


The 1619 Dordrecht Synod's decision on *corruptio totalis*: A missional challenge for the church in terms of media reporting on corruption in South Africa



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The doctrinal controversy, which led to the formal Synod in Dordrecht (1618–1619), had many stakeholders. The different European countries and its governments also had much at stake in terms of how the issue would have been dealt with by the Reformed Church. Although for different reasons than now, the controversy and the ultimate decision taken at the renowned Synod still has significance for the church and society in the 21st century and even beyond. Therefore, a recent study on the reporting of four South African newspapers on corruption (as a form of sin) is telling in terms of the way such cases are presented. Their reporting displays a different way of presenting 'sin' mainly as an actual sin and not as a human condition which calls for the church, in response to the *missio Dei*, to reflect theologically on contemporary media discourse on 'sin' if it wants to address the root cause of corruption in South Africa. Although I realise that there is other ways for the church to respond to widespread corruption, this article focuses mainly on a theological contribution in terms of a broader discussion on 'sin'.

Introduction

No country in the world can claim that it is 'corruption-free'. Therefore, the issue of corruption has a bearing on all the countries in the world, including South Africa. Whether all cases and forms of corruption are equally accentuated and publicised with the same vigour in all countries, is beyond the scope of this article. South Africa, especially in the last decade (2008–2018), has been served with corruption scandals by the media almost every week. It is not accidental that all South African presidents since the dawn of democracy (1994) included in all the State of the Nation addresses (SONAs) the issue of corruption.

In South Africa corruption is regarded as a criminal act. According to the *Prevention and Combatting of Corrupt Activities Act* (21 of 2004), corruption is defined as follows:

When someone gives (or offers to give) to someone in a position of power /or when someone in a position of power receives (or agrees to receive) gratification (which includes money, a donation, a fee, a reward, a status, property, the avoidance of loss, the discharge of a loan, a privilege, and a discount).

When someone in a position of power uses power illegally, or unfairly to endow another with, for example: money a donation, a fee, a reward, a status, property, the avoidance of loss, the discharge of a loan, a privilege, and a discount.

It is fair towards the media to argue that, within a constitutional democracy, it is their role to act as a watchdog of society and blow the whistle when someone commits a criminal act as set out in the abovementioned Act. However, the significance of this article is broader than this, namely the media's reporting on corruption in South Africa as a basis of how 'sin' is presented to the South African society. De Bruyn (2013:250), in his work *The Ten Commandments*, clearly places corruption and bribery as a violation of the eight commandment in the book of Exodus. Corruption therefore is not only a criminal act, but also a sin. De Bruyn (2013:250) asserts, 'Both active, and passive bribery are condemned as unrighteous in the Bible'.

The media's reporting on corruption in South Africa will serve as a fairly good case study to compare on how the clergy during the Synod of Dort articulated 'sin' in their formulation of the Canons of Dort. I will therefore compare and discuss the 1619 Dordrecht Synod's formulation of 'sin' as *corruptio totalis* [total depravity], and subsequently the way in which sin in the form of corruption is presented through media reporting.

I will proceed in the following way: A brief discussion on the doctrinal controversy at the Synod in Dort (1619) and, specifically, the position that was taken on *corruptio totalis*. I will then move on to discuss a recent (2016) study on the media's reporting on government corruption in South Africa. I will focus on the results and findings in relation to the issue of total depravity. I will close my argument in offering challenges for the church in its mission.

The Synod of Dort in 1619 outlined five main points which directly reject the views of the remonstrants (those who were advocating the views of Arminianism).

Here is a summary of what the Synod decided:

1. That all human beings are by nature sinful, and cannot save themselves, only by the grace of the God (total depravity).
2. God has chosen before the foundation of the earth, a certain number of people to be redeemed in Christ (unconditional divine election and reprobation).
3. Therefore, in terms of the aforementioned, Jesus died for the sins of the elect (limited atonement).
4. Human beings may resist God's grace, and God will not use his power to bend their will (irresistible grace).
5. God did deliver the 'elect' from the bondage of sin which does not mean they will not sin in the world, but that they will 'ultimately be saved' (perseverance of the saints).

The focus of this article is particularly on the point of the Synod that human beings cannot save themselves which is based on the notion *corruptio totalis*. They can only be saved by God. It should be noted that the idea of *corruptio totalis* was not a novice idea for the Synod of Dort, but was rooted in John Calvin's teachings as well as in the teachings of St Augustine. It was only that the Reformed Church during the 1600s had to deal with a 'slight' but crucial assertion that God elects human beings, but, as the Arminians (also named remonstrants) argued on, he chose them on the basis of his foreknowledge on who will respond in faith. This basically focuses on the role of human beings in the process of salvation. Therefore, the Synod had to respond and re-affirmed some of the crucial doctrines of the reformed tradition such as *corruptio totalis* to the 'remonstrants'. I will explain the notion of *corruptio totalis* as advocated by the Synod and base it on the writings and works of a few reformed theologians.

