

The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk

ESAU JACOBS

The first question that must be asked, is: Has the Christian church contributed towards social change in South Africa? Against the background of the history of the Christian church, I must say that I believe that the church did not play its full role in social change. As a black in this country, one is always at the receiving end of discriminatory legislation. We live in a fundamentally unjust society.

I ask this question about the contribution of the church because South Africa is predominantly a Christian country. Of our total population, nearly 75 per cent profess Christianity. My problem as a black man is that in a country that professes to be Christian I cannot understand why we practice discrimination against fellow-Christians solely on grounds of colour. Discrimination is deeply rooted in our legal system as well as in our social life.

George Bernard Shaw once said: 'France is such a great country. What a pity to waste it on the French.' In our South African situation this can also be said about Christianity: Christianity is so rich a faith. What a tragedy it is held by Christians.

In preparing this paper I decided once again to take a look at the history of the early missions in South Africa. There is a lot that is unfavourable that can be said about Dr Van der Kemp, but J Du Plessis pointed out that he protested against the ill-treatment and injustices perpetrated against the Hottentots and that the government of the day (1801) did not look favourably upon his mission to the Africans. He was accused by the governor Sir George Yonge of not propagating Christianity but political principles. The accusation of the governor, in nearly the same words, was heard at Brakpan the 27th September 1968: 'Men must not abuse the pulpit to try to attain political ends in South Africa.... But there are some

clerics in South Africa who are playing with the idea and are tossing the thought around that they should do the kind of thing here in South Africa that Martin Luther King did in America - I want to say to them, the cloak you carry will not protect you if you do this in South Africa.' I am sure that you recognise these words. This is indeed a challenge to the Christian church.

Du Plessis writes about Van der Kemp: 'Penetrated as he was with the doctrine that the Hottentots were free men, with all the rights and privileges of free citizens, he refused to use compulsion in his dealings with them.' Du Plessis concludes the chapter on Van der Kemp with these words: 'A century of Christian Missions in South Africa has since proved the fallacy of the opinions held by Van der Kemp.... No responsible missionary today would venture to preach or to practice the doctrine of social equality between the White and Coloured races.' (1) This is Du Plessis's message to the missionaries of his day: If you were responsible, you would not preach the equality of all men.

The white Dutch Reformed Churches

It is obvious to me that the white Dutch Reformed Churches are more inclined to protect the interest of the white people than to work for social change and justice. But when one says this in public one is opposed from many sides and one is reminded about the R6 000 000 a year that the church contributes to mission work. But when the church is asked to protest against the unjust laws that affect the lives of millions of black people, she is silent because she does not want 'to embarrass the government'.

In the booklet 'The Message in Perspective', the writers say the following about the Afrikaans-speaking churches: 'By and large, the Afrikaans-speaking churches have not criticised the race policies of the Government, but have been critical of many aspects of its implementation.' (2)

This does not mean that the Dutch Reformed Church has not said anything about race relations. In 1974 a comprehensive statement was made at their general synod in Cape Town in the report *Ras, Volk en Nasie in Volkere-verhouding in die Lig van die Skrif*. This document has already been subjected to much criticism. The best criticism that I have read is an article by Dr Jaap

Durand. The tragedy about the report is that instead of offering guidance to its member and younger churches concerning social justice it concludes: 'A political system based on separate development of various population groups can be justified from the Bible.' (3) What a tragic conclusion.

According to my mind the report puts too much emphasis on the diversity of the human race and neglects the unity. Durand says: 'It is true that scripture indeed acknowledges and accepts the fact of human diversity, but it makes no "theological" problem of it. The unity and solidarity of the human race clearly functions in the Bible within the framework of salvation history as an integral and constitutive part of it.' (4)

When the Dutch Reformed Church speaks about social justice it speaks predominantly for the rights of white people. Blacks must be satisfied with the crumbs.

Now, the question: Has the Christian church a role to play for social change? My answer is an emphatic, yes! The church has a role to play, because:

1. The church is representative of the Kingdom of God in this world. This Kingdom includes all aspects of life. 'By preaching the gospel message... the Church proclaims and shelters the gift of the Kingdom of God in the heart of human history.' (5)

2. The church is and can only be the church in the world and thus has a responsibility for the world. One great Dutch theologian Berkouwer has said: 'This is God's world and God's people and therefore must take responsibility and be concerned about the world. It was for this world and its people that Christ died.'

3. The church is concerned with the gospel and the gospel is concerned with the wholeness of life. Theology must be our critical reflection on ourselves and on our own basic principles. 'We must have a clear attitude regarding economic and socio-cultural issues in the life and reflection of the Christian community. To disregard this is to deceive both ourselves and others.' (6)

4. The church must be involved in politics because politics as well as the church has to do with people. The church must be concerned about people and it must see that people lead a full human life.

The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk

What is the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk?

The Dutch Reformed Churches stem from the Church of the Reformation which was brought to South Africa by Jan van Riebeeck and the first 200 white settlers from Holland in 1652. (7) From the time of the founding of the Cape Colony serious attention was given to missionary work. Ministers of the Dutch Reformed Churches preached to the black people and baptised slaves and blacks were accepted as members of the white churches. White and black members attended church services and received the sacraments together. (8) In 1829 the synod in the Cape passed the following resolutions:

'Regarding a proposal that Holy Communion be administered simultaneously to all members without distinction of colour, it was unanimously decided that the proposal be noted as an inflexible rule based on the infallible Word of God.' (9)

Dr C J Kriel supports this view in his book and states: 'At first there was no colour-distinction where church privileges and the rights of members were concerned.' (10)

During the second half of the 19th century objections were raised against this practice. In 1857 the Cape Synod agreed to make concessions because of the weakness of some brethren and allowed, in special circumstances, a separate ministration of the sacraments and the Word.

