

Allan Boesak, BLACK AND REFORMED
(1984)

Chapter II

The Black Church and the Future

I was rather surprised when your secretary general asked me to address you on this subject. It suggests that the need to speak of a black church is not confined to those in the traditional black churches alone; blacks in the so-called multiracial churches may no longer be excluded.

This is a happy development, because it means that in spite of so many problems and reverses, the real meaning and significance of black consciousness has not completely bypassed the Christian church.

Black theology teaches us that theology cannot be done in a void. It is always done within a particular situation. The situation of blackness in South Africa is the unavoidable context within which the theological reflection of black Christians takes place. We have come to realize that persons are influenced by their social and economic environment, and that their thinking is influenced by the social conditions in which they live. We recognize that Christians living in different situations will have different understandings of life, as well as vastly different understandings of the gospel and its demands on their lives. This is basically why for some the gospel is an incomparable message of liberation, where-

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needs of those who have no sensitivity whatsoever to the black situation. It is no wonder, then, that the black church sometimes finds it hard to respond meaningfully to blacks in need of God's presence in their lives. A precondition for the authentic identity of the black church is the ability to identify with the community it serves. The black church must identify with the past, present, and future of the community that it serves. The black church must become part of that community, so that it may understand the joys, sorrows, and aspirations of that community. And the church must not be afraid to identify with the struggle of the people. For the struggle in South Africa is not merely political; it is also moral. The struggle is not merely *against* an oppressive political and exploitative economic system; it is also a struggle *for* the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The struggle is as much against a political philosophy and practice as it is against a pseudo-religious ideology.

Apartheid and all it stands for is not a system that places its fortunes on the political judgment of a people. It demands, with idolatrous authority, a subservience and obedience in all spheres of life that a Christian can give only to God. (Of course, this in itself is not strange; apartheid shares this demand with all other totalitarian forms of government.)

To identify with the struggle is to realize that the struggle for liberation and the attainment of black humanity are commensurate with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It does not mean that the Christian has to condone and justify everything in the course of the struggle. It does mean, however, that in the struggle the Christian has the duty to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. One may legitimately ask, of course, if Christians can stand aside and allow the struggle for our liberation to be monopolized by those who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, for we know that God will hear the cry of the oppressed, "How long, O Lord?"

None other than John Calvin reminded us of this when he wrote:

Tyrants and their cruelty cannot be endured without great weariness and sorrow. . . . Hence almost the whole world sounds forth these words, How long, How long? When any-

one disturbs the whole world by his ambition and avarice, or everywhere commits plunders, or oppresses miserable nations, when he distresses the innocent, all cry out, How long? And this cry, proceeding as it does from the feeling of nature and the dictate of justice, is at length heard by the Lord. . . . [The oppressed] know that this confusion of order and justice is not to be endured. *And this feeling, is it not implanted in us by the Lord? It is then the same as though God heard himself, when he hears the cries and groanings of those who cannot bear injustice.*'

Of course, Calvin is right. So, although acknowledging that the powers of the anti-Christ are at work in every situation, the black church knows full well that refusal to participate in this struggle constitutes an act of disobedience to God. We know also that where true human liberation takes place, it takes place because Christ is there.

In the heat of the struggle Christians today are called to be the light of the world. In the midst of the struggle we are called to be the embodiment of God's ideal for this broken world. Christians must be there to represent God's possibilities for authentic Christian love, meaningful reconciliation, and genuine peace.

In arguing thus, I cannot urge that the black church be absorbed by the world, or that the struggle dictate to the church. It remains true that only a critical differentiation between the church and the world—that is, adhering to the criteria of the gospel of its Lord—will enable the church to make a meaningful contribution in keeping God's options open to those who in the thick of battle, because of their tears, their fear, or their anger, often fail to recognize these options. It is not a Christian struggle I am pleading for, but a Christian presence in the struggle.

A Crucial Decision

This decision is not one that will face us some time in the future. It is facing us now. The church is facing a tremendous challenge. In the last decade or two, there have been profound and rapid changes in the black community in South Africa. These are not so

much changes in tangible political structures as changes in political consciousness, which reached a peak in 1976.

Not all the young persons who were prominent at that time have left the church. Some of them have done so—in disappointment and disgust. Many, however, with their parents, are still in the church, but with a highly sensitized political consciousness and with probing, critical questions about the nature and the witness of the church. These are young persons with experience far beyond their years, experience born of their active and personal engagement in the struggle for liberation and for their God-given humanity. It is my contention that the black church does not yet know how to deal with this new generation.

This new political consciousness, and the consciousness of black humanity, have brought a new sense of responsibility in the black community. This new sense of responsibility and the active involvement of the black community in the struggle have taken away almost completely the traditional deference to the church. Church officials are no longer judged by their office and the authority it represents; their office and authority are now measured by their active participation in the struggle for liberation. I daresay that although this worries us no end, we have yet to come to terms with this change of attitude.