Allen (2010:95) explains that the notion of *corruptio totalis* means that all human beings are 'tainted with sin from the very inception of life'.

Augustine argues that sin is not merely an individual act or a specific behaviour, but a state, a condition and an orientation of one's will which is directed towards a desire. McFarland (2007) explains his view:

Though it remains possible to define sin as a transgression of divine will, in Augustinian perspective such transgression must be understood as a turning from God that inheres in the very

structure of fallen humanity. It is the absolute priority of this orientation that guarantees that every particular human act will be sinful. (pp. 148–149)

The view of Augustine that human beings are born with a sinful nature and are inherently corrupt was and still is not the only Christian view on human nature. In fact, the view of Augustine is in opposition to that of the British ascetic, Pelagius. The Arminians agreed neither with Pelagius nor with Augustine. They are still agreeing with Augustine and others that God took the first step in electing a certain number, but here is where they differ: God selected those who he foresaw would respond. Therefore, it could be said that the Arminians provide some room in their view for the role of human beings in the process of divine election and salvation.

Guthrie (1994) explains the reformed notion of total depravity:

Total depravity, correctly understood, means that although both Christians and non-Christians can do much good, nothing we do is free from the corruption of sinful self-interest. It means that although there may be all kinds of progress in history, human beings themselves are monotonously the same, repeating all over and over again the little drama in the Garden of Eden. (p. 225)

Augustine opposed Pelagius' thesis, contending that sin should not be viewed as the new and 'actual' deed of one's own will, but 'as tied together, in its actuality, with one's perverse and apostate nature' (Berkouwer 1971:432). Augustine further adds that this nature must be regarded in light of man's *peccatum originale* [original sin] (Berkouwer 1971:432). McFarland (2007) comments:

Augustine has no doubt that universal human sinfulness was both evident in history and well-attested in Scripture, but his claim wasn't just that all people sin as a matter of fact (something Pelagius would have been happy to affirm), but that all are inherently and unavoidably sinful. (p. 306)

A related question on the notion of total depravity, concerns the way in which all human beings, since birth, come to inherit sin. Ted Peters (1994:25)¹ argues that sin is passed on congenitally. He quotes the psalmist, 'Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me' (Ps 51:5). Subsequently, Peters (1994) explains that this biblical text refers to the:

situation in which we all are born, symbolized as a contagion that has been passed down not only through three or four generations (Exod. 20:5) but all the way back to the mother and father of our race. (p. 25)

There are also those that argue that sin was transferred through imputation (Allen 2010:99). Those who espouse such a view, argue that through the sin of Adam, sin was transferred to every human being and, consequently, all human beings are born with a sinful nature.

The notion of the total depravity of all human beings subsequently implies that sin is in nature also universal

1. He draws from the work of Paul Tillich.

(affecting all human beings) and radical (affecting every aspect of human life) (Migliore 2004:155). Durand (1978:125) refers to the pervasive nature of sin in the world because of *corruptio totalis*. Therefore, Durand contends that the experience of sin should not only be focused on the fragmentary and individual events or acts, but on how it manifests in society through the latter's structures and systems. O'Keefe (1990) explains the link between the inherently sinful nature and the sin manifesting in the structures of society as follows:

A social structure can be sinful in its source as it emerges and develops out of individual and personal decisions which are biased, narrow, and destructive. A structure can be sinful in its consequences when others confronted with a situation so structured are provoked to react defensively and so to reinforce the destructive characteristics of the situation ... (pp. 32–33)

The sin in the world, which is also described as social and structural sin, is based on the reformed notion of *corruptio totalis* as mentioned, namely that all human beings are inherently sinful and born into a world of sin (sin predates human beings).² But this is not the end of the discussion. Human beings have, since the inception of sin in the world, contributed to the evolution of sin in the world through their actions. There are numerous examples of such sins that have contributed to the current state of corruption and sin in the world.

