enormous disaster created by HIV/AIDS.

The rhetoric of scientific correctness in pursuing historicist and structuralist modes of reading<sup>13</sup> created a twofold paradox:

#### *First*

*Despite their immensely 'critical' approaches, biblical scholars were ideologically naive/uncritical and (like most other disciplines) blind to both the underlying and consequential ethical implications of their communicative strategies.* The admission (confession?) by J Botha (1992:179) tells its own story: 'During the seventies and eighties a scientist ethos of scholarship dominated in the guild of South African New Testament scholars. Many of us tended to 'hide behind' our literary and structural analyses, *hiding from the pressing social realities of our country* - even if it was not a conscious choice to do so and even if it was not consciously perceived as such by members of the guild' (my emphasis).

#### *Second*

Despite their *de jure* appointment by the church and outspoken desire to do theology in and for the church<sup>14</sup>, *biblical scholars - except perhaps for the issue of church unity -*

13. I am aware of the shift toward reception -type readings of the bible and specifically Bernard Latagan's contributions in this regard (Latagan and Vorster 1985 and Latagan 1987). They do promote a much more acute awareness of the world in front of the text - specifically the role of the reader/receptor - in constituting meaning. See also Schussler Fiorenza's positive development of a reception hermeneutic (1990:365ff) because '(i)ts challenge to positivist historical reading of the text requires that diverse receptions of the text, including present popular understanding of the text as concretization of its meaning, be included in the problem of the interpretation of the meaning of the text' (my emphasis).

14. See the foreword to the first edition of *Skrif en Kerk* to motivate the title of the new journal!

found it very difficult to engage in the 'wirkungsgeschichtliche' reality of the church and its confessions<sup>15</sup>.

Three examples illustrate this:

- It was mostly left to systematicians<sup>16</sup> to try and sort out the radical questioning of Scriptural authority after the Synod of Delft accepted the Dutch report 'God met ons' in 1979. Unless I missed other contributions, WS Prinsloo's defence of the Old Testament authority<sup>17</sup> (1985) and an article each by NT scholars HJB Combrink and AB du Toit in 1990 on the crisis and future of Scriptural authority, are the only substantial attempts from biblical scholars to assist us in understanding the meaning of *sola Scriptura* to prevent a pre-critical fundamentalist confessionalism in the midst of a bewildering barrage of reading strategies<sup>18</sup>.
- The professionalization and radical differentiation of biblical scholarship made it very difficult to read the First and Second Testaments *as testaments* and the Scriptures as *one Scripture*, i.e. as canon of the Christian church (and therefore in itself a valid reception to be reckoned with in an inter-textual reading of the empirical text as communication event). Despite being reformed scholars, expert biblical exegetes would find the notion of *theology* as *sacra pagina* in practice very difficult to uphold. 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so', will probably elicit the response: 'Who is (the historical) Jesus? Whose bible are you referring to? To which meaning of love do you refer? And - most importantly: How do you know?' This is not to ridicule academic discourse, but to lament the almost narcissistic problematization of Scripture in disregard of the public of the church (Tracy) and the *de facto* significant authority - however critical or uncritical - ordinary church members accord to the bible.
- Whereas the first example refers to the 'principle' of authority and the second to the canon itself, one can (following Fiorenza) also ask a question about the confessional tradition. In their collective struggle not to be seen as unscientific confessionalists (my interpretation of Schussler Fiorenza 1988:10-11), one would not expect biblical scholars to naturally do academic work on the confessional tradition of the church - not even in a conservative Reformed church. But our overview-period is different. Confronted by a confessional event - unique in the DRC's own history since the Canons of Dordt in 1618-19 - the question arises: Where were the exegetical studies *from the DRC* on the role of credo's in both Israel and the New Testament church? or on the Belhar

15. See Schussler Fiorenza's reference above to the exclusion of ecclesial of confessional traditions

16. I refer inter alia to JWV van Huyssteen and BJ Du Toit's controversial *Geloof en Skrifgesag* (1982).

17. It is interesting to note how Prinsloo approaches the problem: 'As biblical scholar it is for my almost impossible to speak theoretically about the authority of the Old Testament. I leave it to my colleagues in Dogmatics to speak about the theoretical foundation and dogmatic aspects. When I speak about the authority of the OT, I cannot do it otherwise than in alignment with a concrete text' (1985:410-411) - in this case Joel 2. One cannot but gain the impression that a flight in to the safe world of the text - however critically read - is actually a naive (read: uncritical) attempt to avoid discussing the difficult theoretical presuppositions underlying the credo-like statement directly preceding this quotation: 'It is my basic presupposition that the Old testament is the authoritative Word of God.'

