

“FULL HUMANITY REQUIRES FREEDOM”

Being Reformed: Yearning for Justice, Fighting for Freedom, Standing in Dignity.

WCRC Consultation: “Resisting Cultures of Discrimination, Authoritarianism, and Nationalism from Below”

Bangkok, 6-10 December 2018

Allan Aubrey Boesak

I

The background paper for this consultation posits that “in the present context there is seemingly a growing overt and often violent upsurge of racist ideologies that are more often than not fed by nationalist discourses.” That, it seems to me, is correct. “Religions of all hues have enmeshed themselves with dominant and dominating ideologies,” the paper continues, and have “provided ideological underpinnings of racism and other cultures of discrimination.”¹ This includes the Reformed tradition the paper says, and the United States, in its campaigns of dispossession and genocide, and colonialist, but especially apartheid South Africa remain perhaps the most malignant examples of that fact. Also true, however, is that “Christian theology, and Reformed theology in particular, has funded resistance movements from below.”

This paper will explore those statements within the present context of current struggles for freedom, dignity and justice, and against the multiple manifestations of global imperialist oppression. South Africa, with its draconian policies of apartheid, declared by the international community a “Crime against Humanity”² and by the ecumenical movement, led by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, a sin, a travesty of the gospel, and its

¹ For a sober, non-theological discussion on the “openings” and “regressions” facilitated by the “surprising” worldwide resurgence of religion in recent decades “as potent force in public arenas of human affairs,” see Richard A. Falk, *The Declining World Order: America’s Imperial Geopolitics*, New York: Routledge, 151-166. This upsurge of religion has brought about dangerously “regressive politics” in many countries including the United States. Yet despite the many negative elements “wrecking world order” as Falk titled this chapter in his book, he concludes that in the realm of global politics, and in the face of an American “counterapocalyptic reading of September 11 ... taking the unprecedented form of a nonterritorial, counterterrorist crusade” that wields its interventionary authority throughout the world through the exercise of “monopoly control over the militarization of space and oceans, only the great world religions have the credibility, legitimacy, and depth of understanding to identify and reject the idolatry that seems to lie at the core of this American project of planetary domination.” *Ibid.*, 166

² See the United Nations’ Statute of Rome, 1962, www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/crimes-against-humanity.html

theological justification a heresy³ – still one of the Reformed communion’s finest moments – had set the world a particularly vicious model of racial oppression and discrimination, injustice and exploitation. So much so that we may speak today of a phenomenon called “global apartheid” which includes socio-economic exploitation and inequalities, political exclusion, racial and ethnic discrimination, as well as gender injustice and heteronormative oppression.⁴ The common element here is the systemic, violent, pervasive, and totalitarian nature of that oppression.

A more particular example of the way in which “apartheid” is applied, globally understood, and most readily perceived is in the policies of the modern state of Israel toward the people of occupied Palestine. Israel is rightly called an apartheid state. To me the description of Human Rights Watch is frighteningly recognisable when it describes India’s treatment of Dalits - discrimination, denial of access to land, forced labour, degrading working and living conditions, and abuse at the hands of police and higher-caste groups that enjoy the state’s protection - as “hidden apartheid.”⁵ In the last few years though, emboldened by an aggressive, state-sanctioned Hindu nationalism it has been much more blatant, more openly violent, and much more shameless. In a more precise sense, “global apartheid” is best understood in the all-encompassing, global expression of what we call “empire,” a reality we can no longer afford to keep out of the discussion.

Simultaneously South Africa has been privileged to provide the world with examples of theological, social, and political resistance “from below,” rooted in, and inspired by the

³ See Edmund Perret, (ed.), *Ottawa 1982: Proceedings of the 21st General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational), Held at Ottawa Canada, August 17-27 1982*, Geneva: WARC, 1983

⁴ According to South African economics scholar and political analyst Patrick Bond, the term was first introduced in 2002 by then-president of South Africa Thabo Mbeki at the welcoming ceremony of the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. See Patrick Bond, “Is the Reform Really Working?”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103, 4, (2004), 817-839. See also Bond, *Against Global Apartheid: South Africa Meets the World Bank, the IMF, and International Finance*, London and Cape Town: Zed Books, 2004. My understanding of global apartheid can be found in Allan Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid, The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. The term has now become widely accepted in political, socio-economic, and theological discourse.

⁵ See Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s ‘Untouchables’*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999, 1-2. It is not surprising either that Dalits themselves are referring to their situation as one of “apartheid.” See e.g. Sathianathan Clarke’s reference to apartheid and the Dalit situation, “Dalit Theology – An Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition,” in Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Peacock, (eds.), *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press/Geneva: WCC, 2010, 17.

Reformed tradition.⁶ In the wake of the WARC's 24th General Council, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, in partnership with the Reformed Church in Germany, and in response to the *Accra Declaration*, has also vigorously engaged the reality of empire, its impact on the workings of globalisation, and the call to prophetic resistance against empire.⁷

Although in South Africa we were serious and effective in our engagement with the perversion of the Reformed tradition exposed in the theology of apartheid, we did not grasp the vast ramifications of the argument about empire as it pertains not just to white racism and its onslaught on black humanity, but white supremacy and white privilege as essential, and indispensable functions of white, global Christian imperialism. We did not fully grasp, or engage, the reality of empire, its all-encompassing reach, its power to capture, enslave, and exploit not just the entire cultural, political and socio-economic workings of our colonized societies, but its deadly attempt to nullify all that made us human, and worthy.

In summarizing that argument: we defined empire as a calculated coalescing of global forces pooling their economic, political, military, and cultural resources together in unprecedented and frightening ways.⁸

They are, as the Bible describes them, powers and principalities, representing crushing realities of domination, oppression, and control. They are murderous powers, but not by accident – euphemisms such as “free trade,” “market democracies,” “collateral damage,” “humanitarian intervention,” or “enhanced interrogation” are the arrogantly transparent veils with which they seek to mask their calculated homicidal, ecocidal, and cosmocidal intent. For these reasons we call these powers “lordless,” not meaning an egalitarianism with no

⁶ See Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed, Apartheid, Liberation and the Reformed Tradition*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984; Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1984; reprint: Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015; and Allan Boesak, *Running with Horses, Reflections of an Accidental Politician*, Cape Town: JoHo! 2009.