Peters (1994:9) explains the escalation of sin in the world as comprising seven steps: anxiety, unfaith, pride, concupiscence, self-justification, cruelty and blasphemy. Sebastian and MacDonald (1995) also discuss the evolution of sin in the world and describe it as follows:

Social sin begins with personal sin, but an entanglement with the surrounding culture and its customs and institutions gradually develops. At that point the harm it inflicts on others, both people and institutions, begins to magnify, beyond the persons originally responsible for it, so that there is little or no possibility of identifying any individual responsible for it. As a result it lives on, even after the death or change of heart of the early agent. (p. 109)

Although Sebastian and MacDonald (1995) might differ in how sin developed, the point is made: sin has evolved over the years – within all human beings since the fall of humanity contributing to the sinful world we have. The notion of *corruptio totalis* forms an integral part of the reformed doctrine, namely the Canons of Dort. I need to emphasise at this point that, although sin is structural and part of society, and that many contributed to sin in the world in all forms (including corruption), this does not mean that individuals are not responsible for their own actions. It is only to allow us to have a broader discussion of sin as it manifest in society. I believe that such a discussion is needed, as it will allow for collaborative and collective attempts to solve the said issue of corruption.

2. Theron (2013:2) also points out the role that political systems play in the occurrence of corruption. Gutiérrez (1973) explains the notion of social sin: 'Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of people, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation' (p. 175).

I will proceed with a discussion on a recent study by Baron (2017) and theologically reflect on how the South African media presents acts of corruption (as a form of sin).

The media's reporting on corruption in South Africa

In 2017, Baron analysed reports on acts of corruption in the context of national, provincial and local government in South Africa included in four South African weekly newspapers over a period of 12 months (from 01 January to 31 December 2016). He then selected four cases of corruption within that period and gathered all the relevant reports on such incidents in the selected newspapers. The researcher collected such reports, described and analysed the rhetoric of each report as well as comparing the reports that appeared in the different newspapers on the same event. In order to analyse the rhetorical thrust of such reports, the researcher made use of classic and modern forms of rhetorical criticism with reference to the work done by Douglas Lawrie (2005) on public speaking, which also applies to media reporting, as described in standard textbooks on rhetoric. Based on such a conceptual instrument, the researcher sought to capture and assess the ways in which each newspaper approached its role in shaping not just public opinion, but also moral awareness, moral attitudes and moral behaviour.

In summary, the study reveals the strategic purposes of the editors and management of those newspapers, but also how the management of the newspapers are aligned to a specific ideological stance in terms of a particular corruption case. The study also reveals the role the newspapers play in the moral formation of the audience – as the issue (corruption) that was reported, was of moral concern. In raising an awareness and also positioning the readers to judge on issues of corruption, the media created vigilance that is one of the conditions for moral formation.³ However, the study, placed in the context of Christian reformed discourse, reveals a very concerning matter which was raised by St. Augustine, but also reaffirmed by the ministers that attended the Synod in Dordrecht (1618–1619): t human beings are all sinful in nature. This matter is revealed in the presentation of the media on corruption scandals in South Africa. I will therefore focus on how such reporting was done to not only raise the alarm, but critically discuss the role of church in society. This is indeed done from the standpoint that churches are in their nature missional. It is the church that is to act as God's agents in his mission to contribute to a sound theology or, as David Bosch (1991:489–498) would refer, to mission also as 'theology'.⁴

The media's reporting in relation to *corruptio totalis*

The findings of the study, conducted by Baron (2017), show that corruption is widespread in local, provincial and

3. See the conditions of Vosloo (1994) as captured in summary by Baron (2017).

4. Bosch (1991:489–498) refers to one of the paradigms as 'Mission as theology'.

national government. The four case studies⁵ used in the study of Baron (2017) on acts of corruption, discuss the way in which the newspapers reported on those cases. Those cases were quite important, as it mostly involved the former president (Jacob Zuma) of South Africa and other influential figures in the public domain. Therefore it would be interesting to reflect in a theological manner on how the media presented those cases. Furthermore, in terms of the newspapers' circulation figures, it is clear that a significant number of South Africans rely on the reports of those newspapers for their perspective and judgement on corruption. Therefore, it will be important to firstly discuss how the newspapers reported on those cases and what the implications for the church are.

What is indeed relevant in the study is the pervasive nature of sin, in particular corruption. However, the findings of the study show that the newspapers' reporting on corruption is only directed at individuals and organisations' acts of corruption, while corruption, as such, still continues as if it is the norm – merely a component of society. It remains 'invisible' for those who are not directly affected; those who are also part of the organisations and institutions of government or political parties in which corruption has become so interwoven and part of their culture that it is difficult to confront and address it. This phenomenon was also well illustrated in apartheid South Africa when 'virtuous' people at the time were nevertheless supporting the evil apartheid system. It served as an example of how people are so entrapped by a system of structural injustice they were complicit in and often did not 'see' or are aware of the injustice. However, in terms of the above discussion on sin and the reiteration by the Synod of Dort in 1619, all South Africans are responsible for the current situation of corruption, whether directly or indirectly involved in a specific act.

