

TUTU GERMAN CELEBRATION TALK

“WE ARE WHAT WE ARE”

Christian Identity in Conflict with Powers and Principalities

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I

On September 1st, 1982, then-Bishop Desmond Tutu was testifying before the Eloff Commission of Inquiry. The commission, with Judge C.F. Eloff as its chairperson, was instituted by the South African apartheid regime to investigate the South African Council of Churches, its workings, the sources of its finances, the way those monies were spent, and whether all these carried the support of the churches who were members of the council. In truth, it was not an investigation. It was a declaration of war, dressed up as an inquiry. The times were tense: after the students of Soweto took to the streets in 1976, one of the most dramatic turning points in the history of the struggle in South Africa, the apartheid regime's repression reached new levels of viciousness.

Unlike after the Sharpeville massacre, this time the prophetic church in South Africa did not remain silent, but joined the struggle in ways never seen before. Young Christians joined their compatriots, flooding the streets of protest in their thousands. More and more, clergy involved in the struggle became targets of the regime, and the churches where they served as well as the community organisations they were part of were under severe pressure. On October 19, 1977, no less than nineteen organisations, most of them connected to the Black Consciousness movement, were banned. Also banned were the newspapers *The World* and *The Weekend World* led by its intrepid editor, Percy Qoboza, as well as the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, led by the Rev. Beyers Naudé. So were a number of leading persons in the liberation movement. On September 12, 1979, Steven Bantu Biko, the charismatic leader of the Black Consciousness movement and undisputed spokesperson of Black aspirations, was murdered, tortured to death by apartheid's security forces. It is at this time, a divinely appointed Kairos if ever there was one, that Desmond Tutu became the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. By 1980, the conflict

between the churches and the white minority government was steadily intensifying. By the mid-eighties many prophetic clergy would be in prison, and some assassinated by the regime's death squads.

By "the prophetic church" I mean that the church we are speaking of is not so much the institutional church but what Martin Luther King Jr., called "the church within the church, a true ecclesia and the hope of the world,"¹ driven by a radical gospel of justice, hope and liberation. It is the church Charles Villa-Vicencio called "a restless presence in church and society."² That is the church not captured by what the South African 1985 *Kairos Document* calls "state theology," and neither by "church theology," but rather engaging in "prophetic theology."³

On that same October 19, at 4 o'clock in the morning, I received the first of many visits from the security police, who searched my home, took books from my shelves they considered "subversive," including my irreplaceable six-year correspondence with Rev Beyers Naudé. I mention this only to show how much the church, our theology, and our activism were on their minds as a threat. For more than an hour, the leader of that terror squad, a certain Captain Frans Mostert, argued with me about Romans 13, that famous passage in which, according to him, (and most traditional exegesis) the Apostle Paul had stated that "all authority" of government is always from God, and should therefore be unquestionably honoured and obeyed. If I obeyed, I too, as Paul says, "would have nothing to fear." Mostert did not talk to me about my ties to the Black Consciousness movement, or what a communist I was. He talked about the Bible. To me, it was a clear indication of the enormous significance of the theology of apartheid as an indispensable pillar of the system for Afrikaner Christians in general, and for the regime and its instruments in particular. We did not agree.⁴

In the midst of these ominous signs and growing tensions, I felt compelled to write an open letter to Archbishop Tutu, to show my support and solidarity in what he was facing at the time. The government, having already seized the passport of the General

¹ In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," see Martin Luther King Jr., *The Radical King*, edited by Cornel West, Boston: Beacon, 2015, 127-146; also James M Washington, *A Testimony of Hope, The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986, 300.

² Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid, A Socio-Theological History of the English-speaking Churches*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, 5

³ See *The South African Kairos Document*, Johannesburg: The Institute for Contextual Theology, 1985

⁴ See my treatment of Romans 13:1-4, "What Remains for Caesar? Once Again Romans 13," in Allan Boesak and Charles Villa-Vicencio, (Eds.), *When Prayer Makes News*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986, 138-154

Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, was ramping up its propaganda against Tutu and the Council, in what I saw as preparation for sterner action against him, the Council, or both, accusing Tutu of “supporting subversive elements,” “encouraging a revolutionary climate in South Africa,” and “promoting the aims of the African National Congress.” Those were dangerous accusations that got activists detained and imprisoned where they sometimes died. In that 1981 letter, I wrote,

Because of all this [your resistance to apartheid] you are now considered an enemy of the state, indeed of South Africa, a dangerous subversive who does not “deserve” a passport and now even runs a greater risk – or so we have heard. After having made you the victim of a campaign promise to appease the worst of the racists, they want to use you to divert attention from their obvious inability to face the consequences of their disastrous policies, and to undo the damage done our country and its people after decades of apartheid.⁵

Because we understood what was at stake here, I did not try to hide my anger:

Precisely who is the danger to our society and to the future of this country? Who has caused the problems that now plague South Africa? Who has taken away the few pitiful political rights we had so that they could inflict their policies upon us without responsibility *to us*? Whose laws are making criminals out of men, women, and children who want only a decent life together as a family?⁶

Not completely knowing how this would end, but understanding more and more where this was heading, I tried to make clear who the real criminals were. It was the regime, those who banned persons who sought justice, and organisations who worked for peaceful change; who detained without trial, banned and exiled the best of the sons and daughters of South Africa. Those with hands stained with the blood of the innocent were accusing the wrong person of fomenting violence:

It is they who have convinced so many generations of Black South Africans that nonviolent protest has no chance in South Africa. For years we have marched, pleaded, cried, tried to speak to the conscience of the white South African government. They have answered with police, with detentions and tear gas, with dogs, and guns. And with that infinite contempt of those who have nothing left but the power of the gun.⁷

They shouted loudly from the rooftops their love for their country, but the one with real, deep love for his country and all its people was Desmond Mpilo Tutu. It was

⁵ Allan Boesak, “You Are a True Son of Africa,” in Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed, Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition*, Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1984, 86-89

⁶ *Black and Reformed*, 87

⁷ *Black and Reformed*, 87

something they, the purveyors of lies and the justifiers of violence, drenched as they were in the blood of our children, and hiding behind the fig leaf of a racist, Christianized patriotism, would never understand. “It is true that prophets are not honoured, or loved in their own country,” I wrote. Nonetheless, “a nation that cannot respond to such a love has set fire to its own future.”⁸

What was on display was the awesome power of the apartheid state with its ideological grip on the country, its ruthless security forces, the mightiest military on the face of the continent, and the security of white solidarity across the Western world. At the same time though, it was the epitome of the powerlessness of power. Over against this was the power of the powerless. It is the first truth we should understand, and that is what lay behind the conflict between the state and the prophetic church.

The Heart of the Matter: Christian Identity

The second truth, and the heart of the matter, I propose, is that this is not just a confrontation between “church and state” in general. That description is too bland for what is taking place here. It is neither a clash of ideologies, nor is it simply a confrontation between “the apartheid state and the church.” This is a state that claimed to be “Christian,” with a constitution based on the Bible, undergirded by a sophisticated theological construct called the theology of apartheid, derived, albeit in severely perverted form, from the Scriptures and the Reformed tradition. It was, in the deepest sense, a conflict between two Christian identities. I propose that the instance of the Eloff Commission illustrate that quite clearly.

That day, Desmond Tutu began his submission to the commission with these words:

My purpose is to demonstrate from the Scriptures and from hallowed Christian tradition and teaching that *we are what we are* as the South African Council of Churches, and what we say and what we do, that all of these are determined by not by politics or any other ideology. We are what we are *in obedience to God and in response to the gracious Gospel of His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We owe ultimate loyalty not to any human authority however prestigious or powerful, but to God and to His Son our Lord Jesus Christ alone*

⁸ *Black and Reformed*, 88

from whom we obtain our mandate. We must obey the divine imperative and word *whatever the cost*.⁹

This is a statement of great theological and political significance and we shall return to these words presently, for within them lies the key to properly understand the nature of the conflict.

