

**The Dutch Reformed Church from  
*Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*<sup>1</sup> to *Church and Society*:<sup>2</sup>  
the struggle goes on**

*Johan M van der Merwe*

Department of Church History and Church Polity  
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

*Abstract*

In the recent history of the Dutch Reformed Church two documents played an important role. The documents were *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* of 1974 and *Church and Society* of 1986. The first document stated the policy of the church on apartheid and defended the policy on biblical grounds. The second document constituted the first step the church took away from the policy of apartheid. The aim of this article is to follow the journey which the Dutch Reformed Church undertook from *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* to *Church and Society*. It starts with the origins of *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, describing how the document's roots go all the way back to the Cottesloe consultation of 1960. It also focuses on the reception of *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* before describing four important impulses that played a major part in forcing the Dutch Reformed Church to rethink its policy on apartheid. These impulses were the Reformed day Witness of 1980, the Open Letter of 1982, the meeting of the World Alliance of Churches in Ottawa, Canada 1982 and the status confessionis of the Dutch Reformed Missions Church in October 1982 which resulted in the Confession of Belhar. These impulses led to the decision during the 1982 General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to revise *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*. The outcome of this decision was the acceptance of a new document called *Church and Society* in 1986. The article highlights the important decisions in this new document which constituted a break with the former biblical founding of apartheid in *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*. Open church doors, open membership, no biblical prohibition of mixed marriages and critical voice against apartheid, are examples of a new policy which showed that the Dutch Reformed Church was on a different road. The reception of this new document confirmed this by bringing the church in turmoil which led to a schism in the church and the founding of the Afrikaanse Protetsantse Kerk in 1987. The struggle of the Dutch Reformed Church did however not stop with the acceptance of *Church and Society* and the reaction of 1987. In 1990 the General Synod of the church confirmed the policy of the church as stated in *Church and Society* of 1986 but also made certain revisions which stated the church's critique on apartheid much clearer. The 1990 document stated that "the church made the error of allowing forced separation and division of peoples in its own circle, to be considered a biblical narrative". The unjust system of apartheid was clearly condemned by the synod and although it also declared that not everything could be branded as wrong and inhuman. The article concludes by accepting that *Church and Society* was not the perfect document and certainly not the perfect answer the world demanded from the Dutch Reformed Church. It was however a small step in the right direction of a new journey, away from the biblical founding of apartheid towards justice and reconciliation, a journey which led to the Rustenburg Church conference in 1990, the so called General Synod of reconciliation in 1994 and onwards, a journey on which the struggle continues.

**Introduction**

History will show that the latter part of the 20th century in South Africa will always be remembered as a time of intense struggle. While this struggle for justice was mainly political, the church was not excluded from it. This statement is supported by John de Gruchy's groundbreaking work: *The Church Struggle in South Africa*.<sup>3</sup> In the foreword of this book, Archbishop Desmond Tutu defined the goal of the churches' struggle as follows: "The struggle of the church in South Africa was fundamentally how to bring about a more just society where

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<sup>1</sup> The Afrikaans title is: Ras, Volk en Nasie in die lig van die Skrif.

<sup>2</sup> The Afrikaans title is: Kerk en Samelewing.

<sup>3</sup> De Gruchy, JW. 2004. *The Church struggle in South Africa*. London: SCM.

differences of race, colour and culture were seen to be irrelevant and without theological significance.”<sup>4</sup> De Gruchy himself defines it further by saying:

What kept the struggle against apartheid alive, was not any romantic optimism that all will eventually work out for the good, but a ‘hope against hope’ that engendered action. Such hope is unprepared to accept things as they are because it is founded on the conviction that this is not how the world is meant to be and that good will triumph over evil. Keeping such hope alive is at the heart of Christian political witness, a hope that celebrates every achievement of justice, no matter how small, en route to the coming of God’s kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