⁷ See Allan Boesak and Len Hansen, (eds.), *Globalisation: The Politics of Empire, Justice, and the Life of the Earth*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009; Allan Boesak and Len Hansen, (eds.), *Globalisation II: Global Crisis, Global Challenge, Global Faith: an Ongoing Response to the Accra Confession*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2010; Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, and Charles Amjad-Ali, (eds.), *Dreaming a Different World, Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth, The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches*, Stellenbosch: The Globalisation Project, 2010.

⁸ For a full discussion of this matter see South African economist Sampie Terreblanche, “The American Empire and the Entrenchment of Global Inequality,” in Boesak and Hansen (eds.), *Globalisation, the Politics of Empire*, 31-48; Allan Boesak, “Theological Reflections on Empire,” in Boesak and Hansen, *ibid.*, 59-72; Allan Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, 55-60.

“lords” or “underlings,” for that is precisely what they create and maintain, and they demand absolute submission. But these lords are not the Lord Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the aim of the builders and beneficiaries of empire “centered in First World capitals ... together with their Third World clients,” writes Steven Hiatt in a fascinating collection of essays titled, *A Game as Old as Empire*, is to “work to arrange the world to their liking.”⁹ Hiatt speaks politically and economically. Ecojustice activist Naomi Klein speaks of the same phenomenon through what she calls “the shock doctrine.”¹⁰ Theologically speaking, however, this is an act of catastrophic recreation directly in opposition to the creative acts and intentions of God. In other words, they set themselves up as God in the place of God, and therein lies the idolatry the prophetic church has identified.

One crucial way in which this recreation plays out in the workings of empire Hiatt explains in a circular chart that sets out the flow of money out of the poor, Global South to the rich North in a calculated “web of control” through manipulation of markets, product pricing, and the rules of international trade followed by unavoidable loans from rich countries, banks, and international funding agencies. This is followed by “conditions for aid, loans, and investment” which includes resource development concessions and privatization on a huge scale, “unnecessary build-up of defence” and “nonreciprocal elimination of tariffs.” These conditions are “enforced” through among other things, “rigged elections, bribes, manipulation of local currencies, and the assassination of uncooperative leaders.” This vicious

⁹ See Steven Hiatt, “Global Empire: The Web of Control,” in Steven Hiatt, (ed.), *A Game as Old as Empire, The Secret World of Economic Hit Men and the Web of Global Corruption*, San Francisco: Berret-Kohler, 2007, 13-29, 18. “And their world is one where only dollars, not people – and certainly not the planet’s billions of everyday people – are citizens.” Noam Chomsky has offered one of the best analyses of how wealth and power have come to supersede human rights and humanbeingness, in his *Profit over People, Neo-liberalism and Global Order*, New York: Seven Stories, 1999. For the imperial visionaries of the Project for a New American Century, “a world of their own making” means that the United States “must accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to *our* security, *our* prosperity, and *our* principles.” See <http://www.sojo.net/idex.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0309&article=030911> Emphasis mine. The similar mind set of British officials in the Blair government is reflected in their pre-invasion discussions on “the Iraq we want.” See T. Walter Herbert, *Faith-Based War: From 9/11 to Catastrophic Success in Iraq*, Oakville CT: Equinox, 2009, 76.

¹⁰ For an even more sobering analysis of the workings of empire in its recreation of the world through systemic processes Naomi Klein identifies as “disaster capitalism” and the consequences of what she calls the “shock doctrine” see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine, The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York: Metropolitan, 2007. In this remaking of the world economic exploitation and military intervention invariably go hand in hand. Thus Sampie Terreblanche writes, “From the perspective of the rest of the world – and especially ... the Poor South – the American Empire personifies two related dangers: first, the danger of increased economic exploitation within the structures of neoliberal globalism and, secondly, the danger of unilateral military invasions into vulnerable countries in the South when they are not behaving themselves in accordance with the American rules of ‘the global game’”. See Terreblanche, *ibid.*, 32

circle ends up in “the flow of money back to the First World” through uncontested contracts, rigged bids, capital flight, tax evasion, and embezzled funds to off-shore accounts.¹¹ Hiatt calls this corrupt system of deliberate enrichment and deliberate impoverishment “extorting tribute from the Global South,” in perfect, but frighteningly sophisticated imitation of old, established imperial systems of tribute and patronage.

Nonetheless we should remember that the empire we face is the work of human hands and minds – it is not divinely sanctioned, God-given or historically determined; not irreversible, unchangeable or unchallengeable as it purports. Its claims of benevolence mask the persistent violence – ideological, systemic, psychological, structural, and physical - inherent in that imperial reach, and the destruction it wreaks upon whole communities, sometimes whole nations, for the sake of profits for the few. There is nothing God-like about it. We are called instead to discern, challenge, and dismantle the idolatrous, blasphemous nature of empire. Resistance is not only possible; it is imperative.

Empires cannot survive without myths: the myth of exceptionalism; of benevolent domination, of mutual beneficiation as long as the hierarchical structures – racial, social, gender, economic – remain intact, and the myth of redemptive violence, absolutely necessary for social and political control. Closely related to that is the myth of invincibility and irreversibility which *ipso facto* produces the myth of the futility of resistance. Fundamental to all these are the myths of religious sanction without which none of the above is possible to sustain because they provide divine right, moral justification, and ideological control. So central was this role in the Roman Empire that New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan deliberately speaks not of “emperor worship” nor of the “emperor cult” but of “Roman imperial theology,” because it was the “ideological glue that held Roman civilization together.”¹² Ideologised religion, nationalist totalitarianism, and imperial power are as

¹¹ See Steven Hiatt, *ibid.*, in Hiatt, (ed.), *ibid.*, 20. Self-confessed “Economic Hit Man” for the rich North John Perkins, in the Introduction, refers to the way governments and government agencies, “powerful forces arrayed to protect the institutional power of corporations, global banks, government defense and security agencies, international agencies – and the small elites that run them,” act to prevent persons from exposing the truth. (p.5) Such prophetic truth-tellers “can be expected to be assassinated – financially and by reputation, if not by a bullet.” (p.6) See also John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*, San Francisco: Brett-Koehler, 2004. To the list under “enforcement” I have added the co-optation, domestication, and iconization of selected local leadership as international heroes, in which South Africa’s Nelson Mandela is an almost perfect case in point, see Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-red Waters*, chapter 6

¹² John Dominic Crossan, “Roman Imperial Theology” in Richard A. Horsley, (ed.), *In the Shadow of Empire, Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008, 59

inextricably entwined today.¹³ Talk of empire as “secular powers” is perhaps the greatest myth of all.

