

# Afrikaner Origins and Neo-Calvinism

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By the time the Apartheid system was overthrown, the world community was unanimous in condemning the remaining vestiges of systemic racism which had characterized European colonization since the earliest expeditions in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Dutch East India Company (DEIC) had established a settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. The official religion of the DEIC was the Dutch Calvinist Canons of Dort (1618-1619).<sup>2</sup> The Afrikaners<sup>3</sup> maintained their religion through various branches of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), which exists to the present. Some have attributed the Afrikaners' domineering tendencies to their Calvinist heritage, rooted in a strong Cultural Mandate. However, the Apartheid system was established by numerous factors, not merely prejudice inherent in Dutch Calvinism. First, the Afrikaners' heritage was hardened by constant threat both from Europe and Africa. Second, it was likely not the first wave of Calvinism which determined segregation, but rather the application of a second wave (Neo-Calvinism, or Kuyperianism) which was misapplied to a foreign situation. I will explore these dynamics through three periods of its history: Dutch (1652-1795), British (1795-1931) and Afrikaner (1931-1995).<sup>4</sup>

Concurrent with the DEIC's global expansion, the Dutch nation was fighting for independence from Spain, a vastly superior opponent. Yet the Dutch were able to unify and concentrate all of their energy in warding off the Spanish (1568-

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<sup>2</sup> W.A. De Klerk *The Puritans in Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1975), 6.

<sup>3</sup>South Africans of Dutch ancestry, otherwise known as "Boers."

<sup>4</sup> These divisions are broadly based and simplistic, especially given the Afrikaner attempts to establish multiple republics early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, these divisions are sufficient for our purposes.

1648).<sup>5</sup> Dutch settlers in South Africa were aware of the risks of being small and isolated in a competitive world.

The origins of Afrikaner theology have been debated by historians like De Klerk, who compared Afrikaners and New England Puritans based on their piety and aim to establish a Christian commonwealth.<sup>6</sup> Though the DEIC was bound to the Synod of Dort as its confessional stance, settlers did not necessarily indwell a distinct Calvinist identity. Gonzalez shows that the situation that necessitated the Synod of Dort revealed the Dutch population to be religiously divided. The primary function of the Synod of Dort was to promote a unified front in the hard-fought war against Spain. The Merchant class stood to benefit from improved relations with Spain, eventually siding with Arminius. Lower classes who would not share in these benefits maintained their defense against Spain and chose the more conservative Calvinist option, that of Gomarus. The conservatives won out at the Synod. Though the debate was framed by theologians, the lines were drawn on economic and political lines.<sup>7</sup> Bosch states that though all of the South African clergy during this period were from Holland, they were not necessarily staunch Calvinists.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the first person to critically link Afrikaner theology to Calvin was David Livingstone, the famous missionary from the London Missionary Society in 1850. Upon arriving in South Africa, Livingstone sent word to London regarding the deplorable treatment of non-whites, arguing that the exploitation of non-whites was a reflection of Afrikaner's Calvinist doctrine of *election* towards the end of dominion.<sup>9</sup> However, Bosch contends that these complaints likely tell us more about Livingstone than about Afrikaners. During this era, Britain also viewed itself as a divinely appointed nation, appointed to civilize Africa and Asia.

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<sup>5</sup> J.A. Loubser, *A Critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa: The Apartheid Bible* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>6</sup> De Klerk, *Puritans*, 6,7,12.

<sup>7</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, "Reformed Orthodoxy," in *The Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., The Story of Christianity (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 180.

<sup>8</sup> David Jacobus Bosch, "The Afrikaner and South Africa," *Theology Today* 43 (July 2, 1986): 203-16: 205. Also, Loubser, *Critical Review*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> A.J. Botha (1984: 366) cited in Loubser, *Critical Review*, 33.