While this struggle was in full swing, with many churches<sup>6</sup> partaking in it, the white Afrikaans-speaking churches were rightfully seen as supporters of the policy of apartheid;<sup>7</sup> not struggling against apartheid, but doing their utmost to support the policy on biblical grounds. This does not, however, mean that the struggle bypassed the Dutch Reformed Church. Although it was not initially a struggle against apartheid but rather a struggle to support it, a struggle to change the policy of the church gradually became evident. As the struggle against apartheid intensified a struggle also started within the Dutch Reformed Church. This led the church on a new road away from apartheid. The intense struggle that also took place in the Dutch Reformed Church becomes evident when we study the reception of different important documents from the 1970s and 1980s. The aim of this paper is to show how the policy of the Dutch Reformed Church changed from *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture (Ras, Volk en Nasie)*<sup>8</sup> to *Church and Society (Kerk en Samelewing)*.<sup>9</sup> In order to do so, I will start with a short overview of the policy of the church as stated in *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*. Secondly, I will look at important impulses that played a major part in forcing the church to rethink its policy. Thirdly, I will give a short overview of the most important changes in *Church and Society* as well as the reaction to *Church and Society* before concluding that although the policy of the Dutch Reformed Church has officially changed, the struggle still continues.

### **Human relations and the South African scene in the Light of Scripture**

#### *The origins of Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*

To understand the content of *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, it is important to study its roots, which can be traced back all the way to the Cottesloe Consultation that took place in December 1960.

The fact that Cottesloe was a call to the Dutch Reformed Church that could not be ignored was first realised by the Cape Synod of the Church. During the 1961 synod, the circuit of Cape Town requested the synod to appoint a permanent commission for the study of race relations.<sup>10</sup> The appointment of this commission was the first important step in formulating an answer. In 1965 the commission tabled a report about the church and race relations in South Africa. This report became the vehicle which transported the call from the Cottesloe Consultation from synod to synod and kept the discussion about race and relations between races in the Dutch Reformed Church on the agenda.<sup>11</sup> It also formed the basis of a report tabled at the General Synod of 1966, before another revision was tabled at the Cape Synod of 1969.<sup>12</sup> In 1970, the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church decided to appoint a permanent commission for the study of race and ecumenical issues.<sup>13</sup> The report from this commission, which was approved by the General Synod in 1974<sup>14</sup> was published in 1975 under the title: *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*.<sup>15</sup> The fact that this was the first official answer to the call of Cottesloe was confirmed by a remark from FE O’ Brein Geldenhuys.<sup>16</sup> He wrote:

<sup>4</sup> De Gruchy, *The Church struggle*, p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> De Gruchy, *The Church struggle*, p. xiv.

<sup>6</sup> It was especially the “English-speaking churches” that opposed the policy of apartheid.

<sup>7</sup> The Afrikaans churches were the *Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk*, the *Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika* and the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika*.

<sup>8</sup> The complete Afrikaans title is: *Ras, Volk en Nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif*.

<sup>9</sup> The complete more commonly known Afrikaans title is: *Kerk en Samelewing: ‘n Getuienis van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk*.

<sup>10</sup> *Handelinge van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika*. 1961. P.51.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Merwe, JM. 1990. *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Kerk en Samelewing as beleidsstukke van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk – ‘n kerkhistoriese studie*. Ongepubliseerde proefskrif. Universiteit van Pretoria. p.35.

<sup>12</sup> *Handelinge van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika*. 1969. P.193.

<sup>13</sup> *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk*. 1970. p.785.

<sup>14</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> O’ Brein Geldenhuys was the first director of Ecumenical issues in the Dutch Reformed Church

With *Human relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* under my arm, I went to Europe to present it to all the important protestant churches in England, the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland. The request to all of them was: This is the point of view of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) about the South African scene. Please study it and let us discuss it.<sup>17</sup>

The content of the document was nothing else than a confirmation of the church's support for the policy of the National Party government, giving *separate development*<sup>18</sup> a biblical foundation.<sup>19</sup> *Mixed marriages* were undesirable and forbidden and common worship was permissible only in special situations.

*The reception of Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*

The reception of *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* inside the Dutch Reformed Church as well as outside the church defines the struggle which took part in the church. Although *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* supported the government policy of separate development or apartheid, it was nevertheless still severely criticised by conservative groups in the church, as being too liberal and moving away from the true biblical point of view and the well known policy of the church.<sup>20</sup> It was especially the paragraph about fellowship and common worship which was met with fierce resistance. It reads as follows:

Spiritual communion or fellowship is experienced inter alia where believers are gathered in fellowship with Christ through His Word and Spirit. This fellowship may also be practised on occasion where believers from various churches are gathered to worship together. How this should be effected in practice, is the responsibility of the local church council.<sup>21</sup>

Formal negative reaction, saying that *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* was too liberal, came from congregations, circuits and regional synods of the church.<sup>22</sup> That this document was no answer at all was heard clearly from churches outside South Africa. Although there were also voices criticising the document from a more liberal side from within South Africa,<sup>23</sup> it was the protestant churches in Europe that tore the document apart.

