

Review of *The Thousand Generation Covenant: Dutch Reformed covenant theology and group identity in colonial South Africa, 1652-1812*. by Jonathan N. Gerstner (Leiden: E. J. Brill)

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This fascinating and carefully researched work by the son of RTS-Orlando Professor, John Gerstner, is an edited version of Gerstner's doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago.

Gerstner's basic thesis can be described like this: The tiny diversion that comes with the beginning of a tenth degree angle later becomes a massive divergence from the parallel. So does a small beginning divergence in theology later become a large divergence from the Biblical norm. This volume describes the social, religious and political consequences of a variation from the biblical doctrine of the covenant as it has worked its way out in the history of Reformed settlement in South Africa. As such, it has become a necessary part of the rapidly growing literature on the cultural outworking of the biblical doctrine of the covenant and its alternatives (see *Contra Mundum* , Winter 1994 for an excellent introductory overview).

This reviewer learned much about the distinctions and technicalities of the various views of continental (Dutch) Reformed theologians on the covenant of grace and the resulting state of children born to members of the covenant. Gerstner shows that the basic views of the covenant of grace in the circles which produced the Three Forms of Unity: the *Belgic Confession* , the *Articles of the Synod of Dort* , and the *Heidelberg Catechism* , tended strongly towards seeing a child born to Christian parents as being *presumed regenerated* . This supposition was to remain until a person's unbelief and ungodly life-style after the age of accountability would prove him to be a reprobate sector of the human race. (See [Appendix](#) for a more complete discussion).

This view of the covenant, along with a couple of other factors, strongly encouraged the emerging proto-Afrikaner people to see themselves as *exclusively Christian* whereas the indigenous Hottentot and Bushman (Khoi-Khoi and San) were permanently reprobate. In other words, it “allow[ed] the colonists to view Christian and heathen as synonyms for

white and black” and did not cast “doubt concerning the colonists' own salvation” (Gerstner 1990, 256). This occurred despite the very widespread influence in South Africa “of the leaders of the [Dutch] Continuing Reformation¹ [who emphasized] the equality of children of believers and unbelievers in needing to be converted” (Gerstner 1990, 256). The Continuing Reformation carefully stressed the external holiness of children of the covenant and rejected all internal holiness or internal redemption perspectives. Gerstner shows that the Continuing Reformation's perspective upon the external holiness was widespread in both Holland and South Africa during the time period covered in the volume (1652-1815). He documents that the external holiness view had many strong adherents especially after about 1750. (See [Appendix 1](#) for more complete summary of the external holiness perspective).

However, Gerstner claims the reason why this biblical-evangelical perspective *failed to impact the frontier culture* was because “few works of the Continuing Reformation made a pointed attack on viewing children as already redeemed” (Gerstner 1990, 256, emphasis added). Furthermore, the baptismal formulation and much of the popular hymnody sung in *boekevat* (family devotions) in the isolated frontier communities in which most of the Boers (settlers) lived, *supported the internal holiness perspective* (Gerstner 1990, 256). The very popular books of the Continuing Reformation (i.e. catechisms, commentaries on the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and devotionals) made a much too subtle attack on the perspective that children of 'Christian' (i.e. baptized) parents were already redeemed. Their “subtle qualifications” could not negate the “unambiguous thanksgiving for 'forgiving us and our children all our sins' of the baptism form, read in the one service virtually every frontiersman attended” (Gerstner 1990, 256).

The die had thus already been cast by the mid seventeen hundreds. The strong teaching of the various versions of the internal holiness doctrine had strongly encouraged the whole community of Dutch-German (*duits*) settlers to see themselves and their children as part of Israel, i.e. as the People of God, as Christians. This, together with a State Church concept inherited from Holland which was very weak in church discipline, encouraged the settlers to see every member of the Duits-Afrikaner community as *Christian* even in the face of gross sexual immorality (such as fathering illegitimate children by Hottentot mothers). If the Afrikaner community was “Israel” (i.e. Christian) then the Hottentot and San, later the Bantu (i.e. Northern, black Africans), were seen to be “the heathen”. The heathen nations were seen to be virtually unredeemable. What this meant in practice was that the Dutchmen had an extremely hard time making the natives culturally “Dutchmen” which was synonymous with “Christian”!² All of this Gerstner carefully documents (see Gerstner 1990, 259-260 for a summary).

