

ACCOMPANYING THE FLOCK - THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH 1974-1990

Willem Nicol
DRC Universiteitsoord, Pretoria

Let us take a bird's eye view of the story and then try to interpret the role that the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) played in order to clear our view on what its present challenges are.

1. The story

During the second quarter of the previous century the DRC supplied a Biblical legitimization of apartheid. Was it leading the Afrikaners into apartheid? I do not think so. It merely reflected the need of the Afrikaners to construct their policy on a strong base.

During the fifties some voices critical of apartheid did resound in the church. They culminated at the Cottesloe Consultation of 1960 where some of the leaders of the DRC made clear critical statements. The Afrikaners and their leaders immediately reacted and during 1961 all the regional synods of the DRC rejected the critical statements. A theology critical of apartheid tried to break through, but the loyalty of the church towards the Afrikaners, the tendency to reflect and sanction their beliefs, was altogether too strong.

In 1974 the General Synod adopted its first comprehensive document on the racial problem of South Africa (*Ras, volk en nasie*). It stated that the racial policy of the government could be justified in the light of the Bible. It gave no thorough attention to the suffering caused by apartheid. In fact, Synod scrapped a long portion on urban blacks. The position was that the Bible did not allow racially mixed marriages. The existence of different churches within the Dutch Reformed family was accepted as Biblical.

It is no surprise that in 1974 the DRC accepted secret state funds for the overseas propagation of the apartheid policy.

Since 1978 the pressure rapidly mounted.

In 1978 the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (coloureds) asked the DRC to repudiate apartheid.

In 1979 the regional synod of the Western Cape condemned racial discrimination.

In 1980 eight leading theologians published a witness in which they stressed that a lot of suffering was caused by racism and called on the church to act in this regard.

In 1982 a group of 123 persons who had been admitted to the ministry by the DRC signed an open letter to the DRC. It rejected the apartheid policy in principle, stressed the injustice that flowed from it and also rejected the existence of separate Dutch Reformed churches.

Also in 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches condemned the theological position of the DRC as heretical, constituting a *status confessionis*, namely a theological position that threatens the heart of our faith. The membership of the DRC was suspended.

Later in the same year the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church took decisions that agreed with the position of the World Alliance in very clear language. They formulated a confession (later named the Belhar Confession) to defend the faith against the heresy.

Towards the end of 1982 the General Synod of the DRC assembled. Hardly any concessions were made but it did decide that its policy statement of 1974 had to be thoroughly revised.

In 1983 the regional synod of the Western Cape rejected the law against mixed marriages, stated that the policy of apartheid could not be regarded as a Biblical prescription and that it had to be rejected if it took the form of racial discrimination.

In 1984 the Reformed Ecumenical Synod agreed with the World Alliance that apartheid was sin and its theological defence heresy.

Then came the General Synod of 1986. The revised policy statement was called *Church and Society*. Would the DRC start moving? From a certain perspective a little movement could be detected. It was admitted that the Biblical sanctioning of apartheid was a mistake. In so far as apartheid and other factors caused suffering and the church had had a part in it, the church repented with contrition. Synod also admitted that Scripture did not forbid mixed marriages. Although the membership of the church was declared open, the existence of different churches within the Dutch Reformed family was still being accepted.

The next General Synod of 1990 accepted a revised *Church and Society*. Whereas the repentance about apartheid was veiled in 1986, it was now clearer. Synod admitted that it should have rejected the Biblical sanctioning of apartheid and confessed this neglect. It admitted that apartheid had become a repressive and unjust system. For the family of Dutch Reformed Churches the ideal of the formation of one church was accepted.

2. The interpretation

2.1 In the language I am using I distinguish between the DRC and Afrikanerdom. For the sake of this argument I speak of the DRC or 'church' when I mean the leadership of the DRC, especially but not exclusively as it is embodied in its General Synod. When I speak of Afrikanerdom, I include in it the body of church members. When the question is considered whether the church leads Afrikanerdom, it is a question of whether the church leadership is pulling Afrikanerdom in a direction or whether it is merely accompanying Afrikanerdom or even following it. (The ideal situation would, of course, have been that the church and all its members were so clearly distinguished from all the others that we could use the word church in this inclusive sense, but this is not the case.)

2.2 It seems to me that the developments in the DRC were a reflection of the movement in the heart of Afrikanerdom, a mirror of its fear, an accompaniment of the flock. I would have liked to show that the church was leading as, for instance, the influential northern newspaper *Beeld* was, but I cannot.

In 1974 the faith in apartheid – that it was feasible and just – was still strong in Afrikanerdom. This can be clearly seen in the report accepted by the General Synod in that year. A lot of exegetical work is done in order to bend the Bible to support apartheid.