The *Gereformeerde Kerken* in the Netherlands reacted by denouncing the document. One of the major points of critique was the fact that the document sanctioned the political policy of separate development and gave it a biblical foundation.<sup>24</sup> The Swiss Federation of Reformed Churches<sup>25</sup> invited a delegation of the Dutch Reformed Church to a conference in Louverain.<sup>26</sup> During this conference it became clear that the main points of criticism against the policy adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church were the interpretation of Scripture, the prophetic calling of the church, separate development, and a large dualism between theology and practice in the document.<sup>27</sup> After their visit to Switzerland the delegation went to Germany to meet with delegates of the *Reformierte Bund*. In a report which was published after the discussions the Bund declared: "We can therefore, only regard the Nederduitsch Gereformeerde (NG) Evert Beukes report of 1974 as a theological confirmation of the present political system in South Africa, in which the separation of races means in practice the dominion of the one and the discrimination, denial of rights and exploitation of the other."<sup>28</sup> Serious questions were also asked about the use of scripture in the document. A press release from the *Reformierte Bund* on 22 September 1979 summed up the dilemma of the Dutch Reformed Church:

Against the background of the terrible consequences of the Homeland policy, against the background of the news we get about torture and banning, against a background of a church divided according to race, we have asked their advocating for the disadvantages of the oppressed

<sup>17</sup> O' Brein Geldenhuys, FE. 1982. *In die Stroomversnellings*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg:81.

<sup>18</sup> Separate development was the term used for the policy that became known as apartheid.

<sup>19</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 167.

<sup>20</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 117–135.

<sup>21</sup> *Ras, Volk en Nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif*. Kaapstad: Nasionale pers:85.

<sup>22</sup> The church council of Migdol in the Western Transvaal, The circuit of Piet Potgietersrus and the Synod of Western Transvaal act as examples of the reaction against the decisions of the General Synod as stated in *Ras, Volk en Nasie* concerning mixed marriages and common worship: Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 130–136.

<sup>23</sup> Dr Allan Boesak was one of the theologians that criticised the decisions of the synod and warned that a major confrontation was on hand. *Die Burger*, 22 Oktober 1974. p.1.

<sup>24</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p.167.

<sup>25</sup> The Swiss Federation of Reformed churches published the document: "Theology – Advocate or Critic of Apartheid? A critical study of the Landman Rapport.

<sup>26</sup> The conference took place from 2–6 April 1979 in Le Louverain, Switzerland

<sup>27</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p.190.

<sup>28</sup> *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk*. 1982. p.157.

and their involvement in the struggle for church unity. Our dialogue partner could not give a satisfactory answer, because they had to hold on in general to the present official line of the Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) as outlined in the 1974 Synod report: 'Human relations and the South African scene in the Light of Scripture'.<sup>29</sup>

The Protestant churches not only severely criticised the document but by 1982 they have severed all relations with the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>30</sup>

It is clear that the answer formulated by the Dutch Reformed Church did not make the grade. Severe criticism from conservative groups in the church and the rejection of "Human Relations" by the reformed churches in Europe made it important to return to the drawing board. It was, however, not only critique against the document that led to a decision to review the answer of the Dutch Reformed Church. New impulses also played an important role.

### **Important new impulses**

#### *The Reformed day Witness*

One of the important impulses which stimulated the Dutch Reformed Church to formulate a new answer was the Reformed day Witness of 1980. Not only did it influence the way of thought in the church, it also showed the enormity of the struggle which took place in the church in search for a new answer. Signed by eight theologians<sup>31</sup> from the Dutch Reformed Church, the Witness was published on 5 November 1980 in *Die Kerkbode*, official newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>32</sup> The Witness called on the church to answer to its prophetic calling in a South Africa which became more and more polarised, making mention "of the divine calling of reconciliation on a meaningful and credible basis in a situation of increasing tension and polarisation between population groups in the country". It also called on the church to strive for "the elimination of loveless and racist attitudes and actions which caused hurtful incidents" and to "a form of church unity in which the oneness of believers adhering to the same confession can take a visible form." It also made mention of the fact that the Dutch Reformed Church could make a God honouring contribution to a: "deeper consciousness of the demands of God's Word under which both the authorities and their subjects are called to reform the present order, so that every individual can be given the scope to realise their potential as the bearer of the image of God."<sup>33</sup>