The world, said theologian Helmut Gollwitzer, speaking of his times in Nazi Germany, is one “shaken by deadly convulsions.”¹⁴ Ours is such a world, indeed a world intentionally prepared for those who are empire’s constant prey. The *Accra Confession* termed it a “scandalous world,” so completely in the grip of the frightening realities of globalism and empire, to the detriment of God’s most vulnerable children on earth, that it can rightly be called a challenge to the faith of the church and the integrity of the Gospel:

Speaking from our Reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians. We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalisation and therefore we confess before God and one another.¹⁵

Already true in 2004, the situation is now infinitely worse. The world of imperial domination in which we live and are called to witness as the Church of Jesus Christ today is equally a world shaken by deadly convulsions. The combined wealth of the world’s richest 1% has overtaken that of the other 99% in 2016. More than half of the wealth in the world is in the hands of just 62 individuals, more than is owned by the entire 3.5 billion of the world’s population. But this is what Oxfam said in 2016. That is now old news. The year 2017 has scarcely started and we had to revise our statistics. In January 2017 Oxfam reported that the situation was much

¹³ Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel write of American evangelicals and American empire, “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, American evangelicals and empire are deeply implicated together.” See Benson and Heltzel, (eds.), Introduction, *Evangelicals and Empire, Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2008, 14. In the age of Trump this is even more true. In that same volume, Jim Wallis writes that to the already “aggressive expansion of American power in the world, President George W. Bush adds God,” noting that he does not doubt for a moment that “president Bush’s faith is sincere.” Jim Wallis, “Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush’s Theology of Empire,” Benson and Heltzel (eds.), *ibid.*, 25-32, 26. That same “dangerous mix” can be observed in e.g. Hungary’s Christian nationalism and India’s Hindu nationalism. Rosemary Ruether has analysed the deep historical roots of the mix of religion, ideology, racial and gender exclusivism and militarism in the United States, see her *America, Amerikkka, Elect Nation and Imperial Violence*, Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2007, and T. Walter Herbert’s masterful study shows just how indispensable this ideologised religiosity has become for the workings of empire, the “war on terror,” and the justification of violence and torture (he speaks of a “theology of torture”), see T. Walter Herbert, *Faith-based War*.

¹⁴ Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Way to Life, Sermons in a Time of World Crisis*, transl. David Cairns, Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1980, xii

¹⁵ For the full text of the Accra Declaration see *That All May Have Fullness: World Alliance of Reformed Churches 24th General Council Proceedings*, Geneva: WARC, 2005, 153-160. See also *Semper Reformanda: http://wrc.ch/accra-confession*. For discussion of the Declaration related to empire see Allan Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, 53-55.

worse: just 8 white men own as much wealth as half the world's population. One in nine people do not have enough to eat and more than 1 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day.¹⁶

"In January 2017," I have written elsewhere,

the United States and the world witnessed a spectacle many were convinced they would never see. The politics and the undisguised ideological bent of the new president seem to have awakened, and emboldened, a frightening, careless hostility towards humanness, compassion, and justice. Now, all over the world misogynists and homophobes of every stripe, creed and colour; white supremacists and unashamed racists from New Nazi's in Europe to revived apartheid defenders in South Africa and new apartheid creators in Israel arise emboldened. Predatory capitalists, worshippers of money and destroyers of the Earth have rejuvenated joy; war mongers and the makers of drones, cluster bombs, barrel bombs, land mines and all kinds of deadly chemical weapons rejoice in the temples of profiteering as they see their fortunes and stocks rise even higher this year. In a perverse inversion of Isaiah's vision, they have waited upon their lord, their strength is renewed, and they are ready to mount up with wings like eagles, to run and not grow weary, to walk and not faint.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Oxfam report, January 17, 2017, <http://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-01-16> Meanwhile, we have seen the US' disastrous and unending "war against terror" with its "catastrophic success" as America's General Tommy Franks called it, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and under Barack Obama expanded to Somalia, Yemen and three other predominantly Muslim countries. Meanwhile hawks in the US Congress and neoconservative think tanks are salivating for a war on Iran. Donald Trump has finally ripped the mask off America's pretended innocence. For the use of the strikingly apt term "catastrophic success" see Tommy Franks, *American Soldier*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, 285-394, and as applied by T. Walter Herbert, *ibid.*, Introduction, 6. It is at the same time a merciless exposure of the "Christian Americanism" at the heart of the ideology driving the Christian crusade mentality that gripped the Bush administration. That is why Herbert treats the Iraq invasion not just as a military and economic, but also a "religious catastrophe." (p.8,9). This mentality abides in every administration because it is so deeply embedded in the American psyche and American political culture, "Indeed, to combine being both practitioners of *real politik* and also self-deluded believers in the rhetoric of America's messianic role is the basic requirement of an effective American politician." See Ruether, *ibid.*, 2

¹⁷ See Allan Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides*, 224-225. Apart from the blatant, and intensifying oppression in countries like Saudi-Arabia and Israel and their behaviour towards others in their tight alliance with the USA, and similar symptoms in Turkey, Russia, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, among others, Trump's attitudes, rhetoric, and policies are enabling violent racist, homophobic, and misogynistic acts against victims by the scores in the United States itself. Journalist Mehdi Hasan has compiled a partial list of victims of such violence in the US since Trump's political prominence. "Since the summer of 2015, a bevy of Trump supporters, fans, and sympathizers have beaten, shot, stabbed, run over, and bombed fellow Americans. They have taken innocent lives while aping the president's violent rhetoric, echoing his racist conspiracy theories, and, as in the case of Cesar Sayoc [who shot and killed several people at a synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018] targeting the exact same people and organizations that Trump loudly and repeatedly targets at his rallies and on Twitter: Muslims, refugees, immigrants, the Clintons, CNN, and left-wing protesters among others." See Mehdi Hasan, "Here Is a List of Far-right Attackers Trump Inspired," *The Intercept*, October 28, 2018, <https://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/53072-here-is-a-list-of-far-right-attackers-trump-inspired>. On Nov. 1, 2018, Trump ordered his military on the border with Mexico to shoot anyone of the refugees on the way to the US who might be carrying a rock as defensive weapon against military attack. "Consider it a rifle" Trump said. On Nov. 2, after killing 45 unarmed Islamic Movement protesters, the Nigerian army posted Trump's video with the logo, "Please watch this and make your deductions." See Matthew Champion, BuzzFeed, Nov. 2,

In India, Narendra Modi's call for a *Ram Rajya* echoes Donald Trump's "*Make America Great Again*." It is "nothing less than invoking an India when caste was at its strongest," write the editors of *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*.¹⁸ The interwoven strands between global imperial reach and localised nationalist totalitarian realities are clear.