When corruption is addressed in this sense, there are also some implications for the church in addressing corruption. As noted, the reporting of the newspapers on corruption is only directed at certain individuals and organisations who are corrupt. However, with reference to *corruptio totalis*, all human beings are inherently corrupt which is the consequence of the current pervasive and universal nature of corruption. This is a radical move away from only perceiving sin as an act of an individual (which it is and for which he or she should be held accountable), but more than that: it is an inherited human condition. This being said: Everyone is implicated, even the media. It also implies that everyone in South Africa has contributed to the pervasive and widespread corruption.⁶

5.The four case studies included: (1) the reported corruption when upgrades were carried out at President Jacob Zuma's private residence at Nkandla. This is documented in chapter 6; (2) the reported corruption of the Guptas' unethical relationships with public officials and state-owned institutions which is documented in chapter 7; (3) the reported corruption at the South African Broadcasting Corporation of South Africa (SABC), documented in chapter 8; and (4) the reported corruption at the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) which is documented in chapter 9.

6.See the discussion in 'Reconciliation as one guiding vision for South Africa?' (Conradie 2013:13–83) on the proportionality of guilt with South Africa as a case study.

However, it should be noted that there is a difference between corruption as a form of sin and corrupt nature. I briefly want to discuss this. The issue of corrupt nature is not corruption as been reported in the newspapers. Corruption is a criminal and sinful act. However, this article wants to focus more on corruption as merely an act (sinful or criminal). It wants to focus on corruption as something that is borne from a sinful nature. This is not addressed by the media. The media deals with the symptoms in terms of Christian discourse, whereas the Canons of Dort assist us to look at a corrupt act in a different and almost radical way.

In terms of Moe-Lobeda's argument (2013:60)⁷ on the structural nature of sin, the scourge of corruption will not be easily eradicated, but will remain part of the social fabric of future generations. Therefore, the hullabaloo made by the selected newspapers over recent (2016) acts of corruption, might present such an issue as a novel phenomenon – a shocking one in a post-apartheid South Africa. However, if placed in the Christian reformed discourse on sin, corruption (as a form of sin), although appalling, has been part of the history and structures of society since sin's inception in the world.⁸

Corruption (as a form of sin) therefore cannot be isolated from, for example the apartheid, neoliberalism and capitalism or colonialism era in South Africa and abroad, or from other periods in history, because sin can be traced as far back as the fall of humanity. It is also present not only in government institutions, but also in the corporate sector.⁹ Corruption existed already during the time when the New Testament church started. In fact, when taking into account the notion of *corruptio totalis*, it means that before our birth sin has been in the world and that we are so entrapped in the system (our inherited nature) that neither the newspapers nor any media institution will be able to effectively deal with corruption in society. This does not mean that the media should discontinue its role of vigilance, fostering awareness and persuading its readership to combat corrupt activities, but that the media and the church should be conscious of its limitations.

Although such a distinction might be made in terms of the newspapers' reporting in terms of government corruption as well as presenting such (government) corruption as one of the most destructive acts in the new and democratic South Africa, it is as serious in nature as other manifestations of sin in the world. It is evident in the newspapers' reporting that one newspaper would place many emphases on corruption as well as certain individuals' acts of corruption, while other newspapers would focus on other moral issues during the same weekend. It raises concern in terms of the newspapers'

7.We note here specifically Moe-Lobeda's reference to and argument (2013) on the structural nature of sin.

8.I want to reiterate that corruption is discussed here as a form of sin. Therefore, it means that, because sin predates human existence, corruption, as we understand it in biblical terms, was part of the world when sin entered the world.

9.An interesting study that should also be undertaken is a comparative study between government and corporate corruption in South Africa. It would be interesting to assess the newspapers' rhetorical strategies in terms of government corruption compared to corporate corruption.

categorisation as well as prioritisation of moral issues. What if it was not the president or a specific individual who was involved? Will it still be front-page news? Are the newspapers really interested in the issues and acts of corruption as such or are they interested in a specific person who has been corrupt as the results suggest.¹⁰ The manner in which the newspapers report, can establish a skewed understanding of corruption (as a form of sin) in the mind of their readers.

One of the pertinent questions to ask in relation to the findings of the study on the media's reporting on corruption is as follows: Has corruption become so mundane and entrenched in the structures of South African society that it implicates all citizens so that, instead of confessing *our* guilt, some citizens (including the media) blame a certain portion of society even though all human beings, South Africans in this case, contributed to the equal spread of sin and corruption in the world?