The Witness caused a storm in the church which lasted for several months. Newspapers were flooded with letters, statements and counterstatements. Although some researchers like Els<sup>34</sup> likes to point out that the Witness was "too little too late", it was the start of a sincere struggle in the Dutch Reformed Church which would eventually lead to a meaningful answer to Cottesloe.<sup>35</sup>

#### *The Open Letter*

A second important impulse, which gave momentum to the struggle in the Dutch Reformed Church, was the publication of the Open Letter on 9 June 1982.<sup>36</sup> Signed by 123 ministers and theologians from the Dutch Reformed Church family, the letter criticised apartheid legislation and pledged themselves to work and pray for justice in society.<sup>37</sup> The Letter stressed that: "the primary task of the church in our country is the ministry of reconciliation in Christ." It went further by saying: "reconciliation includes a prophetic Witness in relation to the entire life of society and therefore the church dare not remain silent on those matters of moral decay, family disintegration and discrimination."<sup>38</sup>

Els<sup>39</sup> is correct when he says that: "the DRC establishment was staggered by the Open Letter." It was met by fierce critique from official Dutch Reformed Church circles. Although nothing was said about the content of the letter, the critique was focused on the method which was followed and it was stressed that according to church policy the letter could not be received. It was further stressed that the timing and publication of the letter

<sup>29</sup> Handeling, 1982, p. 157.

<sup>30</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, p. 205.

<sup>31</sup> The Witness was signed by CFA Borchardt, HJB Combrinck, BA Muller, WP Esterhuysen, JA Heyns, WD Jonker, HW Rossouw and AB du Toit.

<sup>32</sup> Die Kerkbode, 5 November 1980, p. 605.

<sup>33</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, p. 203.

<sup>34</sup> Els, CW, 2008, *Reconciliation in South Africa: The role of the Afrikaans Churches*. Unpublished PhD. University of Pretoria, p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> The reaction to the Reformed day witness and the way in which the theologians were handled in the Transvaal emphasise the ferocity of the struggle that started. For more detail see Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, p. 235–260.

<sup>36</sup> Die Kerkbode 9 Junie 1982, p.1.

<sup>37</sup> Els, *Reconciliation in South Africa*, p. 85.

<sup>38</sup> Els, *Reconciliation in South Africa*, p.86.

<sup>39</sup> Els, *Reconciliation in South Africa*, p. 85.

was a well planned move to influence the General Synod which would convene later in 1982.<sup>40</sup> Although there was a solid wall of opposition from the Dutch Reformed Church, an indication of the overwhelming sentiments in the church, the letter was a movement to a new way of thinking. The voices of the Reformed day Witness were becoming a chorus with the Open Letter and could not be ignored any longer.

*The World Alliance of Reformed Churches: Ottawa*

Gaum is correct when he says: "In certain respects 1982 was a decisive year."<sup>41</sup> Two important events took place in the second part of 1982 which acted as important third and fourth impulses that influenced the DRC in its struggle to a new policy. The third impulse was the meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) which took place in Ottawa from 17–27 August 1982. WARC was the oldest and largest reformed ecumenical body in the world<sup>42</sup>. On the basis that the Dutch Reformed Church had attempted to justify apartheid by misusing the gospel and the reformed confession, their membership was suspended. This was the result of the report "Racism and South Africa"<sup>43</sup> in which it was stated that the "promises of God for His world and for His church are in direct contradiction to apartheid ideals and practices."<sup>44</sup>

The report stated further:

That this situation constitutes a status confessionis for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardising the integrity of our common confession as Reformed Churches. We declare with black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.<sup>45</sup> In the second part of the report the general council stated that it had a "special responsibility to continue to denounce the sin of racism in South Africa as expressed in apartheid".