Between Two Theologies

The black church is dependent on an alien theology. This I regard as very serious. At the basis of so many maladies in the black church—our inadequate lifestyle, dependence on white resources, the very acceptance and rationalization of the situation that makes us so dependent—lies our dependence on an alien theology.

For centuries the black church has been engaged in a struggle to speak truthfully. In this struggle, two theologies were fighting for supremacy within its ranks. On the one hand, there has been the theology we have inherited from Western Christianity: the theology of accommodation and acquiescence. It engendered an individualistic, other-worldly spirituality that had no interest in the realities of this world except to proclaim the existing order as

the God-ordained order. This theology wanted blacks to accept slavery and, in modern times, their lowly position as second- and third-class citizens. Either through force of circumstance or through sheer hopelessness, blacks accepted this anemic, heaven-oriented theology, still rampant in the black church today.

On the other hand, there was also a theology of refusal: a theology that refused to accept that God was just another word for the status quo; a theology that understood that the God of the Bible is a God who takes sides with the oppressed and who calls persons to participate in the struggle for liberation and justice in the world. This was a theology that understood God's love for the lowly and therefore uttered a clear "no!" against those who oppressed and dehumanized them—whether on slave farms or native reserves, whether in the aseptic and air-conditioned temples of banks and boardrooms or within those dark and awesome prison buildings where so many brothers and sisters have lost their souls . . . and their lives.

This theology of refusal has been the theology of great black leaders: to name but a few, Denmark Vesey, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nehemiah Tile, Mangana Mokone, and Albert Luthuli. This theology was expressed masterfully by Frederick Douglass:

I love the religion of our blessed Savior. I love that religion which comes from above, in the wisdom of God which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle . . . without partiality and without hypocrisy. . . . I love that religion which is based upon that glorious principle of love to God and love to man, which makes its followers do unto others as they themselves would be done by others. . . . It is because I love this religion that I hate the slave-holding, woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion that exists in America. . . . Loving the one I must hate the other; holding to one I must reject the other.

This is the theology the black church must make its own if it is to survive, if it is to become truly "church." We must come to understand that this faith is not a "new," "politicized" faith, but

rather the age-old gospel. It is the message of the Torah and the prophets. It is a message that unmask the sinfulness of humanity, in personal life as well as in the existing social, political, and economic structures. It is a message that judges, but it also speaks of hope, of conversion, of redemption. It is a message for the whole of life. And it is our task to bring this message to our people in such a way that it makes sense in the de facto situation.

Confrontation with the State

In the light of what has been stated above, a profound question emerges. What about the future?

Basically there are two alternatives facing our country. One is to continue with the present trend of modernizing and modifying white *baasskap* ("dominance," "supremacy") and eventually to end up with a civil war; the other is to bring about radical and fundamental change that would inspire the search for a truly new society.

At the same time, the black church has two choices. It can develop a policy of *realpolitik* and accommodation, urging the people to accept piecemeal concessions, and making it thereby easy for itself; or it can stand firm, challenging the forces of the status quo and accepting the risks that come with it.

We should not deceive ourselves. This choice will not be easy. Now that all meaningful black organizations have been banned, the black church has become more important than ever before as a vehicle for expressing the legitimate aspirations of blacks. The government knows this. That is why the government is going to concentrate its repressive measures on the church more and more.

If the black church is going to be true to its Christ and its calling, I can see no way that confrontation between the black church and the white state can be avoided. The government may also, however, try to persuade the black church that real changes are indeed taking place, and that, for the sake of peace, the black church should accept them. I think that we must expect a time when government officials will more and more employ a kind of Christian language, using such terms as "love," "peace," and "reconciliation," for the purpose of undermining the watchful-

ness of the church. And many blacks, the so-called privileged underprivileged, may discover that the government is extending more privileges to them, and they may try to pressure the black church.

The black church is called to be wide awake, to remember to take as its criterion not the privileges of those who already have more than others, but the justice or injustice done to "the least of the brethren." The black church must remember always that an evil system cannot be modified. It must be eradicated.

The second choice of course is the more difficult one. It will leave no room for compromise. It is bound to bring confrontation, not only with the government, but also with those Christians, white and black alike, who shout "peace! peace!" where there is no peace. It will make the black church even more vulnerable. The government will accuse the church of subversion, and some Christians may shout charges of lovelessness and intransigence. In the end, however, the church will have preserved its integrity. The black church, like Moses, is not called to negotiate with the pharaoh. It is called simply to convey the *Lord's* command: Let my people go!

Shunning Cheap Grace

I want to suggest a few things the black church must do in order to equip itself for the future.

First of all, we must reaffirm our commitment to Jesus Christ. For the black church, Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord over all of life. This confession we must cling to at all costs. Our loyalty and obedience are to him alone. If the black church is to have any future at all, this is where we must be firm. Our allegiance is ultimately not to the laws of the state, or to the laws of self-preservation, but to the commands of the living God. Our loyalty is to Christ. Our criteria are the demands of his kingdom. We shall have to learn not to be dictated to by the demands of the status quo, however intimidating; or by the demands of any ideology, however tempting. Our faith in Jesus Christ and the liberating power of his gospel must form the basis upon which we offer ourselves as a humble servant in the world.

