

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN A TIME OF CRISIS

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In times of growing uncertainty it is dangerous to predict the course of future events but I believe that future events will substantiate my claim that in two very important respects your ministry will differ from that of any other group of Black ministers in South Africa who have offered themselves for the service of the ministry in their respective churches:

1. You are entering the ministry in a time of serious crisis in the history of our country. It is a period of great upheaval, of serious unrest, of increasing tension between Black and White (and also Black and Black), of ever-growing measures of oppression by the government against all whom the government believes are threatening the security of the state and the identity of the White man, especially the Afrikaner.

The church as an institution, insofar as it is willing to fulfil its divine calling, will be deeply involved in and affected by these events. The majority of the Whites at present seem to believe that law and order has again been restored and that peace and calm have returned to this land. You and I know that, as far as the Black community is concerned, the upheavals of the past months are but the outward sign of a movement of deep and vibrant stirrings towards freedom which can no longer be suppressed by force.

2. During your life-time, I believe, you are going to experience and hopefully participate in the most important process of political and social change which this country has ever experienced. There is no doubt in my mind, despite predictions and denials to the contrary by the powers-that-be, that the present system of racial oppression is like a patient, already seriously ill, and now entering its long-suffering slowly-dying period. This patient is desperately clinging to life and will fight with all the power, means and energy at his disposal to stave off the dying day - but it is of no avail; he will not survive. No political or police expertise, presently frantically administering emergency medicines at the bedside of this old stubborn pater familias, is going to save his life. He is destined to die and disappear, and with his death we will not only view the end of an oppressive rule over a long period of time, but the transition towards political liberation which millions of Blacks have been praying for, struggling for and looking forward to for decades. I believe this transition is going to be a turbulent, painful and violent one - like that of the birth of a newly-born child, too long delayed, but you are going to witness this birth: the appearance of a new independent and liberated state called Azania.

Your reaction to these events

I believe it to be of vital importance that as theological tutors and students, and as future ministers of the Gospel, you should ask yourselves how you are preparing yourselves for the crisis situations of this pre-liberation period which is already part and parcel of your present life, as well as for the immediate post-liberation period which could become a reality sooner than many might realise. It seems to me that there are four possible ways in which clergy, present and future, could react to this situation:

1. You could continue with a traditional form of ministry which has been handed down over hundreds of years as if nothing of great portent has happened or is happening: (a) The preaching one Sunday after the other of one sermon after the other with little, if any, relevance to the crucial social or political issues of the day: in other words a sermon which Radio Bantu or the S. A. B. C. would be very happy to broadcast; (b) dutifully consecrating marriages hopefully in accordance with Christ's demand for the sanctity of marriage but always in obedience to the dictates of the racial laws of the state; (c) faithfully confirming new believers, ministering to the sick, burying the dead and comforting the bereaved.

I do not for a single moment wish to create the impression that this form of ministry is not valid or necessary or sought-after, but I feel it to be of vital importance to ask this crucial question at this time of the existence of the Christian Church in South Africa: What image of the gospel of Christ and of His Kingdom is being created and conveyed to the laity and to the world by such a ministry if no other dimension is added? Is the danger not very real that such a form of priestly service could be seen to be so timeless, so generalised and therefore to be so unspecific as to be largely meaningless?

2. The stresses and tensions of the time and the demands for relevant leadership by your people might create such uncertainty, confusion and even conflict in your own mind and heart that you might be tempted to seek refuge from your agony and your feelings of insecurity in a spiritualised ministry, a persistent call to individual piety or evangelism largely devoid of social concern, or a flight into blissful charismatic experiences.

I do not for one moment wish to create the impression that such piety, prayer, spirituality or charismatic experiences should not form a valid and important part of the Christian life or ministry - but here again I see it to be of vital importance to raise the question of what kind of image of the gospel of Christ and of His Kingdom is thereby being created and conveyed through a ministry which glorifies or over-emphasises the abovementioned traits to the exclusion or serious neglect of other equally valid and important qualities, expressions and experiences of Christian life, faith and witness.