Albert Nolan (1988) discusses the structural sin of apartheid, and avers that all human beings, because of their sinful nature, are guilty in terms of the devastating effects of it:

Original sin is the sin we inherit. It is a given. It is something with which we are born. In South Africa, it is apartheid as a total system. Perhaps more accurately, original sin is mediated to us in South Africa by the system of apartheid. That is not a mere theoretical speculation, it is our experience. From a religious point of view, the system can be experienced as original sin. People are taught to believe that the human weakness or alienation they experience is an inherent characteristic of human nature – 'our fallen nature'. One hears Christians saying, 'We are selfish by nature; there is nothing we can do about it; we are all sinners'. (pp. 90–91)

Although Nolan (1988) is speaking in the context of the post-apartheid discourse and racism, his argument is also relevant for the purposes of this article. In conversation with his argument, this would imply that all South Africans, including the media and the church, bear the burden of the guilt of corruption that is prevalent in the country. Therefore, certain critical questions could be posed to the media: Is the media not, by singling out certain individuals, also simultaneously mitigating the guilt of other members of society? What about those who are passive and not doing anything to stop the corrupt system, and who are indirectly benefiting from corruption? Are they not all sharing in the guilt of the current state of corruption in South Africa?¹¹ In terms of the reformed perspective, which the Canons of Dort amplifies in terms of the total depravity of all human beings, all South Africans have contributed in some way to the current state of corruption and sin in the world. It is therefore not satisfactory to address corruption only as particular acts by individuals in the way the media typically does in its reporting.

It seems to be acceptable for the newspapers to blame a certain individual or individuals for corruption. This is

10. Please see a detailed analysis of the result of the study in Baron (2017).

11. See also the discussion of Menninger (1973) above on the guilt of non-slave owners in America during the time of slavery which was just as guilty as the slave-owners, because they supported the system.

definitely not erroneous, as those specifically responsible for committing an act of corruption should be held accountable, but will this solve the endemic problem of corruption? Is this perhaps not to seek superficial solutions to a much deeper and complex phenomenon in South Africa?

Menninger (1973) discusses the case of the 'legitimate' war in America in which the so-called guilty ones would be separated from the 'not guilty ones'. He contends that this is problematic. In response, he uses as an illustration the period of the slave trade in America. Menninger (1973:107) focuses on those who were non-owners of slaves (who might claim they are not guilty), and argues that they should also be seen as complicit, because they 'supported the system'.

In terms of Menninger (1973) and others (see discussion above), sin is so entrenched in society that it seems impossible to make a distinction between the 'guilty' and the 'not-guilty' ones. In fact, in terms of a reformed perspective it is impossible to be born inherently good (which is a view held by Pelagius). Therefore, this would leave the media with its journalists, editors and owners with some material for internal reflection, namely that they might also be part of the systemic problem of corruption in society. They are part of the evolution of sin and corruption in the world. Therefore, the newspapers cannot regard themselves as occupying a better position (in terms of the reformed notion of total depravity) to expose the culprits without acknowledging their own contribution to the current state of corruption in South Africa. This is not to say that culprits should not be held accountable for violation of the South African law – it is just to focus our attention that corruption will not be solved that easily.

The complex notion of guilt and those responsible for sin in the world is well addressed by some scholars. Such a discussion will be relevant and appropriate for the purposes of this article: to respond more specifically to the question and to further elaborate on the discussion, namely who is to be blamed for corruption in South Africa.

De Gruchy (1989) compares the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany's response in the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt (1945) with the war crimes that were committed in their country. He addresses the said question, but concentrates specifically on the following questions: Who is responsible for the war crimes?; and, related to this: Who should confess guilt for the social sin?¹² De Gruchy (1989) states:

Several things need to be noted about this confession [*Stuttgart Confession of Guilt*] ... The first is the expression of solidarity with the nation in its suffering and guilt. They [*Confessing Church*] were not standing in judgement over against a guilty nation which had been brought to its knees; they were experiencing the pain of the nation, and acknowledging their part in its guilt. They were certainly not giving any excuses. 'We accuse ourselves' they declared. At the same time, and secondly, they did not have

12. It is important to note that De Gruchy (1989) explains the difference between guilt and sin. He states: 'Sin is a general term which indicates that we have done wrong, particularly in relation to God; Guilt is a legal term that indicates we are responsible for what we have done' (p. 36).

a false sense of guilt. They stated that they had in fact opposed the Nazi regime and suffered as a consequence. But this did not take away their share in the guilt of the nation. In the third place, their sense of guilt did not drive them to despair but to fresh commitment. They committed themselves to a new beginning; repentance, they discerned, should lead to real change and a commitment to action. (pp. 34–35)