It stated further:

It is institutionalized in the laws, policies and structures of the nation, it has resulted in horrendous injustice, suffering, exploitation and degradation of millions of black Africans for whom Christ died, and it has been given moral and theological justification by the white Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa which are members of WARC. Therefore, the general council, reluctantly and painfully is compelled to suspend the Nederduitshe Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika from the privileges of membership in WARC.<sup>46</sup>

Reaction to the suspension confirms that this was a major impulse which forced the church in a new direction. Gaum stated it correctly when he wrote: "The General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in October 1982 was shaken by the WARC decision and although the majority of synod delegates requested that the Dutch Reformed Church withdraw completely from WARC, the two-thirds majority required for such a decision could not be obtained."<sup>47</sup> This statement of Gaum is underlined by the individual remarks from the delegates to Ottawa. Prof JA Heyns identified the gap between policy and practice as the main problem,<sup>48</sup> rev JE Potgieter stressed the necessity for serious introspection<sup>49</sup> while dr P Rossouw stated that Ottawa was not the end, but a new beginning<sup>50</sup>. Dr WD Jonker summed it all up by saying: "It is now important that we distance ourselves from every form of racism, not because of Ottawa, but because racism is a sin."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p.307.

<sup>41</sup> Gaum, FM. 1997. *Die verhaal van die Ned Geref Kerk se REIS MET APARTHEID*. Wellington: Boland drukpers. p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Gaum, *Reis met Apartheid*. p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 330.

<sup>44</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 334.

<sup>45</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 335.

<sup>46</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 338.

<sup>47</sup> Gaum, *Reis met Apartheid*. p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 356.

<sup>49</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 356.

<sup>50</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 356.

<sup>51</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, p. 356.

*The Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the status confessionis*

The fourth important impulse came from the Dutch Reformed Mission church when the synod of the church reconfirmed its 1978 decision that apartheid (separate development) was a sin, that the moral and theological justification thereof was a mockery of the gospel and that its consistent disobedience to the Word of God was heresy.<sup>52</sup> The Synod said in 1982 that it had no choice “but with the deepest regret, to accuse the Dutch Reformed Church of theological heresy and idolatry in the light of the DRC theological formulated stance and the implementation thereof in practice.”<sup>53</sup> The synod went one step further and declared that the situation in South Africa, in line with the resolution of WARC, created status confessionis. In a letter to the DRC the Dutch Reformed Mission Church elucidated a status confessionis by saying “that we regard this as a matter on which it is impossible to differ without seriously endangering the integrity of our communal confession as reformed churches.”<sup>54</sup> DJ Smit wrote that the expression status confessionis meant that:

A Christian, a group of Christians, a church group or a group of churches judges that a situation has arisen, a moment of truth has come, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most basic confession concerning the Christian gospel, is at stake, so they feel obliged to testify and act against that situation.<sup>55</sup>

Although a status confessionis does not always imply a new article of faith, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church judged in 1982 that it had to proceed to the formulation of a confession. A draft confession was tabled before the synod on Wednesday 6 October 1982. Four years later it was adopted as an article of faith by the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church under the title: The Confession of Belhar.

WD Jonker summed the situation up correctly by saying: “This brought the DRC to an unavoidable situation ... I was convinced that the DRC was put in a position where it has to take a serious decision.”<sup>56</sup> The Dutch Reformed Church had no other choice but to revise *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*. The first answer to Cottesloe met a dead end and a new answer had to be formulated. This important decision was taken during the General Synod of the DRC in October 1982 and a commission was appointed to do the important work.<sup>57</sup>

**A new document: *Church and society***

*The birth of a new document*

The report of the commission that was appointed at the meeting of the General Synod in 1982 was tabled in 1986.<sup>58</sup> This new policy document on race relations in South Africa was the result of four years of intense discussion and thought. It also confirms the struggle that raged in the church. This becomes evident when studying the concept report that was tabled in the synod. Differences among committee members resulted in minority standpoints in the report. Paragraph 269 serves as a perfect example. The report of the commission read: “*The biblical teaching on church unity and the reformed tradition on the visible unity of the church calls us to a more visible form of church unity in the family of Dutch Reformed churches.*” The minority standpoint of prof DA du Toit and prof AB du Toit replaced the word *call* by *demand*. Visible church unity was, according to them, not only a biblical calling, but a biblical demand.<sup>59</sup> Paragraph 278 on mixed marriages serves as a second example. The report of the commission read:

The Scriptures do not forbid racially mixed marriages. In its pastoral work, however, the church must give due warning that social circumstances, as well as ideological, philosophical, cultural and socioeconomic differences and other factors, may cause serious tensions. Where such marriages do take place, those involved must receive pastoral guidance in all aspects of marriage.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Gaum, *Reis met Apartheid*. p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> Handeling van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Sendingkerk. 1982. p. 602.