3. In the rising tide of Black Consciousness, of political awareness and of massive conscientisation which millions of Blacks have experienced during the last two to three years there is reflected very clearly the growing hope and expectation

of liberation from the system of racial oppression under which millions of Blacks have been suffering for so many years. This new and powerful force of Black Consciousness which has emerged creates a serious dilemma, but also a tremendous opportunity for every minister or priest: to decide what the nature and the extent of his identification with his people should and will be in their struggle for political and total liberation. The strength of your own convictions and the depth of your own feelings as a Black, equally suffering under the painful yoke of discrimination and denial of basic human rights, could easily lead you into the temptation of identifying yourself so wholeheartedly with the cry of your people that a purely or predominantly political role will take precedence over the proclamation of the gospel. It is not impossible to visualise a situation arising in your own life where Christian values and criteria in a period of intense national struggle for liberation are forced into such subservient positions that the voice of the authentic Christ could temporarily be drowned or silenced as the cry of *Amandla!* rises to a crescendo when political liberation is realised. And who, if judged by human criteria, could blame you if you uncritically identify such political freedom with Christian liberation: Didn't the Afrikaners do the same when the yoke of British imperialist oppression became too heavy to bear? But do not forget, when this hour of glory of political liberation arrives, that Christ and His message of transformation, of human life and of liberation of mankind stands above all political policy, all social systems, all economic structures. Do not forget that He continues to stand as the Lord over all human systems, all historic events, deeply aware of the strength, as well as of the failure of all such systems or policies because none of them can ever contain the fullness of the life which only the Kingdom of God offers to all men!

4. I wish to mention a fourth reaction which to me seems to be the nearest to the demands of the gospel for a valid Christian ministry. You could, already starting now, consciously look at the course of present events and future developments and prepare yourself spiritually, theologically, intellectually and emotionally for these events in the realisation that God is wanting you, as a follower of Christ and as a messenger of the gospel, to make some positive contribution, however small, to the furtherance of His Kingdom among all the people of South Africa. This preparation would require that you inform yourself first of all, of the most crucial issues that you believe your people in particular, but also the country as a whole, will have to face within the next decade. Therefore it is vitally important that you should ask yourself this question: Which are the most pressing problems that I as a man of God will encounter and will have to assist in solving?

Furthermore, I believe it to be of vital importance that you should ask yourself what Christ will demand of you as a human being, as a Christian, as a theologian or pastor, as a leader in your community in the role that you will have to play in determining the outcome of these problems.

### The main issues

I believe that there are four important basic issues which will have to be faced in the first years of your ministry:

1. The issue of growing unemployment, poverty and want: South Africa has now entered the period where all of us, but especially the Blacks, are paying dearly for the expensive costs of the unrealisable policies of separate development. With the cost of living continually spiralling the ever-increasing taxes, a rising rate of inflation, lesser investments and other seriously inhibiting economic factors, it is inevitable that unemployment, especially amongst the Blacks, will increase in leaps and bounds with millions of people being forced to live in situations of dire poverty with all the social and economic unrest resulting therefrom. In such a situation history has proved time and again, that the lower income groups are always the first to be adversely affected and the last to be meaningfully liberated. How is this situation going to affect the nature of your ministry? Are you going to set a priority on the erection of extensive places of worship under these circumstances? Are you passively going to accept the state of economic deprivation thus created, or are you willing to involve yourself and your local community meaningfully in economic and social development programmes of self-liberation, self-reliance and self-development?
  
2. The struggle for political liberation: The events of Soweto, June 16, 1976 and what has been happening since by way of raids, detentions, arrests, trials, convictions, acquittals, with hundreds of young Blacks fleeing the country - all these are but the outward signs of a deep inward struggle for political liberation which your people are waging. We are currently witnessing the display of a monster of power of a dictatorial regime which is intent upon crushing all its opponents but which in the long run will inevitably devour and destroy itself - with millions of innocent people, both Black and White, being the victims of such ideological madness. The recently promulgated Internal Security Act, the Terrorism Act and now the newly introduced Newspaper Bill with its clear intention of eventually suppressing all meaningful press freedom in the country, are but the first of an ever-increasing number of oppressive legal measures to follow.