Livingstone likely struggled with the idea that another nation might conceive itself to have a similar appointment, one that was at cross purposes with the *manifest destiny* of the British.<sup>10</sup>

Until Livingstone's assertion, the world community considered Afrikaners to embody a "theory of backwardness."<sup>11</sup> De Klerk points out that while Afrikaners were still trying (and failing) to carve out farmland for themselves in the harsh African landscape, Puritans were starting universities like Harvard (1636).<sup>12</sup> Afrikaners who settled in the South African interior were largely uneducated, and likely had only their Bibles to educate their children.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while Christian piety was important to them and sustained them in the fight for independence in the Netherlands and their fight for survival in South Africa, the early South African DRC was far from a conscious Calvinist body, and was not powerful, united or educated enough to enforce a societal blueprint on native tribes. In their isolation, Afrikaners developed a literalist Biblical hermeneutic and in the context of native and British threat, Afrikaners understood themselves to exist in the Spiritual heritage of the Exodus Israelites. This idea was *not* distinctly Calvinist.<sup>14</sup>

De Klerk describes how Afrikaners quickly became disenchanted with the DEIC. Afrikaners eventually established farms despite the constant oscillation between drought and flood.<sup>15</sup> However, as natives continually killed settlers and stole livestock, the settlers became exceedingly frustrated with the DEIC's unwillingness to protect them.<sup>16</sup> An exasperated settlement leader announced his clan's independence from the DEIC in 1795, citing that of 120 farms that had

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<sup>10</sup> Bosch, "The Afrikaner," 205.

<sup>11</sup> Loubser, "Critical Review," 33.

<sup>12</sup> De Klerk, *Puritans*, 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> A.J. Botha (1984:366), cited in Loubser, *Critical Review*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> De Klerk, *Puritans*, 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-21.

been established in the previous two years, only four were not decimated by raiders.<sup>17</sup>

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British took over the Cape. This move demanded a more sufficient cause than simply trade interests, so they established legitimation with the help of the London Missionary Society. Dr. John Philip and Johannes van der Kemp were sent to South Africa to investigate the “oppressed and wronged blacks.”<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Afrikaners suspected Livingstone of arming the “tribesmen.”<sup>19</sup> In 1833-1834, slaves were emancipated and the British offered meager compensation to the Afrikaners.<sup>20</sup> The British came offering “equality.” The Afrikaners were enraged at the hypocrisy of a Britain that did not acknowledge its own class distinctions.<sup>21</sup> The British arrangement left the Boer settlers even poorer and more exposed to native tribes on the frontiers. Adding insult to injury, the British enforced a strict Anglicization of society: Afrikaans was forbidden in schools and Dutch DRC ministers were replaced with Scots.<sup>22</sup> Afrikaners were entirely isolated, cut off from their cultural heritage in Europe.<sup>23</sup> However, life under the British proved to unify Afrikaners in purpose and religion just as Spanish domination had unified the Dutch.

In order to preserve their threatened culture, a number of groups (called *voortrekkers*) set out from the Cape colony in the 1830s to establish three independent republics in South Africa’s interior: Natal, Orange Free State, and Transvaal. Their trek was exceedingly difficult: men, women, children and livestock walked through land dominated by the Nguni, a native tribe.<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Loubser, *Critical Review*, 10. De Klerk, *Puritans*, 29-30. Dirk Th. Kuiper, “Theory and Practice in Dutch Calvinism on the racial Issue in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 21, no. 1 (April 1986): 51-78: 54.

<sup>19</sup> F.A. van Jaarsveld, “The Afrikaner’s Idea of His Calling and Mission in South African History,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 19 (1977): 16:28; 20.

<sup>20</sup> Loubser, *Critical Review*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> De Klerk, *Puritans*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> De Klerk, *Puritans*, 31-32. Loubser, *Critical Review*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Bosch, “The Afrikaner,” 206.

<sup>24</sup> De Klerk, *Puritans*, 35-36.