<sup>54</sup> Gaum, *Reis met Apartheid*. p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> Cloete, GD & Smit, DJ. 1984. *'n Oomblik van Waarheid*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg. p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> Jonker, WD. 1998. *Selfs die kerk kan verander*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg. p. 162.

<sup>57</sup> Handeling van die Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk. 1986. p. 1201.

<sup>58</sup> Els, *Reconciliation in South Africa*. p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 535.

<sup>60</sup> Kerk en Samelewing: 'n Getuienis van die Ned Geref Kerk. p. 61.

A minority standpoint tabled by three conservative members of the commission, namely rev JE Potgieter, rev DJ Viljoen and dr DCG Fourie read "amended the proposal of the commission by: "Because of this the Dutch Reformed Church regards mixed marriages in our current circumstances as extremely undesirable."<sup>61</sup> This division among commission members and the difference of opinion set the tone for the reception of the report in the synod and in the church. It also shows that the birth of this new policy document was a difficult process which vindicates the standpoint that the Dutch Reformed Church indeed went through an intense struggle in order to move away from the policy of *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*.

### **The content of *Church and Society***

This becomes even clearer when the content of the rest of the document is studied. Gaum is, therefore, correct when he states: "With the adoption of the policy document *Church and Society* in 1986, the General Synod of 1986 firmly moved away from certain views contained in *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* and also fell into line with a resolution taken by the Western Cape Synod three years earlier."<sup>62</sup> In the introduction social concerns were discussed and the religious scene in South Africa was examined. This was followed by basic Scriptural principles regarding the Bible as the "yardstick" of the church and its focus on the Kingdom of God. In the following chapters the nature and calling of the church were discussed, followed by the prophetic task of the church. The role of the church in group relations led to an ethical discussion on Christian behaviour before the document concluded with a practical description.<sup>63</sup>

Concerning apartheid, the following was decided:

Following the reflection that has taken place through the years in church periodicals, conferences, committees and synods concerning the policy which became known as apartheid, the conviction has gradually grown that a forced separation and division of peoples cannot be considered a Biblical imperative. The attempt to justify such an injunction as derived from the Bible must be recognised as an error and rejected.

and:

The Dutch Reformed Church is convinced that the application of apartheid as a political and social system by which human dignity is adversely affected, and whereby one particular group is detrimentally suppressed by another can not be accepted on Christian ethical grounds because it contravenes the very essence of neighbourly love and righteousness and inevitably the human dignity involved."<sup>64</sup>

With this decision, Scriptural grounds for apartheid were rejected. The synod went further and declared that the doors of the Dutch Reformed Church were now open to people of all races. Membership was also open.<sup>65</sup>

Concerning mixed marriages the following was resolved:

The Scriptures do not forbid racially mixed marriages. In its pastoral work, however, the church must give due warning that social circumstances, as well as ideological, philosophical, cultural and socioeconomic differences and other factors, may cause serious tensions. Where such marriages do take place, those involved must receive pastoral guidance in all aspects of marriage.<sup>66</sup>

### **The reception of *Church and Society***

This was an important new attempt to answer the question raised at Cottesloe. The full scale storm which broke loose confirms that this was a new course but that the course was not acceptable to all the members of the church. It led to an immense struggle in the church. As the intensity of the storm grew, even the Moderature, with the exception of Heyns turned back by saying "nothing has changed."<sup>67</sup> It was especially two decisions which were in the centre of the storm. Paragraph 270 stated that membership of the Dutch Reformed Church are now open to members of all races.<sup>68</sup> Paragraph 273 stated that church doors were now open to members of all races for

<sup>61</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 566.

<sup>62</sup> Gaum, *Reis met Apartheid*. p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Hofmeyr, JW (red). 1991. *History of the church in South Africa: a document source book*. Pretoria: UNISA. p.378.