Similarly, I believe we are going to experience the inevitable opposition to such measures which will include - as we have already started to see - demonstrations, strikes, limited forms of sabotage and urban guerilla warfare with all the conflicts and clashes attending thereto and resulting therefrom.

Every Black parish or congregation is going to be affected by this struggle and in a very large number of such parishes or congregations there will be individuals who will be involved, directly or indirectly, in attempts to achieve political liberation for their people. Whether you as minister would wish this to happen or not, your whole ministry will be deeply affected by these events and by the struggle of your people and I believe it to be of vital importance that you should already now seriously consider and decide what Christ is demanding of you in your witness and contribution to this struggle.

3. Growing estrangement and resultant polarisation: I am convinced that every minister or priest is already facing and will increasingly have to face this movement of growing estrangement and resultant polarisation between Black and White in our community. Only a totally insensitive and callous human-being could be unaware of the fast growing frustration and bitterness amongst

your own people with the racial policies of our country and the attitudes of many members of the White community and the tremendous challenge which this fast growing tension is presenting to the unity of believers of different races in a multi-racial church. Many of us are aware of the insistent question being raised by many young Blacks, in their discussions with their ministers when they ask this penetrating question: Is there still a place for the White man in the Christian church? If so, is there still a place for me as a Black? Equally we are aware of the hardening of attitudes on the part of many Whites and the tragedy of their lack of understanding of the message which the Black community has been trying to convey to South Africa, especially since June 16, last year. The outcome of the recent municipal elections, the harsher forms of government security legislation - all these tend to aggravate this situation. Whether you wish this to happen or not, the fact is that you are being forced into a very invidious position where, on the one hand, there will be the insistent and more militant demands of your Black youth for the expression of your proof of full solidarity and identification with their ideal for Black liberation, whilst at the same time the hardening of the attitudes of White church membership as a result of the fear of loss of power and privilege is creating a nearby intolerable situation. The basic theological question which you will have to face, together with all ministers of the Christian faith in our country, both Black and White will be this: Will the power of the reconciling love of Christ be strong enough to unite these strongly opposing forces? Or will it be swept away in a growing radicalisation of the forces of political revolution?

4. The claim of ideologies versus the power of the gospel: Another issue which I believe already forms the basis of lively discussions, especially in the politically-conscious Black community, are the claims made by the ideology of Marxism and the increasing attraction which its political and economic philosophy is beginning to have for Blacks in South Africa - not necessarily out of the sincere belief that such an ideology will be the final answer to the needs of the Black community, but more out of exasperation that the present oppressive nature of the racial policies of our country, cannot and will no longer be endured. Knowing very little about the oppressive nature and practice of Communist regimes, especially those of Russian origin, some of them tend to visualise a falsely optimistic and rosy picture of what life under Communist rule could be. Others, more realistic and pragmatic in their approach, are willing as a form of strategy to accept the assistance offered by Communist countries to achieve their goal of liberation in the hope that after independence they will be strong enough to assert their political autonomy and economic independence.

~~Into this discussion is also introduced the debate on an economic system which could more clearly express and implement a concept of justice for the majority of the community than the present capitalist system of free enterprise which South Africa practises. Anybody knowing anything about the feelings of Blacks in South Africa should be aware of their serious dissatisfaction and criticism of our present day economic system of free enterprise. This whole system is being seriously questioned and increasingly a strong interest is expressed in gathering all relevant information regarding the possible alternatives of forms of socialism such as those practised by China or certain countries on the continent of Africa.~~

It is of vital importance that in this struggle to find a more acceptable political and economic system the Christian church, including every priest or minister who takes his ministry seriously, should inform himself of the true nature of such systems with a view to evaluate them in the light of the gospel and of the Christian faith. This is an issue which can no longer be ignored or delayed by Christians, both Black and White, in South Africa. When I read the slogan on stickers attached to the windcreens of motor cars reading: 'Jesus is the answer', I have, on more than one occasion, been tempted to ask the inmates of such a car: Do you know what this answer is when listening to the claims which are being made by capitalism on the one hand, and Marxism on the other hand? Do you sincerely believe (as I do) that the true answer is not to be found in either of these two economic systems, but that only as the truth of the Kingdom of God and its realisation on earth is being enacted more fully and joyously by all Christians, the true answer will be found.