Judge Eloff represented a government that called itself Christian. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1961, under which Eloff served, appointed by the State President who derived his powers from that constitution, was an unashamedly “Christian” constitution.¹⁰ “In humble submission to Almighty God,” its preamble proclaimed,

Who controls the destiny of nations and the history of peoples; Who gathered our forebears together from many lands and gave them this, their own; Who has guided them from generation to generation; Who has wondrously delivered them from the dangers that beset them;

We, who are in Parliament assembled, DECLARE that whereas we are CONSCIOUS of our responsibilities towards God and men, are CONVINCED of the necessity to stand together;

To safeguard the integrity and freedom of our country;

To secure the maintenance of law and order;

To further the contentment and welfare of all in our midst ...

The people of South Africa acknowledge the sovereignty of Almighty God ...

This is the constitution that gave Judge Eloff his powers. As a constitution proclaiming to be the basis of democratic life “for all the people of South Africa,” it was a complete and utter fraud. That constitution was a racist, exclusivist document, built on white supremacy and the ill-gotten gains of imperialism and colonialism: invasion, land theft, genocide, slavery, epistemicide, oppression, and dehumanization. Formulated just after the Sharpeville massacre, and only five years after that foundational document of South African democracy, the Freedom Charter,¹¹ this

⁹ Desmond Tutu, “The Divine Intention” in Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *Hope and Suffering, Sermons and Speeches*, Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1983, 134-149, emphasis added.

¹⁰ See “The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1961,” worldstatesmen.org/south_africa_const.1961.pdf

¹¹ The text of the Freedom Charter can be found at http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inv_pdfo/AD1137-Ea6-1-001-jpeg.pdf. See also my discussion of the Freedom Charter and its meaning today in Allan Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-red Waters. Prophetic Critique on Empire, Resistance, Justice, and the Power of the Hopeful Sizwe*, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017, 18-20

constitution sought to dispute every word of the Charter, and in contradicting it so vehemently sought to erase it from the pages of history as well as from the minds of the oppressed. The violence in that onslaught was intentional.

That constitution claims that whites did not come here to invade, to steal and to destroy, but were innocently “gathered” here by Almighty God. Not as a scandalous fact in the history of Western, Christian imperialism, but as an act of divine providence. Those white forebears were gathered from many lands, but were now brought together in a land promised to them; not stolen, not taken by conquest and chicanery, but “given as their own” by their God “who has wondrously delivered them from the dangers that beset them.” Those “dangers” were the original owners of this land, who did not stand idly by when the invaders came, but resisted them as long as they could, even against those monumentally uneven odds, from 1510 against d’ Almeida and the Portuguese, to 1652 when Van Riebeeck and the Dutch came, and beyond, against the English, for 178 years of sometimes nonviolent, sometimes violent, but always resolute struggle.

Those “in Parliament here assembled” were only whites, assembled in a racist institution, where the vast majority of South Africa’s population were excluded, there to be debated and discussed, harangued as savages who did not understand, and were not fit for, or worthy of the “responsibilities” of citizenship. That call to “stand together” was a call for white power, white solidarity, and white supremacist reign against the rightful owners of the land, no matter what. Their “law and order” would be the most draconian legislation, laws to legalise their theft, their oppression, and their exploitation of black bodies. It would be the unending violence of police brutality, military actions, imprisonment and torture; the destruction of our humanity, the post-facto justification and pre-emptive absolution of their indescribable inhumanity. And the “contentment” they speak of was never the contentment and welfare of “all.” Neither was it that contentment that is the fruit of justice. It was the contentment of white supremacy, white greed, white privilege, and white enrichment on the backs of black bodies, albeit at the costs of the white soul.

Moreover, Rev David Botha of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church has, in an address to the SACC Annual Conference in 1980, conclusively shown that the political policy of apartheid was in fact a child of the mission policy of the white Dutch Reformed

Church.¹² The white Dutch Reformed Church has not only provided theological and moral justification for the policy, “it had also worked out, in considerable detail, the policy itself.” For years the white DRC actively worked on, and developed practical proposals which the National Party accepted, and these became policies implemented by government. The intertwining ran that deep. That was the Christian identity Eloff represented. But it was a perverted Christian identity derived from the heresy, idolatry, and blasphemy that was apartheid, and as such it would be exposed, and condemned.