The policy of the General Synod stayed the same until the slight changes of 1986. The somewhat softer line that this synod took on racial separation should, however, be understood in a wider framework. At that time the Afrikaner civil religion shifted its emphasis from racial separation to state security. The big thing was the total onslaught on the state by the liberation struggle. All resources had to be mustered to defend the state. Any blacks who were willing to be co-opted in any structures were welcome and for them apartheid was softened. *Church and Society* reflected this movement by taking a loyal line concerning the total onslaught and at the same time softening separation.

The fact that the adoption of *Church and Society* led to the breaking away of about 40 000 members of the DRC to form the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk, should also be seen in its wider context. Since the beginning of the eighties a split was developing

within Afrikanerdom between a group that was willing to adapt to the fact that racial separation was not feasible and a smaller group that was not willing. The church split came a few years after the party political split (the formation of the Conservative Party), but was part of the same pattern. The cause of the split was not that *Church and Society* was unacceptable to the greater part of Afrikanerdom, but because a smaller part of them were breaking away in any case and could therefore naturally not go along with the document.

Was the General Synod of October 1990 ahead of the rest of Afrikanerdom? I do not think so. Already in the beginning of 1990 the National Party had made a radical turn and even in the previous year when the revision of *Church and Society* was under way the new thinking was in the air.

The interpretation proposed here can be explained in the light of the main theme of the 1998 book by Willie Jonker. The title is a statement: Even the church can change (*Selfs die kerk kan verander*, Kaapstad: Tafelberg) and the central theme is that the ethnic character (*volkskarakter*) of the DRC had been broken by 1990 (see the last page). I want to argue that it has only been broken on the level of theological formulation. It is true that the DRC had developed a theological language with which apartheid options could be sanctioned and that the church was slowly purified of the most of this language during the eighties. But this does not mean that the church had secured for itself more freedom over Afrikanerdom to lead and not only reflect. The language changes reflected the changes in the heart of Afrikanerdom. For the sake of its survival Afrikanerdom had to move away from apartheid in any case.

There might be one exception. I put it as a question, because I was not there and did not know the southern Afrikanerdom. Was the regional synod of the Western Cape leading the Afrikaners of their region during the years under consideration? Because of their closer ties with the Coloureds these Afrikaners were probably slightly ahead of the rest of Afrikanerdom and in that sense the church was helping to lead the rest, but was the church not only reflecting its own region?

2.3 The view of the church as follower is supported when one considers the role of the dissidents within the DRC. Through all the years of the apartheid theology of the DRC there have been a small number of dissidents who were constantly opposed this theology. During the last decade before 1990 the regional synod of the Western Cape accepted a lot of the dissident thinking and moved some distance ahead of the General Synod.

The arguments used to fight the apartheid thinking were mostly of a theological nature. It was of course not difficult to expose the faulty exegesis and reasoning of the apartheid theology. Did the church change because it listened to the theology of the dissidents? It did accept many of their propositions, but I do not think that the main reason for this acceptance was the content of the argument against apartheid. In some cases this argument was strong theology, even proclamation, but the harmony between the movement of the church and that of the rest of Afrikanerdom creates the suspicion that the church was rather listening to the heart of Afrikanerdom than to the heart of Scripture. I do not want to say that the dissident position made no contribution to the movement. Probably it did help loosen the church so that it did not remain bogged down in apartheid theology and was able to move along with the times.

But to my mind the influence of the dissidents was more on Afrikanerdom in general than directly on the DRC. Afrikanerdom developed a bad conscience about apartheid. During the eighties there was growing criticism of apartheid from journalists,

academics, writers, certain politicians, missionaries, theologians and many others. The Open Letter of 1982, for instance, was solidly rejected by the DRC but welcomed by a large part of the Afrikaans press. The church lived in an enclave from where it could turn a blind eye to the problems of apartheid, but large parts of Afrikanerdom had to live closer to realities. As they were pressed to question parts of apartheid, dissident church leaders gave them some much needed sanctioning for their questioning. The church was fairly deaf towards the dissidents, not only because it lived further from the painful realities of apartheid, but also because it drew the convictions of Afrikanerdom concerning the total onslaught into its faith. It believed that it was one of its main callings to resist the onslaught. The dissidents within its walls were seen as a dangerously disguised front of the onslaught, so that their message was resisted!

But outside the church the dissidence had some value as a strengthening of the general dissidence within Afrikanerdom. This helped Afrikanerdom to move and the latter helped the church to move – so the influence of the dissidence within the church on the church as such was rather indirect than direct. My theory is that Afrikanerdom would have been physically capable of resisting the liberation struggle for more years and that this would have caused severe extra damage to the country. Why did Afrikanerdom choose the other route in 1990? The main reasons must probably have been economic, military and also various other practical problems and pressures. But the fact that the faith in apartheid was plagued by a bad conscience, that there was some doubt, that Afrikanerdom could not look the rest of the world straight in the eye, that voices of journalists, theologians, intellectuals and others were gnawing at its confidence, probably made it more difficult to continue with stubborn resistance.