1 The *Nadere Reformasie* the Dutch Continuing Reformation, was roughly parallel to the first and second Great Awakenings.

2 Factors militating against seeing the Hotentot, San and Bantu as redeemable, at least until the missions movement in Dutch Reformed circles began to reach out and bring many of the natives into the kingdom were: (1) The relatively few conversions of the heathen due to the concept that conversion meant becoming culturally Dutch, (2) the lack of concerted effort to evangelize, and (3) the fact that the Synod of Dort had decreed that all converted slaves should be released from slavery. (See Gerstner 1990, 258-260)

Gerstner states his thesis clearly:

It is very clear what part of covenant theology reached the frontier, I and my children are Christian. Not just myself as an individual, but my whole family.... While it lacked theological sophistication and the emphasis on personal conversion of the Continuing Reformation thinkers, it was a philosophy which could be and was lived. Long before the concept of being an Afrikaner volk crystallized into nationalism, the concept of being a Christian-volk defined who was the community [(i.e. the people of God) and who was outside it]. The developments of the nineteenth century must be seen in light of the sense of group calling Christians produced during the colonial period largely through the doctrine of the covenant. (Gerstner 1990, 257)

The “developments of the nineteenth century” which Gerstner is speaking about began with the British empire's annexation of the Cape Colony in the first decade of the nineteenth century. At this time began the Anglicization policy towards the Afrikaners and the other native inhabitants of their new colony. The policy also involved the importation of the British imperial concept that the Empire, its law, its *pax Britannia* and its Sovereign were the basic fundamentals of national unity not the primitive ethno-covenantal perspective of the Afrikaner *volk*. The British perspective was in all major aspects equivalent to that of the Roman Law: *individual* loyalty to the virtually divine emperor, his law and his peace held the Empire together. All other human group distinctions were relativized in the face of this individualistic perspective. All persons were relative equals standing before the majesty of the Emperor and his Law-Peace. All individuals born within the Sovereign's *claimed* jurisdiction were equal persons under the law.

This concept was coupled with the emerging British liberal concept developed from Locke and others that the individual was the basic building block of society. Both views strongly influenced British imperial authorities and the meddling congregationalist-Reformed missionary, John Philip, Superintendent of the London Missionary Society. Both views stressed the *complete legal equality* of every individual, in other words totally equal citizenship in one civil-imperial order (see Ross 1986 for Anglo- equalitarian perspective; Crafford 1981 for an Afrikaner, Reformed perspective). Thus the "Christian" Afrikaner and Englishman (together with Hottentot and African) were proclaimed to be equal common citizens of the Empire.

This was actually only theoretically held and never consistently applied in the nineteenth century. For example, woman and most non-Europeans were not allowed the vote, children's rights were not emphasized, etc. However, this imperial dogma still "provoked...a violent [almost instinctual] reaction" among the frontier farmers (*Voortrekkers* or *Boers*) (Gerstner 1990, 259). They trekked into the interior and founded what they considered Christian *Volksrepublieke* (ethno-covenantally-based peoples republics) founded upon the principle of “no equality” between ethno-citizen and ethno-alien/*uitlander*. In other words, both the British *uitlanders* and brown and black natives

were not considered citizens even if they were long-term residents or even born in the land. Britishers, however, were treated as “Christians” and thus were accorded more dignity than the natives.