18. Ferdinand Deist's 3 volume unpublished HRSC report *Wetenskapsteorie en Vakmetodologie in Bybelwetenskaplike Navoring* (1994) does not directly deal with the authority question, but remains extremely helpful in 'plotting' hermeneutical developments -also in the DRC - over the last century.

confession's use of Scripture in the decisive *kairos* period of eight years between the *status confessionis* of 1982 and the first DRC synodical response in 1990? Or where are the reception theoretical analyses of Belhar's non-reception as *confession* thereafter?

Nevertheless, the debate of the early 1990's was not in vein and is still continuing. I also do not think for a moment that other theological disciplines can exempt themselves from the criticism above. Biblical scholarship itself has no doubt been affected and a much greater contextual responsibility is emerging<sup>19</sup>. In the earlier part of the period under discussion, however, DRC-aligned biblical scholars mostly avoided the uncomfortable question of both the 'ethics of interpretation' and the development of a 'biblical ethic' or 'public ethos' which takes the canon as canon seriously in an attempt to overcome the pathological impoverishment of their (and our) communicative action (Habermas).

*What were they - and all of us from the DRC - doing with our enormous 'power to read' the most powerful Book in South Africa? (Now that is an ethical question!)*

## 5. Reflection on the diaconal task of the church

Let us turn our attention briefly to academic reflection on the *diakonia* task of the church in the world. In this limited overview, a comparison is drawn between MM Nieuwoudt's article in 1982 and the large volume on the DRC and its diaconal ministry by AJ Smuts, JJ de Klerk, PB van der Watt and M Nieuwoudt in 1990. Despite the admirable theological reflection on a base-theory for the diacony and its integration with mission in an encompassing sense, the move from 'mercy' to 'justice', from 'diaconal relief' to 'political diacony' has been an uncomfortable one.

Nieuwoudt, a respected figure in the DRC's diacony over many years, specifically refers to the diaconal aspect of 'social justice' (1982:249) which means *inter alia* to stand in for the oppressed and those who suffer injustices. He then notes that many criticise the DRC not only for its silence over political injustices, but even complicity to establish a system of social injustice. In defence of the DRC he 'categorically rejects' such allegations: 'We want to state it categorically that the DRC also on this level only applied the norm of Scripture within the specific political dispensation and always negotiated the best Christian relief for each with his God-given identities... specifically for minority groups.' He admits that there might have been errors of judgement, but that the DRC gave her best talent with the light that she saw and according to her conscience before God, and not with a view to impress people (1982:249, my translation).

Nieuwoudt clearly understands that not everything is *kosher*, but was at that stage not able to penetrate the very ideological base of the comprehensive relief work of the DRC in its own ranks and in co-operation with the 'daughter churches'. The close relation between church and state had great financial benefits for the DRC's diacony (see figures provided: Nieuwoudt 1982:248) and it was therefore very difficult to question 'the specific political dispensation' or to give up the privileged position of negotiating on behalf of itself and others - *nogal* called 'minority groups' each with a 'God-given identity'! Rhetorically Nieuwoudt covers his uneasiness with references to Scripture, conscience and possible errors of judgement.

That this was not only a DRC problem emerges from Paul Schrottenboer's article in the same NGTT, *The RES and world relief* (Schrottenboer 1982: 292): 'We have all, with few

19. See Botha 1992 note 5 and e.g. the NGTT-editions since 1994.

exceptions, stopped short of involving ourselves in *political* structural changes in those areas where poverty and hunger are endemic. ...we (must) squarely face the issue whether, and if so, how and to what extent, we should become active in effecting *political* changes both in our own nations and in other lands so that there may be greater sharing of the benefits of the earth.'

Eight years later - in his review of the volume by Smuts et al - Daniel Louw (1993) laments the fact that the church-state relations in the specific SA context is not addressed adequately (see Smuts et al 1990:65ff) and that the view of black people on the DRC's work over the last fifty years is omitted. Louw refers to a lack in the volume of constructive-critical thinking on the complexities of human relations in a pluralistic society and notes that there is no attempt to address the issue of diacony with regards to violence and conflict in South Africa (103). The reason is stated by the authors themselves toward the very end of their work: The DRC fears political diacony like death! (362).

*The issue of diacony and social justice has therefore been noted, but the DRC has up to the early 1990's not been able to penetrate the very socio-political power base of its own thinking and action.* Reasons are plentiful: the identity formation of the DRC diacony via its extensive involvement with the 'poor white' problem in the thirties and forties (first Carnegie report) which created a primary inward-looking focus over many years; an absolute disdain for the Reformed Churches in the Netherland's Program to Combat Racism in the seventies; the growing ecumenical isolation of the DRC specifically for its theology of apartheid; the fact that it remained a middle-class church where poverty remained with 'others' to whom we give 'from afar' via commissions; the social location of upper class theological faculties weakly positioned to a theology of the poor (see below); the uncritical nature of its theology in general - showing specific difficulty to integrate insights from critical theory and sociology of knowledge.