### The demand of Christ

In and amidst this struggle for a new future, a new society which will hopefully be more in accordance with God's demand for justice and recognition of human dignity, Christ is calling you as His disciple, His message-bearer, His delegated representative. He, the Christ who has laid hold of your life at some time in the past, and called you to His service, is laying claim to your total life and loyalty as you enter the future. It is, amongst others, a claim:

1. Upon your personal life: A life of Christian simplicity, true piety, moral rectitude and spiritual vitality where your personal example will play a decisive role in your ministry. Your preaching, your pastoral care, your Christian leadership will to a very large measure be determined by such personal examples. Equally you will very soon discover the demand of Christ for offering strong leadership, displaying unflinching courage and facing the willingness of voluntary suffering and sacrifice in the face of ever-increasing political surveillance and persecution.
2. Upon your ministry: But the situation of growing tension and emerging conflict will also be used by Christ to lay a special claim upon your ministry as a messenger of His gospel. It will be a claim by Christ upon your theological proclamation, upon your political involvement and upon your Christian identification.

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Your theological proclamation: What is the nature of your preaching going to be? Paul in writing to the Corinthians regarding the nature of his proclamation, states clearly: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." a beautiful phrase: Jesus Christ and him crucified - but what does this mean in the South African context of 1977, after June 16, 1976? What is the real message, the open invitation, the divine judgment of this Christ, crucified, for each of us, for His Church, for South African society today? Will we be willing to preach a theology of liberation and hope, not devoid of social and political content and challenge, but filled with the real meaning of the gospel as it becomes more relevant to the circumstances in which we are involved?

My plea to you today will be this: Let your message be so authentic, so relevant, so meaningful in its portrayal of the living Christ that people will know: This man has struggled to make the Christ of the New Testament the living Christ of today for those of us living in Umlazi, in Sibasa, in Langa - yes even in the remotest corner of a rural homeland! My plea to you would be this: Preach in such a way that at the end of your life and its ministry you may be able to say: I too, have proclaimed the full counsel of God to the flock which He has entrusted to me!

Your political involvement: I believe it to be of vital importance, right at the outset of your ministry, to make out for yourself what the nature of your political involvement is going to be. First of all, you will have to decide whether you believe, on the basis of the gospel, that any relevant proclamation and practising of the Christian faith could ever be possible without becoming involved in politics. I do not believe this to be possible: no religion - least of all the Christian faith - could or should be kept out of politics. On the other hand, I believe it to be equally important to recognise the important truth that the Christian faith should never be identified with any specific political policy, social structure or economic system. No such policy or system ever fulfils in the deepest sense of the word, the demands of the Kingdom of God. Christ as Lord stands above all such systems or structures and therefore the Christian should always adopt a positive critical attitude towards any political, social or economic policy.

Applied to the present political situation in Africa and in South Africa this would surely imply that the minister as man of God should at all times proclaim the Biblical demands of justice and freedom to all, regardless of station or power. Applying the criteria of the gospel, his proclamation of God's salvation and judgment should, without favour or prejudice, apply equally to the policies and practices of Idi Amin, Samora Machel, John Vorster or Kaiser Matanzima. Give praise where praise is due in accordance with the spirit and the mind of Christ, but equally pronounce judgment where this is demanded in the Name of the Lord.

This attitude and approach in our ministry is of special relevance to the emerging struggle for political power in South Africa. Let us not live under any illusions that the transition from White minority rule to majority rule is going to be an easy one: Man's longing (and lust) for power, especially as it has through the past years been stimulated by the many false positions created by the government through its policy of racial and ethnical division, will involve South Africa not only in a bitter struggle for power between White and Black, but also between Black and Black (as we are currently witnessing in other parts of Africa). What is Christ's demand to you under these circumstances? Which is your role going to be: a partisan political role in open support of a specific group or a Christian leadership role which recognises both the good and the bad in each party, policy or person.