This perspective of total equality between “Christian” (i.e. Euro-citizen) and native-inhabitant was in actual fact both syncretistic and Christo-pagan. It was, sadly, naively and ethnocentrically assumed to be *the* “Christian” perspective by Rev. John Philip and the British colonial authorities. Gerstner assumes this basic perspective as well (see Gerstner 1990, 259). The reason for this assumption is likely because it is the definition of citizenship the present American neo-imperialist, civil religion accepts. However, the imperial definition of citizenship was not always that of the American consensus. The more covenantally based American Constitution presumes the opposite.³ Most of the critiques of Apartheid theology assume this individualistic-imperial perspective as well (see the reviewer's analysis and covenantal alternative in *Contra Mundum* , Fall 1992; Winter 1993).

This, then, is *the* major weakness in Gerstner's conclusion. He assumes that the church as ecclesiastical institution is the one new nation of God made up of individuals and families from all nations. He does not build upon what this reviewer would consider to be a more consistently covenantal perspective. Consistent covenantalism would see families, clans and ethno-national units of the earth, along with their political leaders (magistrates), to be either covenanted to false gods or to the God of Abraham. All peoples, the families of the *goyim* (Gen. 12:3; Ps. 96:7), along with their rulers, are to serve Yahweh and kiss His anointed (i.e. Messianic) kingly-Son. Yahweh walks among the *elohim* (i.e. the judges of the earth), holding them accountable to rule justly according to His righteousness (Psa 82:1ff). The Scripture repeatedly predicts the conversion of the peoples, i.e. their being ingrafted *as peoples* into the multi-ethnic, multinational covenant of the people of Abraham (see among others: Gen 12:1ff, 17:5ff, 18:18, Psa 2, 22:27ff, 47 [NIV], 67, 96; Isa 2, 9, 11, Servant Songs, Isa 66; Dan 2; Mic 4; Mt 12:18ff; Rom 4, 11, 15; Rev 7, 21-22). In fact Isaiah uses astonishing covenant-adoption terminology to describe a converted Egypt and Assyria who stand alongside of Israel as a blessing to the earth: “Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance” (Isa 19:23-25).

Therefore, Gerstner's question, "Has the universal calling of all Christians in a nation to proclaim God's Word become, consciously or unconsciously, seen as the task of merely one ethnic group?" (Gerstner 1990, 260) misses the point. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Afrikaner Reformed churches have been deeply involved in

3 In other words, American Indians were considered members of separate nations even though they may have been born within the boundaries of the American covenantal nation. Slaves were not reckoned actual members of the covenanted nation and were only partially counted, not because they were not considered fully human as equalitarians assume, but because the Southerners were afraid of northern Yankee domination and needed the extra population statistics the slaves would add. These numbers were necessary so that they could defend their own emerging national identity against what turned later into blatant Yankee imperialism under the guise of Christian humanitarianism. Actually that humanitarianism was another form of the same Roman Imperial equalitarianism that the British brought to Southern Africa. (See R.L. Dabney, *A Defense of Virginia and the South* , for a complete discussion.).

planting indigenous churches in many African, mixed-race and immigrant communities throughout central and southern Africa (see Crafford 1981). The Afrikaner people *as a whole* have never considered themselves to be exclusively *the* people of God in Africa or anywhere else. They have considered themselves *a* covenanted people within the Covenant People of God. Their concept of the unity of the Body of Christ, *at least theoretically*, was a unity within real ethno-covenantal diversity. They taught (theoretically at least) the newly planted churches to take the responsibility of reaching their own people(s) and also to reach out cross culturally.

Gerstner's problem here, then, is that he seems to have naively accepted many of the unconsciously-held cultural norms of American civil religion and has merged them with a modified anabaptist, individual- collective view of the Body of Christ. In other words, he seems to see the church as an alternative Kingdom of individuals from out of all the peoples, modeling the coming equalitarian Coming Age, in which all ethnic identity⁴ has been submerged (see Kreitzer 1993a for critique). The Reformed version of this vision is a form of Amillennialism which this reviewer believes is essentially platonistic. This future vision emphasizes that the Church as the unified New People/Nation of God totally replaces ethno-national Israel. Thus, logically there can be no place in God's Kingdom scheme for a converted national Israel in the future, nor any converted formerly heathen, ethno- national units within the One Church. In Christ, the distinctions between Jew and Greek are totally erased. Furthermore, the Kingdom is spiritually actualized now and in the future reign of heaven. But it is never actualized in a growing and real sense *within time and history*. Platonic philosophy's dualism between heaven/spiritual and earthly/physical triumphs. So does its implicit dialectical distinction between the goodness of [social] unity and the evilness of [social] distinction, the many. The Body of Christ is thus the One New Man without the old distinctions. (Of course this logically leads to social communalism ["no slave or free"] and the ordination of women ["no male or female"], but that is not always consequently seen by the doctrinally orthodox).