It was toward the end of the apartheid era - and in reaction to the second Carnegie report<sup>20</sup> - that the issue of poverty and diacony was put in a different perspective. During a conference by SEVTO (Univ of Pretoria) in May 1993, Piet Meiring (*Poverty - The road ahead. A theological perspective*) unequivocally links poverty to an unjust society. He pleads for a community-based strategy (over against structural and institutional approaches) which requires that the church first listens to those in need before reacting in its own wisdom<sup>21</sup>.

Notwithstanding the criticism above, much was done at great personal and collective cost, and many people in and outside the DRC benefited from its multi-faceted relief work. But it is clear that *with regards to diacony - potentially one of the most powerful changing forces at the church's disposal - the DRC primarily mirrored the society in which it lived and missed the opportunity to make a social transformative contribution in the decade preceding 1994.*

Time and space are running out. The project has become bigger than I expected. I have not yet said anything about missiology<sup>22</sup> or other dimensions of practical theology like

20. The findings were popularised in *Uprooting Poverty. The SA challenge*, a book with a fundamental impact on my own views of poverty and the 'real people' behind statistics.

21 The work of KAN and NOVA are creative example of such community-based diacony. See Vosloo 1994 for an overview of the conference in Pretoria.

22. See the contribution from Prof Kritzinger later at this conference. Suffice to refer to the notorious exclusion of David Bosch from the Stellenbosch faculty, and the great impact of Dionne Crafford and Piet Meiring to make the DRC see the African realities in which we live. See discussion in closing paragraphs.



pastoral theology<sup>23</sup> or homiletics<sup>24</sup>. Neither do we have the time to talk about church historical work<sup>25</sup> or the crucial decisions implicit in rewriting the orders of the church<sup>26</sup>.

Allow me, nevertheless, to devote our last few paragraphs to the general orientation of DRC theology in the overview-period:

## 6. The general orientation of DRC theology

There can be no doubt: In the period under discussion DRC theology was fundamentally orientated toward Europe (and to a lesser extent the USA). Jonker's statement in reaction to my criticism (see Naude 1991:117) that he missed opportunities to translate his theological insights for an African continent is worth quoting:

'We all have our limitations and no theologian can jump across his own shadow. My own theological position was to a great extent determined by my formation and situation... This means that I was from the outset oriented to European theology. *To tell the truth, many of us have until recently not even noticed that it was European theology. For us it was simply 'theology'...* The realisation that the theology from Europe has itself a contextual character, only recently dawned upon us. The task to think through the full implications thereof for our theological reflection in SA, I gladly leave to the younger generation' (Jonker 1991:120, my translation and emphasis).

That Jonker clearly understood the issue is evident from his earlier speech before the *Akademie*: 'The challenge before which we stand is to work with others toward an understanding and interpretation of the bible in our situation as *people who are drenched in the European tradition but who, in the meantime, became people of Africa*. Here we live and work, we think and pray... We are called to do theology on the edge (*breuklyn*) between the First and the Third World' (Jonker 1988:156, my translation and emphasis).

I am not suggesting that mainstream DRC theology did not address the issues of contextuality and Africa. I am also not adhering to static, romantic or exclusively 'black' views of what 'Africa' means. *The problem is that the issue of contextuality - specifically in NT science<sup>27</sup> - became more of a methodological issue than one of material significance in*

23. One is struck by the theological quality and contextual awareness of Daniel Louw's work. One should be aware of the limitation of this paper which focuses on the macro-level without regard for the fact that individual people went through enormous change and needed some form of spiritual and theological re-orientation normally provided by pastoral theological frameworks.
24. One can refer to Bethel Muller's attempts to understand the role of public religion in the period just before 1990; Johan Cilliers' analytical work on sermons from contrasting contexts, and the liturgical work by AC Barnard, Cas Vos and Julian Muller.
25. A revisionist attempt with regard to our perceptions of history (and our role therein) is a crucial part of 'transformation'. That church historians (and not only 'secular' ones) have a special responsibility arises from the fact that apartheid itself was built on a idealised conflation of Afrikaner and Israelite histories (Kinghorn 1986:139). Hanneke du Preez from Unisa published a study in 1990 on the master symbols of history text books for schools. She concludes that one of these 'symbols' is that whites are superior to blacks and that the Afrikaner enjoys a privileged relationship with God and that the country rightfully belongs to the Afrikaner (Sunday Times 8 July 1990:18). The sensitivity for such a 'revision' was illustrated by the Floors van Jaarsveld incident on the theme of the day of the vow. Van Jaarsveld's critical stance on Afrikaners as a 'verspaetete Nation' is of great significance. *I have my doubt whether DRC historians understood their task - then and now - as revising our symbolic universe toward the reconstruction of our narrative identity.*
26. The proof of the pudding will be in the 'eating' of a church order for an expanding URCSA.
27. One may refer to the work of HJB Combrink (see especially his very informative *Die Bybel lewe in Afrika* written after a visit to Kenia in April 1991, *Acta Theologica* 11/2, 81-90). Also the very substantial contributions on contextual hermeneutics by BC Lategan, e.g. his *The challenge of contextuality* (1991) and *Aspects of a contextual hermeneutics for South Africa* (1994).