This is the Accra Declaration's "scandalous world" many times over and this is our "present context," and as always, it is the vulnerable, the poor and powerless, the women and children, the people of "unimpressive proportions," (Miguez Bonino) persons of colour, the defenceless and those deemed unworthy of human consideration such as LGBTQI+ persons, who pay the price.

It is also worthy of note that even though what in particular countries and contexts presents itself as "nationalism" is in fact, in our globalised world, no longer an isolated or isolatable phenomenon. It is all subservient to a tightly interconnected imperial ideology, serving the same imperial agenda.¹⁹ It is no accident that the daily killings of persons of colour by insanely militarised police in the United States, serving an undeniably racist agenda, rightly called lynchings by African Americans, parallel the persecution of women and LGBTQI persons in Russia, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo for example, or the killings of lower caste persons in India, many from the Dalit community, who also call them lynchings. Writes Arundathi Roy,

Today we live in a country in which, when the thugs and aparatchiks of the New Order talk of "illegal slaughter" they mean the imaginary cow that was killed – not the real man from the scene of the crime, they mean the food in the fridge, not the body of a lynched man.²⁰

2018, <https://readersupportednews.org/news-section2/318-66/53161-trumps-rhetoric-used-to-justify-shooting-protesters-in-nigeria>. The normalization of the politics of violent victimization and impunity is yet another effort in the "remaking of the world," ever farther from "and God's saw that it was very good" in Genesis 1 and ever closer to God's "regret" in Genesis 6, where "every inclination" in the human heart was "only evil," and human violence overran the earth so that it "grieved God to God's heart."

¹⁸ See Clarke, Manchala and Peacock, (eds.), Introduction, 9. This call, they explain, refers to "an ideal age of peace and prosperity and naturalizes the centrality of a dominant form of Hindu totalitarianism." The appeal is, of course, mythical, but it serves the political purposes of the powerful in their manipulation of the masses perfectly.

¹⁹ Donald Trump, in his oft-repeated assertions, "I am a nationalist" is forging an unprecedented blending of globalist imperialism and country-specific nationalisms, enabling and legitimizing both in ways that are proving to be even more disastrous for vulnerable communities world-wide.

²⁰ See Arundathi Roy, "Politics by Other Means," November 10, 2015, <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/33413-focus-politics-by-other-means?>

And like in the US, the murderous intent comes with the deliberate manipulation of language, the disdainful diminishment of suffering, and the cold-blooded arrogance of semantics.

II

The observation in the background paper that the Reformed tradition has been abused for the justification of oppression is unquestionably true, but it is not the most important. More important is the fact that that same tradition has given rise to theological, social, and political resistance. It testifies to the manner in, and extent to which the Reformed tradition, rightly understood, has helped oppressed people claim their agency and embrace their historic task of fighting for freedom, justice and dignity.

I would argue that that is not surprising at all, in a tradition that is virtually compelled to produce a theology “from below,” and which gave rise to the development of the first, full, modern theory of the lawfulness of political resistance.²¹ It would probably be as well to weigh the difference it makes when we keep in mind that Calvin’s *Institutes* were written, not as a high theological disputation for academic purposes, nor as a doctrinal shield for white supremacists, but in the first place as instruction for daily living and testifying for Christians struggling to survive under the strenuous conditions of exile, and in France under violent, unrelenting and unbearable political and ecclesiastical persecution, seeking ways, as *Reformed* Christians, to remain obedient to God, fighting for full human dignity, and to make this world a place of peace, justice, and dignity.²²

²¹ See Francis Hotman, *Franco-Gallia or, an Account of the Ancient Free State of France*, published in 1573, see Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966, as he develops the argument, 76ff. “What characterizes the Calvinist tradition as a whole,” writes Nicholas Wolterstorff, “was its dynamic restlessness, much of that can be traced back to Calvin himself – to his actions in Geneva, but also to his words.” See Wolterstorff, “The Wounds of God: Calvin’s Theology of Social Justice,” Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church and World*, Mark R. Gornik and Gregory Thompson (eds.), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, 128.

²² Between 1550 and 1562 Geneva received at least 7,000 immigrants, most of them French. Calvin’s sermons were geared towards oppressed, exiled people, common folk as well as the more privileged who fled persecution on a horrific scale. Characteristic of Calvin’s preaching style was the way he applied the exegesis of the text to the daily lives of his audience and to actual social and political problems they were facing. This made his preaching “very attractive” to those who came to listen to him, and since he preached every day, and the pulpit was a place of great authority in Calvin’s day, there was a power to Calvin’s sermonic rhetoric that had far-reaching political impact. See Willem Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation*, Leiden: Brill, Vol. I, (1972), Vol II (1994).

Elsewhere²³ I have tried to show how Black Reformed South Africans have embraced their discovery of what was, in my view, essentially “at the heart of the Reformed tradition”: “Making choices” (for the oppressed and justice); “giving voice to the voiceless”; the belief that to do injustice to the Other is to “wound God”; the belief that in matters of public justice obedience to God is above all demands for obedience to earthly powers, and therefore calls us to costly discipleship; the belief in the “tenderness of conscience” that understands the essential oneness and equality of all humanity and leads us to deeds of compassionate justice, of solidarity and of revolutionary reciprocity. Finally, Reformed theology holds to the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord, which for us is not an exclusivist claim of Christian superiority, but rather means that there is “not a single inch of life” that is not subjected to this lordship; no authority higher, no loyalty more binding, no power on earth more compelling than this Jesus in whom God’s preferential option for the poor and oppressed finds its purest form.