Thus American amillennial reformed thought has almost universally rejected the original Westminster Confession's concept that a Christian people and their magistrates are to support the church as institution and to establish the Christian faith and Biblical law in the land (see *Larger Catechism*, question 191; see Isa 19:19- 25). Neither does platonistic amillennialism have a place for Calvin's and the Westminster Confession's use of the "general equity" of the civil law to build a godly civil order. In other words, Calvin and the Confession see the Decalogue as being *only* the summarization of the moral law. The Decalogue is thus *not* the general equity of the civil law (Bogue 1987; see *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question 41, and *Larger Catechism* questions 98 and 99; see also Kreitzer 1993b, c for refutation of the view that "general equity" means the decalogue).⁵

4 Consequent Anabaptists will add gender, social class and age identities as well.

5 The moral law is the Decalogue, *plus* the universal principles of the apodictic and casuistic laws, *plus* the interpretations and applications of the prophets of the Lord, and of His apostles. The apodictic and casuistic laws of the Pentateuch were never intended to be *ad hoc*, specific laws limited only to theocratic Israel (Dt 4:5-7; Psa 119). *All* God's laws are righteous, eternal and good. Thus each apodictic

Gerstner, therefore, *has no consequent biblical-covenantal alternative to equalitarianism* in the civil sphere. He summarily dismisses with one sentence the Afrikaner theologian's explicit neo- Kuyperian attempt to develop a critique and alternative to equalitarianism in the civil realm: "Now at least in principle the goal [of Apartheid theology] is to make many Christian nations of the nations God created, and in no way to base apartheid theory on the distinction between Christian and heathen" (Gerstner 1990, 260).

Lastly, however, this is not to say that his critique is totally without merit. First of all, Gerstner disproves the contention of Irving Hexham's published dissertation (1981) and André Du Toit's article "No chosen people: the myth of the Calvinist origins of Afrikaner nationalism and racial theology" (Du Toit 1983). Both Hexham and Du Toit claim that no roots of the ethnic identity of the Afrikaner can be derived from the Calvinism of the colonial period, the period which Gerstner is researching. Both claim that Apartheid theology and Afrikaner nationalistic "ideology" developed *later* than the Dutch colonial period. They claim that Apartheid theology/ideology developed in the crucible of the sufferings of the nineteenth century oppression by the British Empire (See Atkenson 1993 for another covenantal refutation of Du Toit and Hexham).

Gerstner, however, aptly shows that there were indeed roots of Afrikaner ethno-national identity in earlier Calvinism. They are certainly found in the Calvinist-biblical distinction between Christian and heathen, between people of the covenant and covenant-breakers. This was and remains a biblical distinction. However, the distinction becomes very complicated when many of the "heathen" become confessing and obedient members of the Body of Christ. This is a real problem with which Gerstner is grappling however inadequately.

In this reviewer's mind, the neo-Kuyperian, Afrikaner scholars were/are correct in denying that which Gerstner affirms. Gerstner assumes that "Christianity" has *merely and only* "one point...in which essential differentiation between humans is taught: the division between Christian and non-Christian" (Gerstner 1990, 259). Gerstner again adopts a subtle equalitarian postulate from the surrounding individualistic-equalitarian American culture. Afrikaner theologians were correct in denying that this single division was the only real distinction in Mankind. God has formed the peoples of the earth (Gen 10- 11; Dt 32:8-9; Ps 86:9; Act 17:26). He is the King and discipliner of the peoples (Ps 96). He is the redeemer of all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12; Ps 22). Those ethno-national distinctions remain into eternity (Rev 20-21; Is 66:17ff). People-ness is indeed a specific, God-created sphere- distinction, division if you will, within mankind. God holds peoples accountable for national obedience and disobedience. One cannot read Moses (see Lev 19:33-34. 20:2, 24:16) and the prophets without seeing this clearly.