Afrikaners perfected the *laager* formation, circling their wagons during attack, using modern firearms to fight off attackers.<sup>25</sup> According to one legend, two hundred *voortrekkers* promised God the establishment of a Church if protected. They subsequently warded off a tribal force of ten thousand at Blood River, an event memorialized in an annual Afrikaner holiday.<sup>26</sup>

This “Great Trek” would become iconic in the minds of Afrikaners for generations. Afrikaners came to view themselves as God’s Exodus people, a people of destiny.<sup>27</sup> One of their leaders, Retief, said that they were called by God in hope that “ere long, God in his compassion, will bring us in safety to our appointed destination.”<sup>28</sup> The colonists set out from the Cape without any clergy because the DRC did not believe that such a trek was God’s will.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the trekkers came to believe that through their trials, they would be sanctified for God’s purpose in Africa and the Synod hoped that the trekkers would establish the Gospel among the heathen.<sup>30</sup>

All three of the *voortrekkers’* republics were eventually taken over by the British over the course of three wars. The British outlawed the Afrikaans language and interned thousands of Afrikaners in concentration camps. Bosch notes that

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio, “The Covenant restructured: A Shift in Afrikaner Ideology,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 9, no. 1 (January 1985): 13-16. Also discussed in De Klerk, *Puritans*, 35-36.

<sup>27</sup> “One has to appreciate the loneliness the vast expanses of the veld, the trek into the unknown with all their possessions and livestock, the patriarchal nation of family relationships and of forms of governments, the starry firmament by night and the scorching sun by day, and the dangers of wild beasts and indigenous people that threatened their existence from day to day.” (Jaarsveld, “Calling and Mission, 17). Later South African thinkers (e.g. Totius) would come to see the Great Trek as the antithesis of Babel, thus placing the Afrikaner in the light of God’s ordaining countenance. (Loubser, *Critical Review*, 56).

<sup>28</sup> Van Jaarsveld, “Calling and Mission,” 19. Retief, was not so lucky though. After recovering some stolen cattle for one warlord from another in exchange for land, Retief and his men were invited to a celebration feast. After a frenzied reenactment of a battle, the tribesmen turned on the Afrikaners, dragging them out of the camp and slaughtering them. A short while later, their families were also killed. (De Klerk, *Puritans*, 38-40).

<sup>29</sup> Van Jaarsveld, “Calling and Mission,” 19.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 17-19.

following the wars, the Boers lost eight times as many women and children in concentration camps as soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>31</sup> For the British, the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902) was a minor conflict on the periphery of their Empire. For the Afrikaner, defeat became *the* defining characteristic of their history. Once again, the Church became the haven of a fortress mentality. One subtle form of rebellion came through Afrikaans poetry which developed a national mysticism.<sup>32</sup>

Livingstone's attribution of the poor treatment of natives to Calvinism (1850) was not historically accurate; it would prove to be prophetic in some ways. Loubser shows that the *laager* mentality slowly began to characterize the DRC. Early on, the DRC established that a common Lord's Supper of both whites and non-whites was "an irrefutable principle based on the infallible word of God" (1929 Synod).<sup>33</sup> In 1834, a provision was made for establishing separate "congregations of natives." If native congregations were not available, natives could join a white Church, and each Church, in 1837, was directed to have seating to accommodate any "heathens" that would attend.<sup>34</sup> In 1880, the Synod voted to establish an entirely *separate* Dutch Reformed Missionary Church for Coloureds.<sup>35</sup>

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Afrikaners were attracted to the Neo-Calvinist theology of Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper. In broad strokes, three aspects of his thought are important. First, Kuyper believed that while the Church of Christ was a unified reality, unity was *Spiritual* rather than *visible* and

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<sup>31</sup> Bosch, "The Afrikaner," 207.