It is no wonder that John Calvin would insist:

But in the obedience which we have shown to be due to the authority of governors, it is always necessary to make one exception, *and that is entitled to our first attention* – that it [does] not seduce us from obedience to him, to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty all the sceptres ought to submit. And indeed, how preposterous it would be for us, with a view to satisfy men, (*sic*) to incur the displeasure of him on whose account we yield obedience to men! The Lord, therefore, is King of kings ... If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed [utterly ignored].²⁴

Calvin writes this in his Institutes, and there is no ambiguity. Note how for Calvin here “piety” and “impiety” are *political* sins in themselves, not just sins with political consequences. The price Christ has paid on the cross is not a spiritualised matter, disconnected from the political struggles of God’s people. We have been redeemed by Christ so that we may not be tempted to be submissive to the political desires of evil authorities:

But since this edict has been proclaimed by that celestial herald, Peter, ‘We must obey God rather than men’, let us console ourselves with this thought, that we truly perform the obedience which God requires of us, when we suffer any thing rather than deviate from piety. And that our hearts may not fail us, Paul stimulates us with another consideration – that Christ

²³ See Allan Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid*, Chapter 2.

²⁴ *Institutes*, IV, xx, 32

has redeemed us at the immense price which our redemption cost him, that we may not be submissive to the corrupt desires of men, much less be slaves to their impiety.²⁵

In the Commentaries though, he would grow much more radical, and even more so in the latter sermons.²⁶

Hence for Reformed theology it is not at all exceptional to stand upon the truth of God's preferential option for the poor which Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper has formulated so well:

When rich and poor stand opposed to each other, Jesus *never* takes his place with the wealthier, but *always* with the poorer. He is born in a stable; and while foxes have holes and birds have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head ... Both the Christ, and also just as much his disciples after him as the prophets before him *invariably* took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and *for* the suffering and the oppressed.²⁷

Likewise, Karl Barth was stating a well-established Reformed position when he proclaimed with customary boldness:

The human righteousness required by God and established in obedience – the righteousness which according to Amos 5:24 should pour down as a mighty stream – has *necessarily* the character of a vindication of right in favour of the threatened and innocent, the oppressed poor, the widows, orphans, and aliens. For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of people, *God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it.*²⁸

These Reformed theologians understood and worked with the conviction expressed by John Calvin that to do injustice to another human being is to break the bonds of our common humanity since every person, no matter who they might be, is our neighbour, whose face we see, "as in a mirror." Thus for Calvin, there was no question:

²⁵ Calvin, *ibid.*

²⁶ Willem Nijenhuis writes, "It's easy to see that after 1559 this process of radicalization in Calvin's political ideas continues. Comparing the 1559 Latin edition of the *Institutes* with the French of 1560, we discover a more radical, more openly antimonarchistic development in Calvin's terminology. In 1559 he said that it was 'very rare for kings to restrain themselves.' In 1560 he thought that such restraint was 'almost a miracle.' What is striking in the French edition is the accent laid upon the notion of liberty as *a criterion for right government.*" See Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata*, Vol. II, 76, "The Limits of Civil Disobedience in Calvin's Last-known Sermons; Development of His Ideas on the Right to Civil Resistance," 75-97, my emphasis. Nevada Levi DeLapp writes, "Despite Calvin's persistent cries to the contrary, his theology and ecclesiology were politically seditious." See DeLapp, *The Reformed David(s) and the Question of Resistance to Tyranny. Reading the Bible in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clarke, 2014, 39. Emphasis original.

²⁷ Abraham Kuyper in an address to the Christian Social Congress, Amsterdam, 1891, quoted in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 73. My emphasis.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/I, Edinburgh: Clarke, 1957, 73. Emphasis mine.

The name 'neighbour' extends *indiscriminately* to every person, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship ... *To make any person my neighbour it is enough that they be human.*²⁹

But also, since the cries of the oppressed are the cries from the very heart of God – it is as if God hears Godself cry in the cries of the oppressed, Calvin said – to do injustice to another is to wound God.

So God, in God's pathos for justice, *becomes* the poor, the oppressed, and the wronged. It is a deeply radical notion. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his discussion on Calvin's insistence upon God's compassionate identification with the oppressed who struggle for freedom, justice, and dignity is correct in stating that to understand John Calvin's "exceptionally bold theology of social justice" was to understand the woundedness of God: that Calvin teaches us that God deems Godself violated in the wounds inflicted upon human beings created in God's image.

Here is Wolterstorff's conclusion:

To inflict injury on a fellow human being is to wound God; it is to cause God to suffer. Behind and beneath the social misery of our world is the suffering of God. If we truly believed that, says Calvin, we would be much more reluctant than we are to participate in victimizing the poor, the oppressed, and the assaulted of the world. *To pursue justice is to relieve God's suffering.*³⁰

The "brokenness" of Dalitness is the brokenness of God. Healing Dalit wounds through the undoing of injustice and the doing of justice is healing the wounds of God. When one embraces this radical heartbeat of Reformed thinking, one cannot but join God in God's struggle for justice in the world, cannot but join God's people in the wilderness where they cry for freedom, justice and dignity, but issue the call of the prophet not to get lost in hopelessness, fear and dreamlessness, but to rise up and build a highway for the Lord. One cannot but be in resistance to powers and principalities that in their greed for domination, lust for power, and oppression of the people "deprive God of God's rights." Conversely, for the oppressed *not* to offer resistance is to show "contempt for God" as Calvin put it.

III

In the struggles for black liberation in the United States, the name of Henry Highland Garnet rings as clear as a bell, and rightly so. But as often as he is cited as shining example in our

²⁹ John Calvin, *Opera*, 45, 613, emphasis added.

³⁰ See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *ibid.*, 119. Emphasis original.

struggle, it is almost never mentioned that he, as Presbyterian, was to a high degree inspired by the Reformed tradition. I have been struck with the parallels with Calvin's thinking in his best-known speech, his "Address to the Slaves of the United States" delivered at that decisive conference in Buffalo, New York in 1843, which caused the tense debate about the use of violence in struggles for justice with Frederick Douglass at the other end.³¹

Garnet's address became immediately controversial mostly because of its call to violent resistance against slavery.³² Consequently, the speech is most remembered for that call upon the readiness to take up arms: "Rather die freemen, than live to be slaves." And for the fiery exhortation: "Neither God, nor angels, or just men, command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical that promises success." And for the sober and disturbing conclusion: "There is not much hope of redemption without the shedding of blood."

However, the controversy caused by Garnet's call should not distract us from an essential truth Garnet wanted his people to understand that day. Garnet's address invites us to think about three issues, not always as well-remembered and oft-quoted as the call to arms. But they are, in my view, as relevant today as they were then, and we should heed them more today than ever before.

First is his insistence that there can be no negotiation about one's freedom; with slave-owners or any other oppressor: "... [G]o to your lordly enslavers and tell them plainly, that you *are determined to be free*... Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery, and of a future judgment, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire is FREEDOM, and that nothing else will suffice."

