

THE CRISIS IN THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCHES

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YEARS ago, when his was still a lone voice, Professor B. B. Keet predicted that the Afrikaners, because they are a Bible-reading people, would eventually reject the apartheid ideology as unscriptural. Now, at long last, the persistent voice of Scripture is being heard not only by a few individuals within the Church but by the Church itself, while the Word of God is causing an ever widening crack in the thick layers of natural theology which up till now has dominated the Church's thought on race relations. It would seem that the pressure of events has brought into the open the perennial dilemma of whether the Church should acknowledge other sources of divine revelation alongside Scripture, or whether Scripture alone should shape the faith and life of the Church. Apparently the Church is coming to the conclusion that it cannot support a system which contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible.

Before analysing this estimate any further, a few things must be said about the Afrikaans Churches themselves. First, "nation" and "church" share to a very large extent a common history. In all the important crises which have led to the formation of an intense national self-consciousness in the Afrikaner people, the Church has played a decisive role. On the one hand, therefore, any attack on the Church has always been regarded as a national affront, while on the other hand any crisis within the Church will to a greater or lesser extent reflect a crisis within the nation.

In the second place, there does not exist merely one Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. There are three separate denominations bearing more or less the same name, but each possessing its individual tradition and structure. For more than a century the three Churches have gone their different ways, with little or no real contact. More often than not they have been at loggerheads on issues such as which is historically the oldest in South Africa and therefore the 'authentic' Church of the Afrikaners, and whether or not hymns should be sung in church.

These differences have recently been accentuated by the respective attitudes of the three Churches toward the ecumenical movement. The smallest and most conservative of the three (Gereformeerd) is violently opposed to membership of the World Council of Churches. The second largest (Nederduits Hervormd) is a member of the World Council, but only for reasons of expediency, and the unanimous opposition of its delegation to the statement of the Johannesburg Conference is a clear sign that its membership is to be terminated in the near future.

The third and by far the largest of the Dutch Reformed Churches (Nederduitse Gereformeerd) is divided within itself over the issue of affiliation. There are five completely autonomous Synods, of which only two (Cape and Transvaal) are members of the World Council. No decision of any of the five Synods can in any way be regarded as binding on the other Synods, so that unless all five individually agree, it is impossible to speak of a concensus of opinion. Furthermore, as a result of the widespread missionary activities of these Synods, no less than nine so-called daughter (dependant) Churches have come into being among the Africans and Coloured. (It is probable that the five "white" Synods of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk will soon unite. That there is apparently no intention to include the "daughter" Churches in this union is hard to reconcile with the many statements on unity which have been made in the recent past.)

Traditionally the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk has favoured a policy of "separate development". This has, as we have already seen, led to the establishment of separate Churches for the different ethnic groups and the practically complete exclusion of Africans and Coloured from the "white" Churches. In the field of politics, the Bloemfontein Conference of 1950 maintained that total territorial separation of the races was the only possible solution to the racial problem in South Africa. The Conference decided that immediate steps should be taken to bring this separation about and that white South Africa would have to learn to become completely independent of African labour. The apartheid regulations governing the present mixed society could only be condoned, the Conference declared, as interim measures directed at the safeguarding of racial identity. Once the ideal of vertical separation had been reached, these admittedly unfair and discriminatory regulations would automatically disappear.

Underlying this view is the belief that total territorial separation is a practical possibility to be achieved without delay, even though it should require enormous sacrifices from the whites. The corresponding conclusion to be drawn from the Church's view is surely, therefore, that if it becomes clear total separation is *not* possible, then there would be no justification whatsoever for the continuation of discriminatory regulations against the African and Coloured population of South Africa. Strangely, however, despite the evident immorality of an approach which makes the end justify the means, and the dismissal by Dr. Malan—Nationalist Prime Minister from 1948 to 1953—of the concept of total apartheid as politically and economically unworkable, the Church has clung tenaciously to its view. A declaration on the racial situation was published on behalf of the Church in 1957. Drawn up with the help of men like Professors Keet and Ben Marais, the declaration clearly stated that there is no scriptural justification for the separation of 'believers' on grounds of colour or race. Yet, despite this obvious rejection of apartheid within the Church (the declaration was passed by all five Synods), the Church calmly went on practising apartheid as in the past, maintaining that the day would come when total apartheid would be enjoyed. The concept of the total separation of the races into independent States acted as an escape clause, enabling the most fanatic supporters of apartheid to vote for the unity of all believers. This unity would only become operative, of course, when total apartheid was finally and conclusively proved to be unworkable. The racialists within the Church clearly believed that this could never be done.