- 2.4 The DRC was not leading, but if one is totally realistic, it is a question whether one can expect of a church in such a threatened ethnic situation to take the lead. Pressures of reality pushed Afrikanerdom, and the DRC operated further from those pressures.

What *can* be expected is that a church does not break the movement away from an inhuman policy like apartheid. The DRC was not a braking mechanism. There was enough apartheid theology and sentiment in the DRC that it could have functioned as such. When the majority of Afrikanerdom started moving, it could have resisted the movement by hardening itself in its theological position. Can it not frequently be seen that theology can remove itself from realities? In such a way the DRC could have provided a religious base for large-scale violent resistance and terrorism of Afrikaners. But the church was willing to go along with their people in their inclination towards a more practical and adaptable way of living in Africa.

When doubt and dissidence about apartheid started rising in the ranks of Afrikanerdom, it was at least also on the increase in the church. There were such voices in the church leadership and it was at least possible for the dissidents to make themselves heard without being kicked out of the church.

The accompaniment of the movement by the church probably also had value at a deeper level. The church was not the first to experience the absurdity of apartheid, but when Afrikanerdom felt it, there was a fruitful interaction with the church. Doubts arose out of experience and were then also realised by the church where they were strengthened by the development of theological critique on apartheid. A circular movement took place in which the negative experience of apartheid motivated its theological critique and the latter in its turn strengthened the former.

If the influence of the DRC on the people during the centuries is considered, larger possibilities arise. Did the Christian message of love and respect for all human beings

play a role through the centuries in forming the Afrikaner tendency towards a degree of moderateness and humanness? I would like to believe it.

2.5 When the role of the DRC since 1990 is considered, the view that the ethnic character of the church has not been broken in reality, is strengthened. If the confession of apartheid had been from the heart, one would expect to see a church that moves and sacrifices to re-unite with its family members and that leads its people to make a positive contribution towards building a new nation.

This is not what one finds. The negotiations on the re-unification have been hampered by strong resistance from large parts of the DRC. If there was a real desire to unite, the Belhar Confession would not have kept us apart. Now it seems as if the dominant emotion amongst Afrikaners is that it is painful enough to form a political unity with the rest of the country and that the blacks are making a mess of governing the country – and so they refuse to hand the church over to such a process.

Concerning the new South Africa the church seems rather to reflect the fear and resistance of the Afrikaners than to lead them. During the period before 1990 there was great enthusiasm in the church for apartheid and national security, but now that the other route is being followed on paper, there is very little enthusiasm for it and resistance against it in many quarters.

In what areas can one find enthusiasm? Quite a few that have value in themselves but seem to represent a turning away from the difficult realities of the new South Africa, for instance church growth, a semi charismatic and in other places a meditative spirituality and world mission.

2.6 Real change would have meant that the church was to a certain extent purified of the old attitudes and emotions of Afrikaners concerning Africa so that it was liberated to lead. So far the church has rather played the other role, namely as comforter of its people. It understood the pain and negative feelings of Afrikaners in the new situation and stood by them. This has a certain value like helping Afrikaners to adapt in the new situation, which many do quite well. But the total effect may be that the members are led in the wrong direction because they experience that their negativity is sanctioned.

The theology behind the new formulations of the church is better than the old apartheid theology, but this theology is not put into practice in the new situation. Why not? I think one of the main factors is the kind of religion in the DRC. Had it been a strong, service-oriented, socially responsible religion as our reformed roots should produce, there would have been a chance that the church lead its people. But now we have a religion which to some extent stands at the service of the happiness of the people. Many factors formed it, for instance individualistic pietism since the nineteenth century and competition from the charismatic movement during the latter part of the twentieth century. Afrikanerdom has strong attitudes and feelings, because it finds itself in a difficult situation. It would not be easy to lead them towards joining the new society and the church does not succeed in doing it.

2.7 Apartheid has been a movement away from and against the South African society. It was an unwillingness to accept our situation of being in and part of it and the responsibility it entails. We now need movement towards this society in the sense that Christians play the role of servants and builders in it.

Strong leadership is necessary to accomplish this. The movement away from apartheid was influenced by strong pressures, but there are not such strong pressures to move Afrikaners to join the new South Africa. There are some Afrikaners who consider and would like to opt for this role. Can the church become part of this movement and lead many others in this direction? Strong conviction will be necessary, the kind that only the Spirit of God can give. The Gospel will have to transform us, so that we see our interests as less important than our service. As soon as we have united with the rest of our family, our communion with one another in the uniting church will be a powerful tool of the Spirit to liberate us. I hope that the present year of hope that the church has proclaimed, with its emphasis on service, is a sign that the Spirit is working.