What every oppressor, then and now, must understand, is that the oppressed are determined to be free. They must be told in language that cannot be misunderstood, that

³¹ See Deirdre Mullane (ed.), *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African American Writing*, New York: Anchor, 1993, 115-121. I have considered Garnet's views from different perspectives, (see Allan Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides*, 46-49; 54-58; and again in *Children of the Waters of Meribah, Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition and the Challenges of Twenty-first Century Empire*, [forthcoming], chapter five)

³² Garnet wrote in the preface to its publication in 1843 (in an edition with David Walker's *Appeal*): "The document elicited more discussion than any other paper that was ever brought before that, or any other deliberative body of colored persons, and their friends." Opposed by Frederick Douglass, the call "failed by one vote to be adopted by the convention, which still advocated 'moral suasion' over political, even military, action,"

God is a God of justice, and freedom, and judgment, and that freedom is what is desired: there is no substitute. The demand is for freedom not as defined by the oppressor – a “freedom” that requires the permission of and the limitations set by the oppressor. It is as if Garnet has heard Calvin: “Full humanity *requires* freedom.” *Full humanity*, not “three-fifths of a person.” *Full humanity*, not “once born, broken, split,” or “burnt” outcaste who are considered less worthy, less trustworthy, less deserving, less human. *Full humanity*. This is what is required for a freedom defined by the oppressed themselves, not the scraps that are thrown from the table of the privileged who think that their power justifies their dominance.

This is a lesson post-1994 black South Africans, post-2008 African Americans, and I daresay post-independence Dalits have been learning through painful experience.³³ The words, “nothing else will suffice,” are a reminder that appeals to “gradualism,” tinkering with “reforms” or adjustments to systems of oppression will not be acceptable; that the endurance of the oppressed is not to be confused with endless patience or with acceptance of a calendar for freedom set by slave owners. Slavery, in all its subsequent mutations, is evil, and as such cannot be reformed or modified or negotiated, it can only be irrevocably eradicated.

Here, Garnet raises another truth we have always known but constantly have to be reminded of, even though Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli, our most illustrious Christian political leader of his time standing in the Reformed tradition, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela never tired of telling us so: power is never willingly given up by the oppressor, it has to be wrested from their hands by the oppressed; freedom is never handed to the oppressed on a silver platter, it is the gift of struggle and sacrifice. Frederick Douglass said it with unmistakable clarity:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favour freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without ploughing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did

³³ Manchala Deenabandhu discusses the fact that official Indian crime statistics for 2001-2005 reveal that 27 atrocities against Dalits are committed every day. Thirteen Dalits are murdered every week, 5 Dalit houses burnt down every week, 6 Dalits kidnapped or abducted every week, 3 Dalit women raped every day, 11 Dalits beaten every day, a crime committed against Dalits every 18 minutes. See “Expanding the Ambit: Dalit Theological Contribution to Ecumenical Social Thought,” *Dalit Theology*, 37-38. There is every reason to expect that this situation is worse today, in 2018.

and it never will. ...The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress³⁴

With Douglass' words ringing in our ears, Albert Luthuli's warning takes on an even more prophetic tone. "The road to freedom," are Albert Luthuli's immortal words, "is always via the CROSS."³⁵ The assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and so many other martyrs should be seared into our memory as burning reminders of this truth.³⁶

Garnet's second point is theological, simultaneously raising the question of human dignity: slavery (in all its forms, from the past as well as in the present) is an intolerable assault upon the dignity of black personhood. In a powerful reminder of the outrage of John Calvin on the question of tyranny and submission to it, Garnet says, "To such degradation it is sinful in the extreme for you to make voluntary submission."³⁷ Where in the first instance the sinfulness of oppression rests on the oppressor, now the burden of sinfulness is placed on the oppressed if they accept such oppression without resistance. There is no excuse for acceptance of the indignity of oppression for it "hurls defiance" in the face of God. This, Garnet argues, is sinful "in the extreme."

Third, the condition of oppression, the harshness of the oppressor's rule, the difficult circumstances for resistance, the nebulous evil embedded in systemic injustice, the fear of the oppressor's retribution - none of this relieves the oppressed from claiming their God-given rights, since resistance to evil is the *duty* of the believer. In this Garnett is clear: "The

³⁴ See Frederick Douglass, "If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress," a "West India Emancipation" speech delivered at Canandaigua, New York, August 3, 1857, <http://www.blackpast.org/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-is-no-struggle-there-is-no-progress>. We should note, in parenthesis, that in uttering these words Douglass sounds more radical than the Douglass who so vehemently resisted Henry Garnet 14 years before as we have seen above, and it demonstrates just how complex and inescapable these issues become when struggles for freedom meet relentless violent resistance from those bent on continued oppression and loathe to give up positions of power.

³⁵ Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go, the Autobiography of Albert Luthuli*, [1961], Cape Town: Tafelberg and Mafube, 2006, 232-236; Martin Luther King Jr., "Lamentably, it is a historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily... Freedom is never given voluntarily by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed," see "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", in Cornel West (ed.), *The Radical King*, 131. See Nelson Mandela, Statement from the Dock, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3430>

³⁶ From South Africa, Luthuli was clear: "... Our struggle is a struggle and not a game – we cannot allow ourselves to be daunted by a harshness which will grow before it subsides. We shall not win our freedom except at the cost of great suffering, and we must be prepared to accept it. Much African blood has already been spilt, and assuredly more will be ... We do not desire to shed the blood of the white man, but we should have no illusion about the price he will exact in African blood before we are admitted to citizenship in our own land." See Albert Luthuli, *ibid.*, 124.