Now, however, the bubbles are beginning to burst! You can hear them pop in the minds of ministers of the Church as one by one they take a public stand against the discrimination inherent in apartheid. A young missionary in the Cape, David Botha, has published a book, '*Die Opkoms van die Derde Stand*' (The Rise of the Third Estate) in which he rips to pieces the arguments in favour of the "separate development" of the Coloured. In '*Delayed Action*', eleven prominent theologians have published their aversion to apartheid as practised in South African society. Meanwhile study groups, under the active leadership of men like Rev. C. B. Naudé of Johannesburg and Rev. A. J. van Wyk of Stellenbosch, met and prepared reports, which provided the substance for the Statement issued by the Johannesburg Conference of December, 1960. In Johannesburg

a group of young ministers from the different Churches meet regularly to discuss and decide on their responsibility in the racial situation. Clearly, enough is happening to make the men in government feel distinctly nervous. The Church is influential enough within the nation to bring about a radical change in political practice.

There are certain aspects of this development within the Church which need stressing:—

- As a result of its tremendous missionary effort, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk feels a special responsibility towards its African and Coloured members, and it will not be a party to any indignities which through apartheid permanently handicap these members.
- Approaches to the Government through private delegations have proved futile. Dr. Verwoerd and his Cabinet are obviously prepared to ignore any advice which clashes with their ideology, even though it comes from leading members of the Church.
- A strong desire on the part of N.G.K. leaders to come to an agreement with the English Churches on cardinal points of principle may lead to a new alignment of the Protestant Churches in South Africa to replace the existing Christian Council, of which the N.G.K. is not a member. This will undoubtedly lead to more effective action by the Churches than has hitherto been possible.
- The pressure of the intellectually influential, Afrikanerdom-based South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) on the thought of the Church cannot be denied. Many of the clauses of the Johannesburg Statement are the direct result of some new thinking within SABRA itself.
- The Johannesburg Statement cannot be regarded as the official view of the Church until it has been ratified by the Synods. This will not happen without a hard and perhaps prolonged struggle.
- If it does happen, this will mean another long and laborious process to gain acceptance for the Statement among the ordinary members of the Church.
- The Statement itself is still hampered by the fateful 'escape clause': "a policy of differentiation can be defended from the Christian point of view; it provides the only realistic solution to the problems of race relations and is therefore in the best interests of the various population groups".

As in the past, the retention of this clause will probably have the effect of indefinitely suspending all the constructive aspects of the Statement.

- The belief that apartheid can be theologically grounded is still very strong. '*Die Kerkbode*', official organ of the whole Church, is a vigorous proponent of this line of thought.
- The attitude of the Cape organ of the Nationalist Party, '*Die Burger*', is a pointer to the strong element in the Party's leadership which thinks like the Church, especially over the treatment of the Coloured people.
- The Nederduits Hervormde Kerk, by publishing its own minority statement at the Johannesburg Conference, has unequivocally come down on the side of the Government. Its attitude after the Conference can be summed up as follows: "We are the real defenders of Afrikanerdom, and the N.G.K. leaders have behaved treasonably". There is no doubt that in this way they hope to get a large number of the die-hard laymen of the N.G.K. to join their Church. It would be unfortunate if this caused the more liberal leaders within the N.G.K. to hold back.

There are undoubtedly many hopeful signs that at last the Dutch Reformed Church is realising that it cannot be the handmaid of an ideology which makes unChristian demands upon its supporters. One of the most hopeful of these signs is the number of letters from ministers and laymen which regularly appear in '*Die Kerkbode*', protesting against developments which are logical aspects of apartheid but contrary to Scripture. Once the Word of God in all its purity seizes hold of the minds of men, there is no possibility any longer of a compromise with its enemies.

WHITE TO MOVE?

PAUL FOSTER

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