De Gruchy (1989) clarifies that the said confession of the church at the time was in no way a 'guilt trip'. The church did not deny its opposition to the Nazi regime in Germany, but acknowledged that all human beings are guilty because of the sin of Adam.¹³ He (1989) explains:

Just as a nation, a group, or a congregation can acknowledge its sins, so the confessing of guilt is as much a corporate action as it is one which involves individuals. (p. 39)

De Gruchy (1989) subsequently argues that all human beings share in the guilt that can be derived from:

our rejection of Christ, our share in the fallenness of humanity. Hence none are guiltless, and it is pointless to apportion blame to others. We are guilty, and it is in the church that this guilt should be most acutely felt and recognized precisely because it is the community which has known and acknowledge the saving grace of Christ. (p. 39)

Gestrich (1989) also refers to the declaration of guilt that was drafted by the Evangelical Church after the Second World War and illustrates the acknowledgement of collective guilt by those who would have been regarded as 'innocent':

On October 18 and 19, 1945, the Evangelical Church formulated its well-known Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, in which prominent church leaders who knew they were not only in a 'community of suffering' but also in a 'solidarity of guilt' with all Germans confessed [*sic*] as representatives for all Germans: 'Unending suffering has been brought upon many people and countries by us'. On August 8, 1947, the 'Darmstadt Word' of the Brethren Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany commented on 'the political path of our nation. We must allow ourselves to be absolved of our total guilt of our fathers as well as our own, we must allow ourselves to be called home 'by Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and from all the evil paths on which we Germans have gone astray in our political intentions and actions'. (p. 249)

Kerans (1974:67) argues in his work *Sinful social structures* that everyone, including those who are passive, is to blame for what is classified as sin in the world and society. The wrongs committed and the prevalence of social sin, for example war crimes and, in South Africa particularly the well-known promulgation of apartheid, are examples of sin as manifested in the social structure. Kerans (1974) explains, for example in the American context, how everyone in society is responsible for black discrimination:

How many people have refused blacks entry to their shop or office, saying, 'I have nothing against them; it's just that if I let them in I'll lose the business.' (p. 67)

13. De Gruchy (1989) quotes the words of one of the early leaders of the confessing church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'It is not a morbidly egoistical distortion of reality, but it is the essential character of a genuine confession of guilt that it is incapable of apportioning blame and pleading a case, but is rather the acknowledgement of one's own sin of Adam' (p. 35).

Kerans (1974:67) cautions that, 'The person who says that is not only captive to social opinion, but he also contributes freely to his own and others' captivity.' Gestrich (1989:250) alludes to the words of the Lutheran Hans Asmussen in the aftermath of the Second World War, 'The German citizen ..., who for the sake of his peace sacrificed justice, is guilty.'

Menninger (1973), in his work *Whatever became of sin?*, focuses on corruption through the use of American case studies. Notwithstanding the difference in context, his discussion on the collective responsibility of sin is relevant for the role of all members of society in corruption. In reflecting on acts of corruption, the newspapers might find it much easier to identify and crucify a particular individual or individuals and present them as the ones responsible (as was observed in the media reports earlier in this study). However, Menninger (1973), like Kerans (1974), argues that it is not only a particular individual or certain individuals who are responsible for sin which, in this study, would be corruption. The article calls on the church to provide society with a deeper theological reflection on sin – which would be crucial in addressing corruption.

Nolan (1988:89) brings the notion of collective guilt closer to home to the South African context and the years of apartheid. Nolan (1988), likewise, argues that those who were active as well as those passive in the construction and prevalence of the apartheid system in South Africa are equally responsible for the sins of apartheid:

The system [*apartheid*] was created by numerous human beings in numerous ways. There were those who made the policy decisions along the way; there were those who supported and worked for the system; there were those whose greed, arrogance and hypocrisy made them fanatical architects of the system; and there were those who committed the great sins of omission by remaining silent and doing nothing to change the course of events. We can even point to those among the oppressed who did not join in the resistance but became passive accomplices in their own oppression. We can look back and see generations of sinners behind this system stretching back beyond South Africa and beyond colonialism into the distant past. (p. 89)

Conradie (2013) also critically discusses the issue of proportionality of guilt, specifically in terms of structural sin (structural violence and resistance) in South Africa. His emphasis is on the complexity existing between the two notions, victim and perpetrator, specifically in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. He declares that the said notions are not easy to define, because, in some cases, the victim might claim to be the perpetrator, while, in others, the perpetrator might assert that he or she is the victim. As an illustration, he uses the example of 'gangsters' on the Cape Flats to elucidate the complexity of defining the two. He also makes the point that sin and guilt have much to do with the whole of society, and that often the victim may be the perpetrator or vice versa, or a person or group could be both (victim and perpetrator) as the following example by Conradie (2013) illustrates:

It would be appropriate to suggest that gangsters are victims of economic and social forces far beyond their own control.

