

CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

Cedric Mayson

1. THE CONFLICT

The conflict in South Africa is between a minority who impose a divisive undemocratic non-racial society. It is divided between the mostly white rich and the mostly black poor. One side has the weaponry of a modern military state and the other has their bare hands. One side receive massive economic and political support from the west, and the other is allowed neither political organization nor outside support.

The regime has no legitimacy. It survives solely by violence enacted in the legal, economic and social structures, the bloody engagement of the military and police, and the employment of mercenaries in townships and bantustans, the reckless repression of its own populace and its neighbouring states. Over all lies a grey fog of deceit and misinformation, a deliberate attempt to disguise or justify the enormity of the oppression and its root in brutal injustice and exploitation.

It is not a conflict about sanctions or violence or

communism, or the Commonwealth, or the EEC, or PCR, or church funds, or theology, or forms of representation, or reforming

friendship to draw both sides together....but plays no such a role. The church itself is divisive and divided, in desperate need of reconciliation. It is not Gods army but Gods battlefield.



Clergymen including Dr Allan Boesak, The Rev F. Chikane, Archbishop Tuta and Archbishop. S. Naidro leading a protest march.

apartheid, or protecting minorities, or necklaces, or bishops, or prisoners on Robben Island; it is a struggle to overthrow an unjust and repressive regime and replace it with a government mandated to establish a united democratic non-racial South Africa. This is the line of battle on which the contending forces divide.

2. RECONCILIATION

2.1 Is the Church a Reconciler?

Before we could explore the role of the church they likes to think it stands between the contestants, black and white, rich and poor, old and young, stretching out the hand of

course of the struggle and startled the west northerly world.

A THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE AND A CALL TO PRAYER FOR THE END OF UNJUST RULE was produced by a group in the Western Cape for the June 16th Memorial Service of 1985, and its authors explain;

We have prayed for our rulers as is demanded of us in the scriptures. We have entered into consultation with them as is required by our faith... We now pray that God will replace the present structures of oppression with ones that are just, and remove from power

Since the current emergency began in June 1985 progressive Christians in the South African church have produced three documents which have jolted the

those who persist in defying his law, installing in their place leaders who will govern with justice and mercy.

From Soweto in September 1985 came a document called "A challenge to the Church" but known universally by its subtitle ; THE KAIROS DOCUMENT. This theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa begins by denouncing what it calls State Theology which defies secular rulers, Law and Order (even if the law is unjust and the order vicious), and make a devilish scapegoat of communism. The South African regime promotes a false god, an idol, the anti-Christ. The document criticizes the false assumptions behind Church Theology: "Reconciliation" which accepts evil; "Justice" which is determined by oppressors and envisages no fundamental change in the structures of society; "Non-violence" which condones the violence of the state and accuses its victims of aggression; and the promotion of a false faith and spirituality remote from the affairs of the world and the concerns of scripture.

To be truly biblical our Church leaders must adopt a theology that millions of Christians have already adopted - a biblical theology of direct confrontation with the forces of evil rather than a theology of reconciliation with sin and the devil.

The Kairos Document advocates Prophetic Theology which makes a social analysis, emphasizes the firm Christian

tradition of the conquest of oppression and the dethroning of tyrants, assures Hope, and calls people to side with God in the struggles of the oppressed.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not called to be a bastion of caution and moderation. The Church should challenge, inspire, and motivate people.

E V A N G E L I C A L WITNESS IN SOUTH AFRICA was produced in June 1986 by a group of 'concerned evangelicals' which includes those belonging to the charismatic and pentecostal churches and groups. These 'born again' Christians endorse much of the Kairos theology and are particularly aroused by the intrusion of western heresies.

What is called Western Christian Civilisation or the western capitalist culture is seen as identical with the Christian faith or the demands of the gospel . . . it is the class interest of these people . . . their being beneficiaries of this racist apartheid system, which moves them rather than the gospel . . .

None of these documents were produced by Church Synods or hierarchies: each of them was built line on line in small groups of progressive Christians involved in the struggle - united non-racial democratic Christians - and evoked an explosion comparable with the Church in England calling a Day of Prayer for the downfall of Thatcher, or the German Church changing its name to Christians against Kohl. It also blew away any notion that something called "The

Church" occupies a neutral central ground and acts as reconciler with both sides. The Church is a model of division and conflict, not reconciliation.

There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace. Kairos Document.

2.2. Is Christian teaching a reconciler?

Can our theological perception of the faith once delivered to the saints indicate to voters and politicians how to dissolve the tensions in society? Do religious leaders have a store of solutions to our conflicts? Does the Church have Good News for the Modern World?