At the time when 45 white members of the Stockenström congregation objected and demanded that the sacraments be ministered separately, the church council (kerkraad) wisely rejected their request and states in plain words: 'That such a principle runs directly against the formulier of the Holy Communion, deviates from the Confession and is in conflict with the Holy Scriptures.' (11) But the white members were not satisfied and went to the Ring which was very sympathetic to their cause and the synod of 1857 decided in favour of separate churches. The result was that in 1881 a separate church for coloured people was established. It was to be known as the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk.

What was the relationship between the white church and the Sendingkerk until 1978? It was largely a position of white domination. This was made possible by the fact that the white church provides ministers to serve in the black churches. These ministers get paid primarily from white funds. This means that these ministers are controlled by the white church.

Our relationship with the present government has never been a happy one - but until 1974 nobody dared to say this aloud or officially. Instead, at synods, the government was praised for what it had done for coloured education. We forgot Laski's advice: 'A government can always learn more from the criticism of its opponents than from the praise of its supporters.' (12)

The beginning of the turning-point for the Sendingkerk started in 1974 when the synod accepted the resolutions of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod held at Lunteren. These resolutions were mainly about human rights, social justice and the unity of the church. I give only a few of these resolutions: 'Synod urges its member-churches: To reject every form of racial discrimination and racism; To reject every attempt to maintain racial supremacy by military, economic or any other means; To reject the subtle forms of racial discrimination found in many countries today with respect to housing, employment, education, law enforcement etc.' (13) This was the real turning-point in the history of the Sendingkerk. The editorial of a certain newspaper of that year had the headline: 'The Sendingkerk will never be the same again.' (14) And indeed it will never be the same again - prophetic words!

At the last synod of 1978 the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk went even further: it rejected the policy of separate development; accepted church union at congregation level; rejected detention without trial (Art. 6) and urged its ministers not to be members of secret organisations. These were bold decisions - especially the one on the unity of the church. The Sendingkerk corrected the decision taken by the white church in 1857, nearly 120 years ago.

As never before the black churches are now articulating their people's hurt and suffering, their fears and aspirations and the deep anger at a policy that dehumanises and humiliates them. Unhesitatingly black spokesmen for the black churches are challenging the white church on:

1. Its support and uncritical acceptance of government policy and actions;
2. The fact that the white church is essentially a 'volkskerk' whose loyalty is primarily to the cause of the Afrikaner and the National Party;
3. Its theology, which not only accommodates but

justifies government policy as God-given and in accord with Scripture and the Reformed tradition. (15)

What should a church do in order to contribute towards social change?

1. The church must be the church. By this I mean that its highest authority must be the Word of God. No other interest should prescribe its goal and conduct in the world. We know of churches where secret organisations have played, and are still playing, an important role in the decisions of the church. (16) The church must have only one loyalty - it must be loyal to Jesus Christ.

2. The church must be conscious of its responsibility in the world. It must have a sensitivity to what is right and wrong. If the church ignores questions of simple morality, it cannot play a role in social change. The Christian must ask himself whether he wants to support a fundamentally unjust society. As Gutierrez says: 'An unjust situation does not happen by chance; it is not something branded by a fatal destiny: there is human responsibility behind it.' (17) The church must work unceasingly towards the goal of social change. Herein lies our Christian hope, viz. that the structures in the world that are made by men must be changed by men. Or to say it differently: To be a Christian you must be involved in the struggle.

3. The church must be able to define clearly the kind of society it ultimately wants. For us, the following definition would suffice:

(a) A society where there is justice.

(b) A society in which wealth is equally distributed.

To put it in the words of Julio de Santa Ana: 'The Third World argues that the problem lies not so much in stopping growth but rather in redirecting it in such a way that inequalities and injustice can be overcome.' (18)

(c) A society where people are not handicapped in living a full human life.

(d) A society where there is full participation and full co-responsibility in the highest levels of political decision-making. 'My personality cannot be adequately protected when others, but not myself have access to the sources of power.' (19)

Measured by these criteria does the Sendingkerk play a role in promoting social change? Up to now very little has been done. In order to achieve something the Sendingkerk must work for the full liberation of the black

people in South Africa, thereby simultaneously liberating the white people.

This means that the Sendingkerk must take liberation theology seriously: 'Liberation theology seeks a church that ministers to the poor not merely with a sense of compassion but with a sense of justice.' (20) Verkuyl calls liberation 'a dynamic reality'. (21)

One of the sons of the Sendingkerk has this to say about black theology: 'In breaking away from the old oppressive structures of our society, seeking new possibilities, creating room for the realisation of true humanity, Black Theology seeks the true purpose of life for blacks as well as whites. Blacks want to share with white people the dreams and hopes for a new future, a future in which it must again be necessary to make of Christian theology an ideology or part of a particular aggressive cultural imperialism. Black Theology, by offering a new way of theologizing, desires to be helpful in discovering the truth about black and white people, about their past and present, about God's will for them in their common world.' (22)

When I read what Dr Marius Barnard has to say about separate beaches in the Cape Times it appears that there may also be hope for the white people. He writes: 'Our Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Pik Botha, is on record as saying he would not be prepared to die for a segregation sign in a lift. I would go one step further and say I would not want to die for an apartheid notice on a South Africa beach.' (23)

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