Your Christian Identification: In the present and developing crisis you will in all probability be confronted in your parish or congregation or your denomination by ever-growing numbers of politically conscious youth, crying out for

liberation, of an increasing number of parents and adults in agony and distress on behalf of their children, by overwhelming social needs including economic deprivation, hunger and want of your community - and possibly many other such problems. Many evenings as you come home your heart and soul will cry out: Oh God, give me the wisdom to discover and know your will for myself in this time of crisis, give me the courage to continue in your service, give me the love to forgive those who oppress my people, give me the strength to fight against an evil system of those who deny us our human dignity and our basic human rights, give me the fortitude to protest against those who exploit the labour of our people for selfish gain and who use practically every means to maintain their selfish control of power.

3. Upon your denomination: As I read the present situation and try to look into an uncertain and unpredictable immediate future, it seems to me that every church in South Africa would be challenged to declare its stand in word and deed on the following urgent issues:

Liberation: The call for liberation, softly spoken about amongst themselves in years gone by, has now swelled to a wave of sound reverberating from one part of the country to the other as this concept has come alive in the hearts of millions of Blacks. So deep is the gulf which divides the Whites in their thinking from Blacks, that what comes across to the Whites as a serious threat and an imminent danger sounds like sweet rhythmic music in the ears of the Blacks: liberation, liberation! and whether your specific denomination or the church in general in South Africa likes it or not, wishes every denomination will be faced with the decision to state very clearly where it stands with regard to this issue. The time is passed where any denomination in our country which wishes to be seen as relevant to Black aspirations and needs, can any longer ignore the challenge of participating in the struggle for liberation. The question is no longer whether but only how! Churches will have to answer - should in fact already have answered - the question: What does liberation in the true Christian sense mean: is it only personal? spiritual? or is it also social, political, economic? If so, what exactly is to be the role and the witness of the Christian Church in this struggle for a new society?

Reconciliation: I am aware that many Black, including Black Christians, have become increasingly suspicious when Whites approach them with a plea for reconciliation. They state unequivocally: You Whites want reconciliation while we Blacks seek liberation, and only when you are prepared to identify yourselves with our goal for liberation there can be true reconciliation. Without that any such plea could never be realised.

If we have a clear and common understanding of what true liberation implies, I would fully agree with the above viewpoint. As somebody who belongs to an organisation where for many years we have stated clearly the demand for reconciliation based on justice, I am fully aware of the challenge which this situation presents to you and to your denomination. On the one hand there is the growing demand for action towards liberation emanating from the young militant Blacks: on the other hand there is the increased hardening of attitudes and rejection of



Black aspirations and demands by a substantial section of the White Christian community - and both these belonging to the same church and, in a few instances, to the same parish or congregation. What will be Christ's demand of you under these circumstances? How is your church, for instance, facing up to the issue of army chaplains, of conscientious objection, of marriage officers bound to implement unjust racial laws of the state, of the support for victims of political oppression?

Relevance: Today, as never before, the church in South Africa is being tested regarding the relevance, credibility and liberating power of the message which it proclaims. Many of us are aware how, in the minds of an increasing number of laity, both White and Black, there has been a growing conviction of the increasing irrelevance of the church as an institution, or the loss of its influence on the minds of many people. Claims which the church has made regarding our true brotherhood in Christ, our unity despite all differences, our sharing of spiritual gifts as well as material privileges - these and many others have been exposed as largely unsubstantiated claims. As the crisis deepens and as the day of liberation draws, the church will be challenged as never before to prove and substantiate the claims of its Master that He indeed is the Way, the Truth and the Life. I sincerely believe that Christ has the power and the urgent longing to lead us as a Christian community into a new and deeper understanding of what Christian commitment and Christian relevance mean at this time in the history of His Church in our country. I do not know what the answers will be that He will be willing and able to give to us, nor do I know where this will lead us to, but this I know: In Him is all the fulfilment of all the aspirations and the hopes of all the oppressed, the imprisoned, the blind, the millions who are shackled by the forces of evil. He stands at the entry of a new time, a new period in the history of our country and He beckons us to follow Him as He leads us into true and full liberation!

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