<sup>32</sup> In *Totius*" (J.D. du Toit) "*Vergewe en vergeet*" ("Forgive and forget"), a small thorn is trampled by an ox wagon (symbolically Britain), but then it raises itself, heals its "wounds with the ointment of its own resin." In another poem, a desert weed is a symbol of the Afrikaners. It is able to grow where others die. You can't ultimately burn it because it will send out shoots and grows again. (Cited in Bosch, "The Afrikaner," 207) Bosch concludes (207-208), that the poetry spoke to a new generation of Afrikaners, "that they were irrevocably part and parcel of the soil of Africa, of the veld and the mountains and the rivers, and that no earthly forces would ever succeed in subduing them, let alone routing them." (208)

<sup>33</sup> Adendorff 1971: 57. Cited in Loubser, *Critical Review*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Geldenuys 1982: 29. Cited in Loubser, *Critical Review*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Loubser, *Critical Review*, 26.

was relegated to the eschaton. The temporal church was bound to its own national expressions and should not seek to supersede them.<sup>36</sup> Babel's Imperialism stood in contrast to God's Cultural Mandate. When pluralism was combined with Kuyper's belief in free democracy<sup>37</sup> and "common grace" which God bestowed even on non-Christians, the Netherlands became the epitome of toleration. However, Afrikaners sought to apply Kuyper's principle of *differentiation*, where multiple nations were combined within a single border.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Afrikaners saw "democracy" in light of German nationalism. "Democracy" was understood as any ruling group or individual that featured "the total essence of the nation as spiritual unity."<sup>39</sup> Second, Kuyper believed that society should be organized according to Scripturally ordained inter-locking spheres; each sphere communicated with and limited the others. However, all spheres existed under God's sovereign rule in Scripture, which provided societal blueprints for these spheres so that they could develop in their own way. This thinking allowed for the flourishing of each respective sphere in the Netherlands. While Scriptural norms had authority *over* societies, they also had dynamism *within* society depending on the unique makeup of people within it. Thus, Kuyper did not believe that the Javan government (a Dutch colony) should look like the Dutch government, though they adhered to the same principles.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to Kuyper, the Afrikaners gave "the people" (*volk*) its own sphere. Thus, the historical impetus of a people could become the new norm for societal ethics.<sup>41</sup>

Third, while basic structures of Kuyper's political program did not ...d themselves to the Apartheid system, other discordant supremacist ...es in his thought did. In his Stone Lectures, Kuyper explains that the greatest potential of

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid*, 41-43; Kuiper, "Theory and Practice," 74.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. Abraham Kuyper, "Lectures on Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered at Princeton University Under Auspices of the L.P. Stone Foundation (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1931), 27.

<sup>38</sup>Loubser, *Critical Review*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Bosch, "The Afrikaner," 211. The combination of Kuyperianism and nationalism also discussed in Loubser, *Critical Review*, 47-50.

<sup>40</sup> Kuyper, "Uniformity: The Curse of the Modern Life." Cited in Loubser, *Critical Review*, 44.

<sup>41</sup>Kuiper, "Theory and Practice," 77. Loubser, *Critical Review*, 47.

any nation would come through the “comingling of blood.”<sup>42</sup> He believed, counter to the purist Afrikaners, that cross-cultural mixed marriage was positive. However, he later explains that all nations of the world developed from the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Two of these sons, Shem and Japheth, developed into peoples which contributed positively to societal development. Ham, however, meandered into obscurity.<sup>43</sup> Without *directly* explaining who might be represented by these nations, Kuyper states that certain civilizations such as Mongolia, India, Mexico and Peru had been great, but were like lakes without an outlet: feeding themselves and then stagnating. Africa was worse; Kuyper likened it to a marsh.<sup>44</sup> Underlying his program of cultural superiority is a doctrine of election, by which God elevates some over others.<sup>45</sup> His solution for the “Dark Continent” was to rule it according to the Calvinist life-system.<sup>46</sup>

These three streams gave Afrikaners a new philosophy for self-preservation. When Afrikaners were finally free of British jurisdiction in the early Twentieth century, the Church and state enacted legislations which thoroughly segregated society. The Missionary Policy of 1935 dictated that Blacks develop economically, independent of white society. Social “equality” was declined because, they argued, it would lead to the demise of black and white.<sup>47</sup> Segregation came into fullest symbolic legislation in the Mixed Marriages Act

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<sup>42</sup> Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 35. Also discussed in Kuiper, “Theory and Practice,” 72.