<sup>64</sup> Gaum, *Reis met Apartheid*. p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> The Star 23 October 1986. p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Kerk en Samelewing*. 1986. p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Meiring, PJG 1999. p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> *Kerk en Samelewing*. 1986. p. 46.

common worship.<sup>69</sup> Meetings and protest meetings were organised in congregations and towns. Even politicians got involved. AP Treurnicht, leader of the Conservative Party, said at the annual congress of the party that brown and black people could now become ministers in Dutch Reformed Church congregations.<sup>70</sup> This did not help to calm emotions and it soon became clear that a church split was becoming a reality. At a meeting of 2 500 Dutch Reformed Church members which took place on 28 November 1986 in Pretoria, it was decided to appoint a committee to look into the possibility of founding a new church.<sup>71</sup> This was the first step and despite all the efforts from the Dutch Reformed Church, a new church was founded on 27 June 1987. It became known as the Afrikaans Protestant Church, a church for white Afrikaners only.<sup>72</sup> 19 ministers and more than 5 000 members of the Dutch Reformed Church left to join the new church.<sup>73</sup> The church split confirms that the struggle in the Dutch Reformed Church was sincere and intense. Heyns described it as: “one of the darkest days in the history of the DRC”.<sup>74</sup> Although the reaction on *Church and Society* created a major storm in the Dutch Reformed Church it also laid the foundation for the General Synod of 1990.

### **The General Synod of 1990 and further**

The General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church met in Bloemfontein from 16–25 October. Els is correct when he writes: “In the history of the DRC this meeting will be known for its dramatic decisions on apartheid in South Africa. It was the culmination of a process that started in 1978 with the adoption of the document *Human relations in Light of Scripture* (HRS). This was revised and in 1986 the document *Church and Society* (CS) was adopted as the official policy of the DRC. The synod of 1986 opened the way for discussions of *Church and Society* and asked members to send their grievances and objections as well as ‘better formulations’ so that it could be revised and presented to synod in 1990.”<sup>75</sup> During the synod certain changes were made to aspects of *Church and Society* and it was adopted as the official decision on race relations.

The synod declared the following:

282. The Dutch Reformed Church, however, acknowledges that for too long it has adjudged the policy of apartheid on the above named grounds too abstractly and theoretically, and therefore too uncritically.
283. While the Dutch Reformed Church, over the years, seriously and persistently sought the will of God and his Word for our society, the church made the error of allowing forced separation and division of peoples in its own circle, to be considered a biblical narrative. The Dutch Reformed Church should have distanced itself much earlier from this view and admits and confess its neglect.
285. Any system which in practice functions in this way is unacceptable in the Light of Scripture and the Christian conscience and must be rejected as sinful. Any attempt by the church to defend such a system biblically and ethically, must be seen as a serious fallacy, that is to say it is in conflict with the Bible.
286. The Dutch Reformed Church wants to state clearly that it condemns all forms of discrimination and the suppression of peoples and wholeheartedly desires that all will be free to share in the privileges of the fatherland and will receive reasonable and equal opportunities to acquire prosperity and riches.<sup>76</sup>

The unjust system of apartheid was clearly condemned by the synod and although the synod also declared that not everything can be branded as wrong and inhuman. *Church and Society* reached the end of its road at the general synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1994 when the synod decided: The general synod does not see *Church and Society* as a document that needs revision. The church now lives in a new situation where macro social ethical issues need her attention.<sup>77</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The move from *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* to *Church and Society* left the Dutch Reformed Church wounded. More than 8 000 members left the church to form a new Afrikaans

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<sup>69</sup> *Kerk en Samelewing*. 1986. p. 46

<sup>70</sup> *Die Burger* 25 Oktober 1986. p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> *Die Burger* 29 November 1986. p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 677.

<sup>73</sup> Van der Merwe, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. p. 682.

<sup>74</sup> *Die Kerkbode* 22 Julie 1987. p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Els, *Reconciliation in South Africa*. p. 93.

<sup>76</sup> *Kerk en Samelewing* 1990 – ‘n Getuienis van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk. Bloemfontein: NG Sendingpers. p. 39–40.

<sup>77</sup> *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk*. 1994. p. 578.



church, the *Afrikaans Protestant Church*. This schism confirms the intense struggle that the church went through to break with the old policy as formulated in *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*.

In an evaluation of *Church and Society*, Johann Kinghorn is correct when he says the following:

The difference between *Ras, Volk en Nasie* and CS<sup>78</sup> is the difference between 1974 and 1986. It is the difference between a self-assured ideology and an ideology which is under siege. What immediately strikes one is that, compared to *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, CS is much more reticent in its style of argument as well as in its conclusions. There is an obvious attempt not to emulate the extreme doctrinal approach of previous documents. The result is that CS shows a healthy interest in the 'realities' of South Africa and comes across as a document which is stronger on ethics than *Ras, Volk en Nasie*.