*constructing theology*. And the many articles about Africa and its realities emerged mainly from missiological reflections<sup>28</sup> *without an 'orientation' effect on DRC theology as such*.

Why is this so important? *Because your intellectual orientation determines your reflective agenda*. One should not underestimate the importance of wrestling with SA's radical *Absturz* into modernity (Smit 1994:15) and the immense problems created for theology and the church in SA by the *simultaneous impact* of pre-modernity, modernity and post-modernity. The DRC owed it to herself, her congregants and the church at large to continue the intellectual struggle with issues like authority and tradition, church-state relations in a secularised framework as well as the rule of law based on the sovereignty of God and the law of nature. These issues have - through globalisation and the effect of colonialism - become African issues as well.

But the DRC nowhere - up to this day - really confronted herself with the material effect for theology of our African context. (We can obviously not jump over our own shadow, but we can change our position relatively to the sun!)

This had at least two effects on DRC theology:

#### *First*

The very question of cultural thought, forms and expressions in a discipline so deeply Western, was not adequately addressed<sup>29</sup> from the rich variety of alternative perspectives. We only belatedly saw the preliminaryity and locality of our own thought and did not know how to deal with it. Neither do we know better today.

#### *Second*

*The link between theology and sub-modernity<sup>30</sup> was never really forged*. One can only dream about the effect on DRC theological faculties if in the overview period women and others from the non-powerful world could influence academic work. I am reminded by Frederick Herzog's critique of David Kelsey's book on theological education (*To understand God truly*): By exclusive focus on the *Wissenschaft* of Berlin and the *paideia* of Athens, the poverty of Lima was forgotten. 'Lima reminds us that 'seeing' God is never direct, always indirect. *Paideia* (Athens) and *Wissenschaft* (Berlin) have to be brought under the scrutiny of the vast encampment of the poor who are banging, as it were, at the doors of our theological schools.' He adds: 'What's theological about the theologian? It is understanding what intellect can and cannot do in the face of poverty. It is something for which the theologian's eyes need to be opened time and again - in an ever-new Emmaus experience. *The problem, of course, is that God is often the theologian's favourite toy*' (Herzog 1994:276, 275, my emphasis).

*If the relation between Stellenbosch and Kruispad, Pretoria and Mamelodi, Bloemfontein and Botshabelo were ecclesially and socially established, the theological orientation would no doubt have been different*. And swept forward by the hermeneutical spiral between theory and practice, the DRC could have become herself a greater

28. The work by Dionne Crafford and Piet Meiring over many years - too many to list here - is a pillar of hope in this regard. Although not academically influential, Nico Smith's views and his trek from Stellenbosch to Mamelodi served a great symbolic purpose.

29. My work on orality and the very notion of theology/literacy as well as a Zionist christology may be noted albeit it represents very preliminary ideas. See Naude 1993, 1996

30. I am quite aware that 'sub-modernity' represents another variety of modernity as a fundamental Western phenomenon not applicable to all spheres of South African society. But it does help to express the 'social location' of reality 'below' the powers of modernity.

transformative force in South Africa and not a church which in most cases mirrored<sup>31</sup> the (changing) realities of her own situation.

The reservoir of intellectual potential in the DRC is immense and probably unsurpassed on the African continent. Some shifts not reported here did indeed occur in the post 1994 period. But new challenges are facing us. The question is whether the DRC will be self-critical enough about her past to assume her theological responsibility for the future.

*What are we going to do with our power-to-reflect? What will be theological about our theology?*

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31. It is utter ironical that Afrikaans Reformed churches in South African as well as the DRC-family were by the middle 1990's about the only non-unified structures in the new South Africa. It destroys their witness and obviously their ability to provide experiential exposure to diversity. They share in the world -wide phenomenon of denominationalism where separateness becomes constitutive for identity.

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