Gerstner, as pastor in a Reformed Church wavering on the issue of female ordination (the Christian Reformed Church), could also be forgetting God-created gender distinctions within the unity of mankind. Gender along with ethno-covenantal identity is also

and casuistic law *must* have an eternal, universal aspect applicable to all peoples.

formed/created by God (Gen 5:1ff, Mt 19:4). Parent-child and age distinctions, as well as the ability/gifts/discipline uniqueness underlying socio-economic classes are created by God and won't be erased in the eternal state. Real "social class" distinctions remain as well. Some, in the parables, inherit more cities and talents than others. Mankind-in-Christ, therefore, is a true unity and a real diversity: a trinitarian unity exactly as is Mankind-in-Adam (see Kreitzer 1992, 1993a). Try as he/she will, rebellious, unified humanity-in-Adam cannot erase true God-created distinctions.

Fortunately, the Afrikaner churches later dropped the covenantal distinction between their-group as the People of God and the heathen as the reprobate. They discovered a more biblical explanation for their instinctive desire to maintain ethno-cultural and socio-political self-determination. Neo-Kuyperianism gave them many more biblically valid insights for developing a truly Reformed justification for their desire to remain a Christian people among the other Christian peoples of the earth. "The neo-Calvinist defense of apartheid" was not, thus, merely "remarkably subtle arguments... To defend a sense of calling related to a heretical misunderstanding of the doctrine of the covenant" (Gerstner 1990, 261, n. 6).

There are, however, *definite aspects of evil and grave theological error* in that defense. There has to be an alternative to apartheid discrimination in the church and the socio-political order. This alternative is expounded *in principle* in the "general equity" of the *ger* laws of the Pentateuch (see also Gal 2 and Jas 2). These laws are *not* found in the Decalogue (except a small reference to the alien in the Fourth Commandment). Even so, they are the basic assumption behind much of the New Testament revelation dealing with the ethnic alien (see, e.g. the Good Samaritan; Peter and the Centurion, etc.).

Ethnic aliens must be treated equally with the ethno-citizen except for (1) land ownership (Num 15), (2) full [ruling-judging, and voting/choosing] membership in the legal assembly (Dt 23:1ff), (3) aspects of debt slavery, etc. The believing, circumcised, immigrant, ethnic alien of that time, and the believing, baptized ethnic alien in a Christian land made up of a covenanted-together, ethno-linguistic group of this New Covenant age, *must be given equal protection of the law*. This is much different from philosophical equalitarianism in legal theory. Derek Kidner summarizes the alien/stranger [*ger*] laws:

In all other respects, however, the foreigner who made his home in Israel was to be treated as an equal. Before the law, whether in a civil dispute or in a trial for crime, his standing was, for good or ill, that of any Israelite. "You shall have one law for the sojourner and for the native" (Lv. 24: 22). His working conditions too were safeguarded. "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your town; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it...(for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it)" (Dt. 24:14f.)....

More important, he must not be cold-shouldered. The kindly provisions of the tithe-feasts (Dt 14: 28f.) were meant for him no less than the native poor; in

fact “the sojourner” is usually the first on such a list. And, as if to forestall the quibble “Who is my neighbour?”, the great commandment of Leviticus 19: 18, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”, is supplemented before the end of that chapter by the charge: “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (34). This in turn was clinched by the unanswerable declaration, “The Lord your God...loves the sojourner [*ger*]” (Dt. 10: 17f).

