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Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa

Doctrines

The doctrines of the Dutch Reformed Churches of South Africa are encapsulated in the following three articles of faith: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Dutch Confession of Faith (Confessio Belgica), and the Canons of Dordt. The Heidelberg Catechism, which was completed in January 1563, consists of a confession in 129 questions on all the essential aspects of Christian doctrine. The Dutch Confession of Faith, which was mainly composed by Guy de Bray in 1561, consists of 37 articles which deal with the fundamental aspects of the Christian faith such as the nature of God, the Bible, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, original sin, election, the incarnation, and the sacraments. The Canons of Dordt are a statement of faith produced by the Synod of Dordt held in 1618-19 in the Netherlands. These affirmed the following five points;

1. the complete depravity of humanity;
2. unconditional election;
3. limited atonement;
4. irresistible grace;
5. perseverance of the saints.

This is essentially a restating of the Calvinist position: that God has predestined who will and who will not be saved and, therefore, people cannot contribute to their salvation.

History

When South Africa was settled by the Dutch in the 16th and 17th centuries they transplanted their Dutch Reformed theology into the African continent. The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa was formally established by Jan Van Riebeeck in 1652. The history of the church has been very much bound up with the politics of the Afrikaner community of South Africa. The most controversial aspect of the Dutch Reformed Church's theology has been its support of the apartheid system: that is, the insitutionalised separation of the people of South Africa according to their race. South African Prime Minister Daniel Francois Malan, who led the campaign for complete segregation of the races in South Africa, was himself a Dutch Reformed minister. The social segregation of blacks, coloureds and whites was reflected in the establishment of churches for each of these three groups. In the early 1980s the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid to be a heresy and expelled the Dutch Reformed Church from its organisation.

Following the expulsion the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa has moved away from supporting apartheid. In 1986 all congregations in the church were desegregated. More recently the church has expressed repentance for the sin of supporting apartheid. It is to be hoped that following the establishment of voting for all adult South Africans regardless of race there will be closer integration within the church.

Symbols

Like other reformed traditions the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa uses the symbols of bread and wine to commemorate the death of Christ.

Baptismal water symbolises the death of the old sinful self and the rebirth into new life.

Adherents

In spite of the abolition of apartheid the distinctive racially based groupings within the Dutch Reformed Church continues to exist in practice. In 1996 the Dutch Reformed Church (mainly white) had 1,288,837 members, the Uniting Reformed Church (mainly coloured) had 1,216,252 members, and the Reformed Church in Africa (mainly Indian) had 2,386 members (Europa Publications Ltd. 1997, Vol 2: 2989).

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