³⁷ See John Calvin's *Commentary* on Isaiah 14:7-8; see my detailed discussion on this in Allan Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid*, 58, 59

forlorn condition in which you are placed does not destroy your moral obligation to God.” And again, “Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation.” The moral obligation “to God” is inseparable from the moral obligation to freedom and to one’s own dignity. And while this reasoning brings Garnet to the conclusion that violence as a strategy for freedom struggles is not only acceptable but in all probability unavoidable, this same passion should drive those who believe in militant, nonviolent action for justice.³⁸

Compare Garnet’s views with Calvin’s insights on the same fundamental issues. Calvin’s judgement on the evil nature of oppression is the same: Tyranny is a “violation of human dignity,” Calvin says, “for full humanity *requires* liberty ...”³⁹ Notice how Calvin conflates the “degradation” of the dignity of authority with the “violation of human dignity” [of their subjects], as he conflates that with their “spoiling God of God’s rights.” Tyrants, Calvin says, are “hated by the whole world”, for tyranny is “a perversion of order, its overthrow can thus be called a *restitutio*”, a restitution “to its original order,” which can only be a “restitution” of the justice which lends dignity and legitimacy to authority and to which the oppressed have a right. God self “cannot endure tyrants and He listens in empathy to the secret groans of those who live under them.”⁴⁰

Calvin’s judgement on oppressed people who meekly accept their oppression is equally harsh: Resistance to tyranny does bring risks and unforeseen changes, but, says Calvin, “Only a degraded people could prefer the yoke of tyranny to the inconveniences of change.”⁴¹

Calvin does not spare those who for some reason or another are afraid to resist tyranny. “There is no doubt that God has struck with a spirit of cowardice those who, like asses, willingly offer their shoulders for burdens.”⁴² Since tyrants do not “rest their injuries until the wretched people have altogether given up,” resistance is inevitable and Calvin finds

³⁸ I used the same reasoning in 1979, in an open letter to the South African Minister of Justice, in defending the decisions of the South African Council of Churches to call for, participate and lead actions of civil disobedience on a massive scale. See Allan Boesak, “Divine Obedience – A Letter to the Minister of Justice”, *Black and Reformed, Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, reissued edition, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 32-41. See for numerous references to the arguments made by John Calvin on this matter Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid*, chapter 2, especially 50-64.

³⁹ *Commentaries*, on Matthew 2:9

⁴⁰ *Commentaries*, on Isaiah 14:7-8

⁴¹ *Commentaries*, on Matthew 2:9

⁴² *Commentaries*, on Isaiah 3:12

inspiration for that resistance in the example of the Hebrew midwives who stood up against the Pharaoh.

Thus tyranny must be resisted Calvin insists, because it serves the purpose of all tyrants, designed “in order that they [the people] may turn away” from the promises of God, and “renounce the hope presented to them from on high.”⁴³ In other words, not just helplessly give up, but wilfully *renounce* all hope for freedom and all faith in God and in God’s justice. These are grave matters; it is the worst thing oppressed people could do. To renounce hope is not only to be resigned to one’s oppression, it is to invite death. Whereas elsewhere for Calvin it is the tyrant who denies God by injustice and oppression, here it is the people who deny God by renouncing all hope in God’s liberating power. Renouncing all hope in God is the same as depriving God of God’s right to do justice in love and freedom. The tyrant will not stop until he has “destroyed in them all recollection of God,”⁴⁴ that is, erased from their memory all the promises of God, and all God’s deeds of liberation through which Israel came to know God. It means to erase all recollection of the truth that God is a God who loves and desires justice; that God’s own freedom to be a just God is the guarantee for the freedom of God’s people; all recollection of the life-saving truth that against that love for justice and freedom no tyrant shall prevail.

Especially expressive of the sin of submission to slavery, Garnet argued, again echoing John Calvin, was the slave owners' "aim" to make the slave "contented with slavery." As offensive to God and humanity as that was, however, yet another sin was greater, this time placing its heavy burden on the souls of black slaves themselves: the slave's enslavement does not have to mean an enslaved mind. For Garnet, as for Calvin, as it should be for us, there is no such thing as “reconciling” and “making peace” with degradation and oppression.

⁴³ *Commentaries*, on Exodus 5:12. Calvin understands the boundaries: “(The Pharaoh) is deaf to every excuse of his officers ... there is no more feeling in him than in a stone.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his rejection of the decision of the Confessing Church to send Karl Barth to Hitler for “talks,” understood these boundaries as well as Calvin, and it would lead to another kairos moment and a different kind of decision: “From now on, I believe, any discussion between Hitler and Barth would be quite pointless – indeed, no longer to be sanctioned. Hitler has shown himself quite plainly for what he is, and the church ought to know with whom it has to reckon ...”, Bonhoeffer in his letter to Erwin Sutz, see Eric Mataxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Nashville: Nelson Thomas, 2010, 249. In this, as in his embrace of Reformed theology’s “not one single inch” of life not being under the Lordship of Christ, Bonhoeffer shows himself more Reformed than Lutheran.

⁴⁴ *Commentaries*, on Exodus 5:12

When Garnet and Luthuli, King and Mandela all warn us that the price to be paid will be high, they hark back to Calvin who reminds us that in these matters we owe the God of justice and freedom our utter loyalty and obedience. This will be costly, since, is Calvin's reminder from Proverbs 16:14, "the wrath of a king is a messenger of death." Nonetheless, we should be emboldened by the truth that tyranny is unbearable, not just for human beings, but for God, and that there limits to both the acceptance of tyranny and our obedience to tyrants. We are called to faithful struggle, because "even the principalities of heaven" – never mind on earth – "tremble with awe" before this God.⁴⁵

IV

The recently fired US Attorney General Jeff Sessions has, as all tyrants who call themselves Christians always do, run to the Bible, and to Romans 13 in particular, to justify, and stop criticism of the Trump administration's murderous policies and legitimize its disastrous rule. Calvin also deals extensively with Romans 13 where Paul describes government as "servant of God" who does not "bear the sword in vain," (Rom. 13:4), and this is where conservative Calvinists, tyrannical rulers and beneficiaries of their misrule and corruption try to find refuge.⁴⁶ I have dealt with this famous and contentious text elsewhere.⁴⁷ Suffice it here to simply make five points:

1. To use Paul's description of governmental authority without taking into account the context of empire and resistance to empire within which he worked and wrote, together with the context of the church in Rome as well as the political import of all of his writings within the context of empire, is to enhance the possibility of misunderstanding Paul from the outset.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31, 32

⁴⁶ This was of course a standard proof text for the apartheid regime, but unsurprisingly following in their footsteps, Jacob Zuma in South Africa also resorted to Romans 13 in an effort to keep churches from criticizing him and his administration. See Zuma's statement before the 2013 Presbyterian Synod in Giyani, Versahni Pillay, "Cursed If We Criticise Zuma? Think Again," *Mail & Guardian*, (online) October 8, 2013, <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-10-08,cursed-if-we-criticise-zuma-think-again>. For the use of this text in justification of Bush's pre-emptive war doctrine and America's divine right to execute God's divine wrath upon evil, i.e. whoever is America's enemy is also God's enemy, see T. Walter Herbert, *ibid.*, 66