Above all, the spiritual wealth of Israel was his, provided he took his stand within the covenant. There was nothing here for the casual, but everything for the committed. The law of the Passover excluded those who were in Israel for nothing more than employment and living space; but it admitted the slave or the resident alien once they and their family were circumcised, and it repeated in this religious context the refrain we have met elsewhere: “There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger [*ger*] who sojourns among you” (Ex. 12: 43- 49). In case this should seem to apply only to the Passover, the law of offerings reinforced the point. 'If a stranger [*ger*] is sojourning with you..., and he wishes to offer an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to the Lord, he shall do as you do... As you are, so shall the sojourner be before the Lord' (Nu. 15:14f). (Kidner 1972, 29- 30)

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Appendix

Gerstner documents the several variations of the traditional Reformed view of internal holiness (see Gerstner 1990, 245 for a summary). The views involving the sanctification of the children of believing parents is based on the exegesis of 1Co 7:14. The majority of Dutch Reformed theologians, thus, held to a version of sanctification of the child that amounted to "internal holiness":

1) "internal holiness" of presumed redemption and regeneration in the womb of the vast majority of all children of Christian parents in an *internal, real sanctification*. Only the Dutch Reformed of this variety, Gerstner documents, could claim that a newborn, unbaptized child was a "Christian". This view is obviously different from the consensus Christian view:

A Lutheran (or a Roman Catholic, [high Church Anglican], or Eastern Orthodox...) could not say his child was born a Christian. The child is born in sin and will remain that way until he is baptized. For the Baptist, the child is not a Christian until he believes. The only branch of Christianity which could affirm that a child is born a Christian is the Reformed [or Reformed, low church Anglican] Covenantal holiness made Christianity a birthright in a way no other view of children of believers did.... (Gerstner 1990, 245)

2) "amissible covenantal holiness", that is a child is saved in the covenant until he or she rejects the covenant "after reaching the age of discretion". This is Bullinger's viewpoint (Gerstner 1990, 6).

3) "seminal holiness" in which the child is seen as "already possessing the seeds of faith which would later come to fruition" through the proclamation of the word (Gerstner 1990, 245). This is clearly Calvin's view in the last edition of the *Institutes* (Gerstner 1990, 10).

4) “Decretal holiness” (140- 141). All children born of believing parents are saved, with the exception of those reprobated by the hidden decree of God. In other words, the “elect children of the covenant were viewed as being regenerate from their mother's womb as a general rule” (Gerstner 1990, 8). This was clearly Beza's view but it did not become predominant until the nineteenth century (Gerstner 1990, 7).

A minority held to a view of the state of a “holy child” meaning an external sanctification, an external “setting apart” (the original meaning of the Hebrew and Greek terms): “set apart for God in the visible church” (Gerstner 1990, 245) in an *external, covenantal holiness*. “God had put the children of believers in a special sphere in which they were most likely to be regenerated through the means of grace” (Gerstner 1990, 8). Children “were to receive the seal of the righteousness that is by faith (Rom. 4:11). They were to receive the seal before they had received either that faith or that righteousness. This position was seen as the logical application of the core principle of covenant theology; continuity between Old and New Testaments” (Gerstner 1990, 8). Gerstner claims that the statements of Ulrich Zwingli “all point to the concept of external holiness” (Gerstner 1990, 8). He further shows that this was the view that Calvin was most “favorable to” in his “early theology” (Gerstner 1990, 8-9). *Gerstner (and this reviewer) believe strongly that the external holiness view is the biblical view.*

Furthermore, Jon Gerstner carefully demonstrates that this external holiness viewpoint was that of many followers of the *Nadere Reformasie*, the Dutch Continuing Reformation (roughly parallel to the first Great Awakening) both in Holland and in South Africa. He documents that the external holiness view had many strong adherents after about 1750.

Yet at the same time, most of the descendants of the settlers at the Cape after 1652, especially those in the interior separated from the new development of theology, held consciously or subconsciously to the “internal holiness” doctrine of the *Three Forms of Unity* and of the Baptismal formulation as approved by the Synod of Dort. That formulation explicitly states that a child is forgiven: “We thank you that you have forgiven us and our children all our sins” (Gerstner 1990, 249).