It is the unanimous message of these documents that much Church teaching has led us astray. The Gospel is true, but our understanding is so buffeted by the storms of social and political pressures that we cannot set a course through the chaos and confusion. We all feel the church ought to point the way out: but it does not. The moment Christians begin discussing these documents the theological conflict emerges in growls or moans or cries of 'Heresy!' The terrible accusation that the teaching of the church has misled the people demonstrates to serious situation in which we live, the cutting edge of the Kairos time. And yet reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel.

2.3. Scriptural Reconciliation

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled. So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5. 17-20.

There are two ways to conclude a contention. One is for the contestants to discover their points of agreement and for both to unite upon this central ground. The other solution is when one says: 'You are right and I am wrong', and crosses over to the other side. When the scriptures speak of reconciliation with God the latter case always applies. God never meets sinners half way. He goes all the way to suffer with them in order to bring them entirely on to his side. He does not reconcile himself to the world, he reconciles the world to himself. The work of reconciliation which he has handed on to us as ambassadors for Christ is not that God will be reconciled with evil, or that we should be reconciled to one another in our godlessness, but that God draws us all onto his home ground.

One of the national

characteristics of the British (in the humble opinion of the British) is their ability to hear both sides of the question, to ensure fair shares and play the game, but it behoves us not to confuse our conflicts. God never makes a compromise with evil. When God's new creation is spelt out in terms of love, or justice, or compassion, the reconciliation in which we deal is not a *quid pro quo* with brutality, or kinder forms of exploitation, but a reconciliation which pulls the offender totally onto God's camp. Jesus refused to compromise with the rich, with Pilate, with Caiaphas, with Cephas, or with himself. God does not sit half way between rich and poor: he camps with the poor. Jesus did not reform the traditions of the Pharisees: he broke them. He did not negotiate lower prices with the money changers: he kicked them out.

The struggle to liberate the world, to bring salvation to society, is concerned with the purpose of God for humanity. Christians are not dealing here with political compromises but of fundamental issues of faith, the will of God, the truths which enable human society to operate, and on such matters reconciliation does not come from seeking the central ground. It comes by a total transformation, a moving of the position, an unconditional surrender of evil anti-godly, anti-human positions, and a commitment to the new creation.

It was the genius of Jesus to capture this new creation in his teaching of the *Basileia*. This creative movement within human society is not a dream of heaven but a reality on Earth, not a space odyssey descending from the clouds at the end of the age but as a power within humanity here and now, not a religious organisation about spirituality but a liberating movement in the whole material of our being together. The *Basileia*

is the reconciling power drawing people from 'east and west, from north and south, to come and take their places at the feast'. (Luke 13.29) This is the Good News of the new creation.

3 RECONCILING CONFLICTS IN AFRICA.

3.1. The focus of reconciliation.

The liberation struggle in Southern Africa is of this fundamental nature. It is an appeal to be reconciled to God. It is not about replacing white supremacy with black supremacy but establishing a non-racist society. It is not to permit upwardly mobile blacks to join the ranks of the wealthy but to design a new society in which the earth is shared. It is not an ideological western scheme but an actual conflict in which South Africans are transforming their society and building a new nation on a new plane.

On the 25th and 26th of June 1955, on a soccer field outside Johannesburg several thousand South Africans met to formalise the Freedom Charter. (See end) Those concerns were fundamental and remain the basis of the liberation struggle to this day. They are not matters of negotiable politics but fundamental principles for the design of human societies which we, in our Christian way, recognize as Jesus' *Basileia* working its way out, conditions derived from the ground of being in which human society is rooted. 'It is all God's work'. Reconciliation is not halfway between justice and injustice. apartheid is evil: its theological justification is heretical: it cannot be reformed but must be totally rejected. Half a democracy is undemocratic. Less exploitation is still exploitation. Oppression is not to be reduced but eliminated.

Tyrants are not to be domesticated but tumbled from their thrones. Even South Africans are sinners and when we achieve a united, non-racial democratic structure we shall still have plenty of problems: but until we establish a society on that basis the conflict is totally irreconcilable.

3.2. The Church and Reconciliation.

From that moment in

Basileia is the other way round, rooted in the communities of the common people who heard Jesus gladly. They assume the Basileia is directed from God in heaven through Church or State committees. The theology of Jesus' community mostly arose from the beliefs of the oppressed, but today the academic community mostly situated in the middle and higher middle class does the theology, basically for the same community, Bonino. Much of what we do in our church services has lost its relevance

liberation who are not necessarily believers. In its original biblical expression, God's Kingdom was for the poor and not for the believers' Pixley 104

The church must avoid becoming a Third Force, a force between the oppressor and the oppressed. Christians, if they are not doing so already, must quite simply participate in the struggle for the liberation and for just society. Kairos Document.