He states further:

Even so, if only for the time being, one has to give CS its due. The stronger emphasis on an ethical approach is often evident – most conspicuously in paragraphs 304–308 where, inter alia, 'the application of apartheid' to which we have referred, is rejected. Another example is the inclusion for the first time of a number of positive statements concerning some human rights.<sup>79</sup>

He then goes on to put his finger on the weak spot of *Church and Society* by saying:

Unfortunately, however, CS is not a truly serious attempt to interpret the South African situation ethically. Having rejected the 'application of apartheid', CS nowhere, not even remotely, tries to ascertain if and how apartheid was applied in such a way that injustice was done to other people. No consideration is given to even the possibility that apartheid might inherently be a *system* of injustice. It is inconceivable that this fact simply escaped the attention of those who drafted CS. In a context in which the international community, the ecumenical church, by far the majority of Christians within South Africa, the confession of Belhar and the Kairos document unanimously press for answers to these questions, it is impossible that the DRC could be unaware of it. The omission of these questions and of any attempt to solve them, points to the fact that the DRC was not prepared to question its own fundamental assumptions, nor was it prepared to question the fundamental assumptions of the policy of apartheid. For this reason no definition of apartheid can be found in CS. Thus, what the DRC rejected in paragraph 305 and 306 was not the system of apartheid, but only some *effects* of apartheid.<sup>80</sup>

De Gruchy rightfully pointed out that:

The new position of the NGK was totally inadequate, in fact it was nothing more than a theological rationalisation of the government's own attempt to reform apartheid. But apartheid was beyond reform; it was a heresy that had to be rejected as contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ. There could be no compromise, no cheap reconciliation, only the dismantling of apartheid and everything that sustained it.<sup>81</sup>

Looking back, *Church and Society* was not a perfect document. What it was, was the result and proof of a struggle in the Dutch Reformed Church that lasted for decades and that is still going on. With *Church and Society* the Dutch Reformed Church took the first small step on a new road, a road which led to the Church conference in Rustenburg where the Dutch Reformed Church confessed that apartheid was a sin.<sup>82</sup> The road then led to the 1994 general synod where Mr Nelson Mandela challenged the synod to go further on the road of reconciliation.<sup>83</sup> It took the church to the Truth and Reconciliation commission in 1997,<sup>84</sup> back to the World

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<sup>78</sup> CS is Church and Society, Afrikaans: Kerk en Samelewing

<sup>79</sup> Kinghorn, J. 1990. On the Theology of Church and society in the DRC. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 70, (March 1990), 21–36.

<sup>80</sup> Kinghorn, J. 1990. On the Theology of Church and society in the DRC. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 70, (March 1990), 21–36.

<sup>81</sup> De Gruchy, *The Church struggle*. p. 195.

<sup>82</sup> Van der Merwe, JM. 2011. Kerk en Samelewing 25 jaar later: Was die kool die sous werd? *NGTT* vol 52 no 3&4 2011. [Accessed: 20 February 2012].

<sup>83</sup> Handeling van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk, 1994.

<sup>84</sup> Meiring, PJG. 1999. Chronicle of the truth commission: a journey through the past and present into the future of South Africa. Vanderbijlpark: Carpe Diem.

Alliance of reformed churches in 1998<sup>85</sup> and eventually to the watershed decision of 2011<sup>86</sup> to start the process of accepting the Belhar confession as part of the confessional basis of the church. Is the struggle over? If we take the words of Desmond Tutu that the struggle of the church in South Africa is fundamentally about how to bring about a more just society where differences of race, colour and culture were seen to be irrelevant and without theological significance, seriously, the struggle will and must go on, not only in formal church meetings and synods, but also in the hearts of every member of the Dutch Reformed Church.

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<sup>85</sup> Van der Merwe, JM. 2011. Kerk en Samelewing 25 jaar later: Was die kool die sous werd? *NGTT* vol 52 no 3&4 2011. [Accessed: 20 February 2012].

<sup>86</sup> Handeling van die Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk. 2011 at <http://www.ngkerk.org.za>. [Accessed: 27 April 2012].