Gangsterism on the Cape Flats may be regarded as a function of forced removals under the Group Areas act, economic deprivation, educational disadvantages, drugs trafficking and so on and so forth. At the same time, gangsters also commit horrendous crimes (such as gang rape) where the vulnerable in society are further victimised. Add to that the violations of human rights that occur in the name of protection of the neighbourhood, self-defence, vengeance and an ensuing spiral of killing. In short, such gangsters are both victims and perpetrators. (p. 50)

In terms of the above discussion on the reporting of newspapers on sin (corruption), what is the challenge that it poses to the Reformed Churches in South Africa and what opportunities might exist? This is the purpose of the final section of this article: The church, which is part of God's mission on earth, also spreads the gospel. Therefore, the next section discusses the role of the church as agents of transformation in South Africa.

Corruption: The Reformed Church's mission

The Reformed Church should revisit the Canons of Dort as a resource to address the prevalent corruption in society. It has much to offer to the state of corruption in South Africa. This is different from what the media is currently providing through their presentations of corruption in their reports. It is crucial that the church introspectively asks: Who is responsible for the pervasive corruption in South Africa? The answer lies within its own confessions, but in particular, within the Canons of Dort (1619) on the issue of *corruptio totalis*. The answers might place the responsibility at the door of a particular individual who is not wrong because he or she must take responsibility for his or her action, but the Canons of Dort widen the ambit of accountability.

The findings of the study show that the selected newspapers would put the blame on a certain individual or individuals who committed a corrupt act. Therefore, the notion of *corruptio totalis* questions the way in which newspapers report on corruption. The focus of the newspapers, solely on specific individuals' corrupt behaviour, could undermine the notion of sin as pervasive and as being part of the fibre of society.

Christian discourse on original sin and the Canons of Dort (which is dealt with in the paragraphs above) assists one to understand the pervasive impact of sin, including the acts of corruption. It radicalises an understanding of sin stating that it cannot be isolated and then eradicated. It is more pervasive and, in fact, manifests itself in each and every human being as well as the structures of society. Corruption is not only the act of an individual, but, in terms of reformed doctrine, all human beings are inherently sinful. Therefore, every human being in one way or another has contributed to this corrupt, sinful state of human beings and of society.¹⁴ Although I

14. This argument links with that of Sebastian and MacDonald (1995:109) that sin did 'magnify beyond the persons originally responsible for it'.

acknowledge the pertinent role of newspapers in addressing corruption, it leaves a vacuum for the church to assist society to reflect deeply and theologically on the rampant corruption experienced in society. In terms of the Canons of Dort, it also poses a challenge to the church and all role players in the fight against corruption. Their limitations are that, although they can play a pertinent role in the quest to root out corruption in South Africa, all role players, including the church, can unfortunately not redeem human beings (including the media itself) from its corrupt nature.

Furthermore, the way in which the media presents acts of corruption should be of concern to the church. The media in its reporting suggests that there are only a few corrupt (sinful) people in society who should be dealt with in order to redeem society from the scourge of corruption, whereas the Synod in Dordrecht (1619) opposed such an understanding of sin as an external act. However, sin is a condition. Furthermore, it evolved and is found in the social fabric and structures of society. Since creation, sin evolved and even the most noble and most virtuous person in society is inherently sinful. In terms of the Canons of Dort (and reformed doctrine), it is ultimately only through the saving work of Christ that humans can be redeemed from the sin in their lives and in the world.

The reformed perspective on the sinful nature of human beings, in particular its notion of *corruptio totalis*, therefore has implications for the church in addressing corruption. In terms of the above discussion, the following pertinent question could be posed: Is the church also not guilty in terms of the guilt of all human beings and the notion that every human being is, in her or his nature, sinful?¹⁵ Is it therefore not important that the church not only perceives its role in terms of opposing corruption, but also acknowledges and confesses its own contribution in the evolvement of corruption in society? It should be, alongside the media, vocal of the universal and radical nature of sin in the world – which all boils down to *corruptio totalis*. As Menninger (1973:126) argues, to acknowledge one's sin is a start, but it is not enough; each member, organisation and institution (including the church) must join hands, oppose all forms of structural sin and 'become noisy enough to attract the attention and gain the support of some of the previously indifferent'.