Secondly, we shall have to learn to resist the temptation of what that great theologian of the resistance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has called "cheap grace." Love, peace, reconciliation, justice are evangelical realities the black church dare not ignore. But there is a danger in our South African Christianity today. Christians are sometimes so desperate for something "good" to happen in this quagmire of political hopelessness that often they cannot distinguish between subterfuge and authenticity. In such a situation, it is very tempting to see peace and reconciliation where there is none at all.

Reconciliation and Confrontation

Oppression of blacks in this country has been going on for three hundred years. In the course of those years, humiliation and degradation have left their mark on the souls of millions. Self-hatred and dejection have become the hereditary burden of countless generations. Many have died; many more will die. Distrust, suspicion, hatred have become part of our lives. Therefore, reconciliation is essential. But it will be costly.

In the process of reconciling God with the world, confrontation with evil almost made Christ give up. But it was necessary. It was necessary to unmask human nature for what it really was. It was necessary to rip to shreds the flimsy garment of pseudo-innocence that human beings had wrapped around themselves to convince themselves that they were guiltless.

True reconciliation cannot take place without confrontation. Reconciliation is not feeling good; it is coming to grips with evil. In order to reconcile, Christ had to die. We must not deceive ourselves. Reconciliation does not mean holding hands and singing: "black and white together." It means, rather, death and suffering, giving up one's life for the sake of the other. If white and black Christians fail to understand this, we shall not be truly reconciled.

So it is with peace. One is not at peace with God and one's neighbor because one has succeeded in closing one's eyes to the realities of evil. Neither is peace a situation where terrorism of the defenseless is acceptable because it is being done under the guise

of the law. For in South Africa, Adam Small's question remains pertinent: "Which law? Man's law, God's law, devil's law?" Peace is not simply the absence of war or an uneasy quiet in the townships. Peace is the active presence of justice. It is shalom, the well-being of all.

If our theology fails to make clear that Christian love is not a sentimental feeling but an act of justice, doing what is right, our theology does not reflect the gospel fully. We must not be afraid to say that in the South African situation Christian love between white and black must be translated into terms of political, social, and economic justice. By doing this, we help the Christian church to accept the challenge of veracity. Even though this process will be a very painful one, it will prove to be rewarding in the attempt to generate an authentic Christian community.

Thirdly, we must be prepared to meet the challenges the new situation will present. There will be the challenge to preach a relevant gospel to the black community. For many of our young blacks throughout this land, the crucial question is whether the gospel is indeed the gospel of liberation, and not merely a tool for the oppression of the poor. This is a challenge only the black church can meet.

There is also the challenge to find a way of participating meaningfully in the struggle. Words and statements will no longer suffice. With tragic inevitability, the violence inherent in the system of oppression in South Africa breeds violence and counter-violence. In addition, as peaceful protest is made increasingly impossible, the belief grows that violence is the only solution. I realize that the issue of violence is a touchy one, and this is not the place to discuss it. I want to say, however, that the unbelievable hypocrisy of white Christians on this matter is appalling, and it will take all our resources to undo the damage done to Christian integrity on this point.

Although the debate is not yet closed, and although we may be faced with even more taxing situations, we must in the meantime refuse to be idle. The church must initiate and support meaningful pressure on the entrenched system, as a nonviolent way of bringing about change. The church must initiate and support programs of civil disobedience on a massive scale and challenge white

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Christians especially on this issue. It no longer suffices to make statements condemning unjust laws and then tomorrow to obey those laws as if nothing were amiss. The time has come for the black church to tell the government and its supporters: we can not in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. So we will teach our people what it means to obey God rather than man in South Africa. A new study on the investment problem will not suffice. But direct and forceful action will show multinational corporations how serious the church really is about the plight of our people.

To do all this in South Africa is to expect trouble. The repressive, intolerant nature of the present government cannot allow it. And yet the church has no other option. And when we do this we must prepare ourselves for even greater suffering. It is the Lord himself who warned us: "A servant is not greater than his master." For the black church this word of our Lord is especially true: "He who wants to hold onto his life at all costs shall lose it. But he who loses his life for my sake, shall gain it." If the black church can understand this, we shall not have to fear the future.

I pray that the black church in South Africa will, by the grace of God, be truly the church of Christ:

- in the midst of struggle and in the heat of the battle—be a servant church;
- in the midst of violence, oppression, and hatred—be a prophetic church;
- in the midst of hopelessness and pain—be a hopeful church;
- in the midst of compromise—be a committed church;
- in the midst of bondage and fear—be a liberated church;
- in the midst of intimidation and silence—be a witnessing church;
- in the midst of suffering and death—be a liberating church;
- in the midst of failure and disappointment—be a believing church.

To God, the only God, who saves us through Jesus Christ our Lord, be the glory, majesty, authority, and power from all eternity, now and forever!