⁴⁷ See Allan Boesak, "What Belongs to Caesar: Once Again Romans 13," Allan Aubrey Boesak and Charles Villa-Vicencio, (eds.), *When Prayer Makes News, Churches and Apartheid – A Call to Prayer*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986, 138-156

⁴⁸ See Boesak, "What Belongs to Caesar?"; see also especially the whole body of recent New Testament studies dealing with this subject, e.g. Richard A. Horsley (Ed.), *Paul and Empire, Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 1997; Richard A Horsley (Ed.), *Paul and Politics, Ekklesia*,

2. The key to understanding the Romans 13 passage is not, as traditional interpretation holds, in v. 1, but rather verse 4: government is nothing, if it is not “God’s servant (*leitourgos!*) for your good.” I made this point in 1985 in the heat of the debate surrounding our call to pray for the downfall of the apartheid regime, but it is gratifying to note that Nicholas Wolterstorff, in a very recent work, comes to the same conclusion. Wolterstorff argues, correctly, that government is a servant of God also in executing wrath on wrongdoers – the “sword”. My point is, however, that even that execution of wrath cannot be a willful, random act of vengeance, retribution or oppression. It too, will be an act “for your good” in *protection* of the rights of the poor, the defenceless and the downtrodden, the outcasts and the despised.⁴⁹
3. Calvin’s expectation of government is not in the first place that it be a “terror” to those who do wrong though. In the first place Calvin, as did Paul, believed that “a magistrate who truly answers to his title; who is the father of his country, and, as the poet calls him, the pastor of his people, the guardian of peace, the protector of justice, the avenger of innocence ...” is indeed the proper representative of good government.⁵⁰ In my view, this is not mere obeisance to earthly power, it is rather, a critical standard to which governmental authority is being held. If government is not this, theirs is no more than the rule of gangsterism.
4. Using the description “servant of God,” jumping, as it were, over the first crucially important words to “bearing the sword not in vain,” without in the same breath emphasizing, as Paul does, the words that immediately follow, “*for your good*”, is to omit a crucial referential framework for the whole text. This “good” is the “common good” in service to all, not just official pampering of the rich and powerful. It is the flourishing of the whole community, for the social, political, and economic health of the whole society. Paul does not mean charity, but justice, the respect for, promotion of, and protection of the rights of the poor and powerless toward the recognition of the fulfilment of the human dignity of all.

Israel, Imperium, Interpretation, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 2000, and the bibliography cited there.

⁴⁹ See Allan Boesak, *ibid.*; also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 83-104.

⁵⁰ *Institutes*, IV, xx, 24

5. In light of Paul's own theological and political stance within the wider scopus of his epistles, it is wrong to interpret "submission" here as blind, unquestioning obedience to civil authority.

In my view, Romans 13, far from being the refuge of scoundrels in splendour, pirates in love with pomp and circumstance, gangsters soaked in greed, and warmongers blinded by lust for blood and profits defiling politics, is in fact a weapon in the hands of those fighting for the sanctity of governmental authority.

V

If I understand it well, this consultation is called to consider three main questions: One, is our global situation, characterised and controlled as it is by imperialism, nationalism and totalitarianism, one that comprises a "scandalous world" of oppression, discrimination, exploitation, and death-dealing policies and practices of exclusion of the majority of God's children? And more specifically, is this true for Dalits in India and African Americans today?

Two, is there in our Reformed tradition, not the tradition appropriated by the rich and the powerful who distorted and perverted that tradition for their own racist, imperial ends, but as the radical tradition of resistance, justice, and liberation claimed by the poor, the powerless and the oppressed who knew that their cries for justice were the cries emanating from the very heart of God? Are our Dalit sisters and brothers and our African American sisters and brothers right to hear in these cries from God's heart a call for resistance toward justice and freedom?

Three, does this situation mean that a *processus confessionis* is required for Reformed thinking on the question of church and state?

To me the answer would seem to be a clear "yes." But perhaps these voices might help us in our deliberations. From Africa-America I hear Circuit Judge and Baptist pastor Wendell Griffen as he realizes a crucial truth about racism and white supremacy in the US, and it is something Black Reformed Christians in South Africa, too, had to discover in order to understand our struggle better:

It is time that we admit that the problem is much deeper, yet has always been obvious. Racial injustice continues and has persisted across the entire history of this society – legally, economically, politically, socially, and culturally – because white supremacy and racism is now – and has always been - *sacralized*. By *sacralized* I mean that white supremacy has always been

considered sacred. Whiteness has always been the standard of “rightness.” It is, therefore, a fundamental mistake to view and treat white supremacy as merely an attitude or a set of practices and policies. White supremacy is something approaching a theology in this society, if not the world! ... In this sense, race is not only a social construct. White supremacy is a theological construct in which white norms, goals, and aims define what is right, good, true, healthy, fair, and otherwise worthwhile ... This sacralized demonic theology has deceived, misdirected, distorted, perverted, and corrupted American society in such pervasive ways that we have failed to recognize it as a theology. Simply put, white supremacy is a theology that has deified whiteness and demonized non-whiteness. This theology has deceived people for such a long time and so effectively that even theologians have not recognized its theological effect. Because we have not treated white supremacy and white racism as sacralized evil, we have not understood that white supremacy and racism must be “de-sacralized” and exposed as demonic.⁵¹

From India I hear Manchala Deenabandhu:

The Dalit situation is one that *seriously challenges the credibility of the faith claims of any Christian in India* ... [therefore] not Dalit suffering alone, but also determination to struggle to overcome suffering and to risk themselves for the sake of liberation and justice as a matter of theological reflection.⁵²

And so it is. Except perhaps that I would exchange the words “theological reflection” for “theological integrity.” *That* much is at stake here. Also at stake is our God-given rights and God-given humanity. We are determined to claim our humanity, therefore we must be determined to fight for our freedom. Or as Calvin put it, simply and clearly in his commentary on Matthew 2:9: “Full humanity requires liberty.”

⁵¹ See Wendell Griffen, unpublished paper, “Racial Justice, Public Theologians and the Challenge of Sacralized Evil,” Key note address, Inaugural Racial Justice and Public Theology Collaborative Summer Conference, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN, June 8, 2018, 5,6.

⁵² See Deenabandhu, *ibid.*, 38.