The Church is not the servant of a Basileia which is

different from the Basileia emerging in day to day human experience. The Church has no elevated role on a superior plane: its agenda for human society is the same as the Freedom Charter. There is only one liberation struggle in South Africa,



Rev. Allan Boesak addressing Students.

history when the Church fell into the hands of an elite who associated the Basileia with an ecclesiastical structure, the Church isolated itself from God's work in human society. It became a community which was good about caring for the outcast in society, but lost its vision of society in which people were not cast out. Western people see Jesus as one of themselves doing missionary work to save the uncivilized heathen and find it difficult to believe that the

to the poor and oppressed, says the Kairos Document.

Christ is in the conflict. It is the liberation struggle of the people against the oppressive regime which is seeking to reconcile South African society with the Basileia. The only role for the church is in the heart of that struggle of the oppressed people, doing its theologising from within the conflict.

The task of Christian groups must be carried out together with people committed to

and the role of the Church is to enter it wholeheartedly and proclaim and pursue it in terms of faith and hope and commitment as the only way to reconcile our conflict in the new creation.

Christians who approach the liberation struggle from a base in the affluent middle class of the white west are unconsciously aligned with the oppressor and find themselves deeply challenged by the

insights of Christians in the front line who have grappled with the dimensions of the struggle in terms of their faith. They profess particular concern about violence and communism.

4 Summing up; the Church and Oppression

Many western Christians are horrified by the white Christians who govern South Africa but in truth there is no difference between white South Africa and the white West, except that for us the Third World is on the other side of the street and for you it is on the other side of the world. The South African microcosm enables us to see what the western world is really like. In this conflict the Church cannot occupy hypothetical positions between or above the struggle; if it is not on one side it is on the other. Most see it situated within the oppressive western block.

The Church 'protestation that it has taken an option or bias for the poor and oppressed locates it firmly in the midst of the affluent ruling class with a mission to be kind towards the poor. It accepts the perspective and legitimates the structural disparity between affluence and poverty, power and powerlessness. For most Christians in South Africa and the world the church does not have a bias towards the poor; the church is the poor and oppressed people of God, struggling to overthrow the

tyranny of economic, political and military structures which make people poor, and the cultural, social and religious structures which make people accept their oppression. It is from these dispossessed people of God that God's initiatives come, not from the powerful and affluent administering ecclesiastical institutions. God does not act because the Church has decided to take an option for the poor: the liberation struggle IS God's initiative to save the world from tyranny and reconcile it to himself. The western church must decide whether it will be sympathetic towards the oppressed, or join the struggle on their side.

We are a divided Church precisely because not all the members of our churches have taken sides against oppression. Not all Christians have united themselves with God "Who is always on the side of the oppressed" Kairos Document.

5 The Church and Reconciliation.

These recent documents from South African Christians enable us to set-out explicitly the role the Church should play:

5.1. Reconciliation means rejecting the System.

The Church cannot collaborate with tyranny. Kairos Document. It must be totally irreconciled with the policies and practices of the South African regime and their partners. They can give not the slightest support, not a grain of recognition, not a step of common ground with the

unjust, heretical, violent exploitative regime. That rejection entails a positive response to the victims demands for the total isolation of the regime, including mandatory economic and political sanctions. That rejection includes only the Nationalist Party, but every party in the present South African elections, splinter groups seeking their own benefit, and the tragedy of Inkatha which is being used to divide and destroy our people.

The United States, West Germany and Britain seem intent on arranging a round table conference between the South African regime, other white political parties, Inkatha, Black Consciousness groups, the PAC, the UDF and the ANC, but this seems a ploy to justify continuing the System. The only base for reconciliation is commitment to a united non-racial democratic South Africa by those entering such negotiations and the Western Church should be there amongst them.

5.2. Reconciliation means commitment to the Liberation Struggle.

The Church's role as ambassador, as reconciler, is entirely dependent upon its entering the struggle on the side of the poor and oppressed. The positive role of the Church in the reconciliation process is one of open solidarity with the Liberation Movement, specifically with the African

National Congress and the United Democratic Front. There has been a gradual progress along these lines, but the moment is ripe for decisive action by the Western Church. Christ cannot come into you until you come into the struggle.

The time has come for the Western Church to go beyond negative criticism of apartheid to positive open strong action on the side of the liberation struggle. If the Western Church is serious about reconciliation it must establish a direct detailed and ongoing consultation in Europe with the African National Congress. It must be seen to be there. The ANC would welcome the closest relations with the western churches on the theological, political, economic and pastoral fronts of the liberation struggle.

Those of you who will come together as a group to take such a stand within the Church will certainly have to carry a cross: in South Africa it would take you into detention for the UDF and death for the ANC.