<sup>43</sup> Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 35. Kuiper, commenting on Kuyper’s “comingling of blood” and mythological anthropology, states that “he crossed a materialistic theory of selection by comingling of blood with an idealistic theory of election based on a very dubious interpretation of a Biblical text.” (Kuiper, “Theory and Practice.” 72)

<sup>44</sup> Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> “There is no life without differentiation, and no differentiation without inequality .... To put it concretely, if you were a plant you would rather be a rose than mushroom ... lion rather than hyena ... richer rather than poor, talented rather than dull minded, *of the Aryan race rather than Hottentot* [bushmen] *or Kaffir* [African heathen] .... The stronger overcomes the weaker ...” [emphasis and clarification mine] (Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 195-196.)

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> A.J. Botha 1984: 232. Cited in Loubser, *Critical Review*, 30.



(1949).<sup>48</sup> The segregation of society eventually led to the white minority (15%) occupying 83.6% of the land<sup>49</sup> and made it virtually impossible for natives to develop an economy. Some proposed a temporary segregation to keep the groups from mutual destruction.<sup>50</sup> Others allowed segregation to become an ideology which slowly mutated into suppression of one group by another.<sup>51</sup> When the world criticized this segregation, Afrikaners were forced to find Scriptural evidence to back up their policies.<sup>52</sup>

As early as 1943, the DRC stated that the Apartheid system was founded on Scripture, both in broader principles (i.e. Kuyperianism) and with specific texts.<sup>53</sup> At the 1947 Synod, E.P. Groenewald gave a thorough defense of Scriptural proofs. He admitted that outside criticism initially caused Afrikaners to Biblically legitimate their policies. However, he goes on to state that Apartheid is upheld by Scripture.<sup>54</sup> Some common arguments from the period include the idea that Israel's set apartness was the model for every nation which was called to Holiness;<sup>55</sup> the separation of nations in Babel, Pentecost, and the New Jerusalem; Acts 17:26 where Paul states that God established the times and boundaries of every nation; Paul's naming of himself primarily as a Jew (rather than according to His *Spiritual* distinctive, a member of the Church) and Paul's admonition to Gentiles not to be circumcised, nor for the Jews to remove the marks of circumcision. Finally, an argument was made that greater

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<sup>48</sup> Practically speaking, mixed marriages were not that important. For 32,000 white marriages, 75 were mixed at the time of the Act's passing. "The Liberation Struggle in South Africa/South African History Online," *South African History Online*, [http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/legislation\\_1940s.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/legislation_1940s.htm). Accessed:4.19.10. Also Loubser, *Critical Review*, 70-71.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 70ff.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 62, commenting on E.P. Groenewald's writing (1947).

<sup>53</sup> Loubser, *Critical Review*, 60.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

peoples are called to *steward* lesser peoples based on the Scriptural example of Israelites enslavement of the Gibeonites as water carriers and wood cutters.<sup>56</sup>

In conclusion, we can see that though early Afrikaners likely desired to propagate the Gospel, they did not do so in a unified and coherent way. Their ethic became reactionary, shaped by self-preservation from both African and European. Their ethic would eventually seek a theology, which they found in a uniquely applied Neo-Calvinism. Interestingly, both Afrikaners and their opponents retrojected Calvinism back onto early Afrikaner history to explain twentieth century Apartheid.<sup>57</sup> Christianity in many ways proved to be part of the problem in South Africa. It was warped by social and political forces and caused the Afrikaner to be his brother's keeper in ways foreign to the Gospel. However, it is not historically accurate to state that prejudice inherent in Dutch Calvinism directly led to the establishment of Apartheid in South Africa. Even as Christianity was a part of the injustice of Apartheid, it would also become part of the solution.

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<sup>56</sup> Loubser, *Critical Review*, 60-69.

<sup>57</sup> Bosch, "The Afrikaner," 204.