The argument by Menninger (1973) that the 'non-guilty ones' might be complicit indubitably, raises serious questions and concerns about the position of the church in terms of the state of corruption in the world. Is the church as well as the media not part of the 'despoilment' (Migliore 2004), the moral decline and pervasiveness of corruption in South Africa? Therefore, the church cannot be regarded as the 'not-guilty-one' (Menninger 1973), but as one that has contributed in some way or another to the current state of corruption in the world. Given the presentation of the media, the church has a task to participate in addressing corruption, not as one that is 'blameless' or the 'non-guilty', but in humility join and raise its voice against a false righteousness in society. No one, not

15. See earlier my reference to De Gruchy's argument and discussion (1989) on the Confessing Church's confession of guilt in the war crimes of Nazi-Germany.

even the church, can be regarded as innocent, especially in terms of a reformed perspective on sin.

However, if we all, including the church, are corrupt, how could we act as being 'blameless'? The media reflects in contrast that they themselves are not to blame. The church has to play a role in participation in society and assist society to reflect on the contribution of the whole society to an issue of corruption, but also that all should humbly participate in addressing it.

Although the media and the church could still continue in their crucial role and quest to address corruption, and to act as the watchdogs of society, it should be careful not to act as the 'saviours' or the 'blameless'. Instead, through acknowledging their own contribution in terms of the widespread corruption (as a form of sin), they should seek solutions together with the rest of society.

It is also crucial for the church to understand that it is part of the problem, especially in terms of the reformed perspective on sin. South African society will need everyone, including the church, to assist in combating corruption. However, the Canons of Dort, particularly the issue on *corruptio totalis*, leaves us with the question as to whether corruption will ever be eradicated taken into account the universal and radical nature of sin in the world.

In the endeavour of combating and rooting out corruption in South Africa, the involvement and participation of each member of society is needed. In addition, Moe-Lobeda (2013) reflects on the role of society in the eradicating of structural sin which could also be relevant to the discussion on corruption. She particularly addresses the systems that perpetuate an unjust economy as well as the burden on the environment. She argues that structural sin can be dealt with when members of society, in the first place, 'see' and become aware of structural sin, and secondly, 'judge' and discern the wrongness. Although the selected newspapers play a role in the awareness and encourage their readership to adopt a particular position on corruption, they are still lacking in focus – they should include the responsibility of and contribution of all members of society to the current state of corruption in South Africa.

Moe-Lobeda (2013) argues, however, that more is needed than the above: all human beings should act. This, as she asserts, is needed, because human beings constructed the system and therefore human beings can change it (Moe-Lobeda 2013:238). She proposes that all members of society play a role through the non-cooperation with evil (not to participate in systems that are doing harm), in the first place, and secondly, cooperation with good (supporting more just and healthy living, and all that contributes to the good of society).

How does this assist in reflecting on corruption in South Africa? In terms of Moe-Lobeda's arguments, it would mean that members of the South African society, alongside the

media, should denounce all forms of corruption and work towards a just society. The newspapers are not assisting society if those who are corrupt are only critiqued, which is much needed to combat, expose and 'unmask' corruption. However, more constructive ways are needed, and that would be to construct a society that also admit their own contribution, and together with the 'corrupt' deal with the pervasive corruption in society. There have been many discussions on those who held unto the economic monopoly of the country and benefited from the wealth of the country. However, the question remains: Why are they the ones that are not emphasised in the corruption reports of the selected newspapers? How is it possible that only one or a few individuals can be isolated in terms of corruption? Why can they not be easily brought to book? Is this not a small indication of the deep entrenched corruption in society and that all members of society have to be involved in addressing pervasive corruption in society?

Conclusion

There might indeed be various practical ways for the church to respond to corruption in South Africa, for instance to instil biblical values in society. However, this article approaches the role of the church differently. The church should provide society with a theological analysis of the pervasive and radical nature of sin in an effort to address corruption.

The media is indeed not the church and is, in this article, not equated with the church, but has its own objectives and vision for a good society. This article does not prescribe media institutions in South Africa, but displays the underlying problem – a deeper theological analysis – on the inherent sinful nature of all human beings as formulated by the Synod in Dordrecht (1619) which helps us to understand the pervasive and radical nature of corruption (as a form of sin). It, at least from a theological perspective, provides a deeper analysis from the wells of reformed doctrine and as captured by the Canons of Dort (1619) for the church to respond and contribute to the problem of corruption in the South African society. The current role of the media and the church should, however, not be discontinued. The media should continue to report on individuals and the church should also expose those within their own ranks, but they should be mindful of all human being's contribution towards the pervasive acts of corruption in South Africa.

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