5.3. The nettle of Capitalism.

If the Church in the West would play a role as reconciler it must grasp the nettle of Capitalism. It did good in its day, but now it is corrupt and it must follow the great empires and slavery and feudalism into extinction. Western Christians are beginning to hear the word from the world that capitalism, like its child apartheid, is evil and its theological and moral

justification is heretical. Its time has come, and its time is your Kairos. You cannot devise a western version of the Kairos Document or the Liberation theology of Latin America, only those engaged in Liberation struggle can theologise about them. Your struggle is to liberate western civilisation from the exploitation and destruction of capitalism. In this struggle you will write your own Kairos documents and devise your own liberation theologies and they will mingle with the harmonies already being played in the Third world. Such is your role as reconciler to the ways of God.

The Gift of Faith

If that were all, it would seem that this paper is simply suggesting that the Churches should join the trendy lefties but there is a distinctive role for Christians at which vitality we must look in conclusion. Disciples of Jesus know that he taught little about God that the Jews and the older eastern religious did not know already. His distinctive message concerned proclaiming the Basileia and he had the gift of enabling them to believe it when he preached it. That was their gift of faith through grace. Preaching and teaching the Kingdom of God is the distinctive task of Christians in the liberation struggle surging through the world today.

What Christ in the Third World struggle offers the west is not arguments and expositions of the evils of capitalism, but the gift of faith in an alternative future. People

in the oppressive unliberated western world are so deplorably and miserably hopeless, so uncertain and depressed about the future, and people in the liberation struggle are so incredibly and joyfully certain that victory is coming

Faith is a new vision. The western church thinks as the western world thinks: most of it has little vision beyond that of the politicians, the media and warmed up 19th century theologians. It is fumbling and lost and it knows it. Indeed, as the Marxist Machovec writes:

Many Marxists, but also many self-critical modern theologians, are aware of the fact that concern for the future that longing for liberation and radical change once found in Christianity- has been taken over in the modern period almost exclusively by Marxists.

Perhaps what is needed most is the liberation of the Church itself. There is need of a mental decolonization and a theological perspective to analyze the situation not only scientifically but out of experience...perhaps you can only do that if you find others who have been born and bred in the struggle themselves and can talk from experience.

There is a new way of looking at the world at God, at the Basileia, at the Church, at Communism, at Christians, at other religions, at people: a world reconciled to God. There is a vision of world with social structures design to make peace instead of antagonism; of a new economic system that is

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BOOK CHOICE

On October 18, 1972, Benjamin F Chavis Jr. and nine other Black activists were convicted of having incited race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1971. They were sentenced to a combined total of 282 years in prison. Nearly a decade and millions of dollars later, that conviction was overturned and the Wilmington Ten were freed. The case has become a landmark in the struggle for civil rights in this country. Amnesty International declared the Wilmington Ten political prisoners in the U.S.A.

During his years of confinement in various North Carolina prisons, Chavis knew that he had to maintain his faith in God, in God's people, and in their

collective will and yearning to be free. He decided to capture his prison prayers and experiences in the form of psalms. The psalms were written as a testament that the descendants of African slaves were able to survive centuries of oppression because of an irrepressible faith in God of justice and freedom.

The book is divided into three parts: Oppression, Struggle, and Liberation, the three historical phases of all successful freedom movements. It consists of 150 psalms, written in freeline and free verse, from the perspective of a Black minister who was a political prisoner in the United States. The psalms speak directly to the issues of the Black struggle, but they also address the overall issue of

human rights. As Chavis writes in his introduction, "The context is particular but the message is universal."

Since leaving prison, Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. has earned a doctorate from the Divinity School of Howard University. He is currently Deputy Director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. A veteran of the civil rights movement for 21 years, Dr. Chavis is a former schoolteacher, and is an experienced civil rights leader who has worked with Dr. Martin Luther King JR., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the NAACP. Currently, Dr. Chavis is helping to organise the National Black Independent Political Party.

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designed primarily to give people homes and schools and hospitals and jobs to do; a new way of looking at the world without the barbed wire of nationalism, denominationalism, race or sex, a faith which blasts the church out of the tyranny of its traditions and tumbles its conceits off the throne, and sees new communities of the faithful growing more rapidly than ever before in history.

It is a vision which laughs at the idea that western

churches can have a moral reforming influence on the western powers - any more than they can improve Botha's unshining image; which mocks your ego trips in your best suits to burning the Church to the notice of Government ministers or the big names of business; which says to those hopeless reformists who recognise the enormity of the west but steadfastly refuse to contemplate the revolution: come over and join us!

This faith is a gift. When Jesus told Nicodemus it was necessary to be born all over again to see the Kingdom of God he was referring to the transformation of our religious

experience. No one can force themselves to be reborn, or manufacture faith, but they can be willing to let the old life go, to let the burden of those oppressive ideas of God and his world roll away, to realise that in the cold lonely godforsaken nuclear fears of the oppressive western world, the liberated people are offering us the hope of new life.

**Let us all say
apartheid
must go**