On the other side of the table was Desmond Tutu, representing a totally different, entirely opposite, but completely authentic Christian identity. He was not focusing on himself; this was not grandstanding. It was Tutu embodying the Black oppressed who saw in Jesus Christ their liberator-Messiah and who, like Chief Albert Luthuli, went into the struggle taking their Christian faith with them, “praying that it would influence for the good the character of the resistance.” It was not an individualized identity; it was a collective, communal identity. Tutu did not use the “royal we” which is an assumptive appropriation employed by the powerful of the earth. When Tutu says, “We are what we are,” it is the communal identity he has in mind. When Tutu says this, he points not to the churches in the first place. He points to Jesus, “our Lord and Saviour.”

He points to Jesus because in Jesus lies the ultimate identity of those who follow him, and in their ability to discern who he really is The Black Consciousness generation, with their decolonised minds, understood this existential question extraordinarily well, and they shouted from the roof tops who they knew themselves to be. They translated Fanon’s individualized question into a communal question, a trans-racial, trans-cultural, trans-religious question. With that self-understanding they swamped the streets of Soweto and the rest of the country in flaming protest and fiery resistance, and with that self-understanding they challenged the churches. For those students and youth who were Christians, this is how they responded to Jesus’ question. Their Christian identity was spelt out in commitment and sacrifice, in pain and blood on the streets of confrontation. The apartheid state, like some Leviathan stirring under the sea, rose up in fear-filled rage and let the waves of vengeful wrath crash over the children. This time, the churches seemed to listen, but it was the prophetic church that heard and acted and gave such sterling leadership in the

¹² See David P. Botha, “Church and Kingdom in South Africa” in Margaret Nash, (ed.), *Your Kingdom Come*, Johannesburg, 1981

struggle between 1979 and 1990, after Desmond Tutu took over the leadership of the Council in March 1978. It was a year that heralded an extraordinary epoch. Desmond Tutu's leadership heralded a fundamental transformation of the SACC as he created room for the radical theological self-expression of a new generation of Black clergy and theologians all of them organically rooted in the struggles of their people.¹³

So in 1979, the South African Council of Churches took a number of resolutions in which it declared support for mass actions of civil disobedience, in my view the most important, impactful, and historically and theologically most significant in the life of the Council. In many ways this would prove to be the foundation upon which the Council's theological direction would be built, transforming it public witness. The Council took those resolutions even while it knew it would not be able to control the thousands of young people flooding the streets, the vicious retaliations of the government or the violent clampdowns of the regime's security forces. It was not about control, it was about solidarity, about Christian duty, about obedience to God rather than to human beings, be they ever so powerful and prestigious; it was about our obligation to, like God, stand by the poor and oppressed, and about being on the right side of the revolution. For the churches, that was a hugely important step, and the difference it made to society, the struggle and the church was immense.

At the same time, the church was not pledging ultimately loyalty to an ideology, to the youth, or to the dictates of the revolution; that ultimate loyalty could be given only to God. It was on that basis that trust with the struggle was built, and the youth understood that. We knew we were driven by our Christian convictions and by that singular gift of the Holy Spirit: prophetic boldness. We knew we were hearing the voice of God in the cries of the oppressed for freedom and the restoration of their full humanity. We knew it because thus we had testified – in the resolutions of the Council of 1979, in the ARECSA Charter of 1980; the Belhar Confession of 1982, the Declaration at the Call for Prayer for the Downfall of the Apartheid Regime in 1985, and in the Kairos Document of 1985.

¹³ See also M. John Lamola, *Sowing in Tears, A Documentary History of the Church Struggle against Apartheid, 1960-1990*, Grant Park, Johannesburg: African Perspectives, 2021, 225

Christian Identity as Prophetic Engagement

Desmond Tutu engages with Eloff as prophetic witness to truth. He severely criticises the government on its hypocrisy, condemning the SACC for theological standpoints on justice the white DRC itself once defended.¹⁴ But he chastises the government not just on its hypocrisy, but also on its failures in what should be normal governmental responsibilities. Those “mundane, secular” things the SACC is doing, like providing boreholes or good education, should be seen as natural for a government that claims to be just. Tutu also slips in some scathing critique as he mocks the government on its obsession with “race,”

Why should skin colour or race be any more useful as a criterion than say, the size of one’s nose? What has the size of my nose to do with whether I am intelligent, etc.? It has no more to do with my worth as a human being than the colour of my eyes.¹⁵

But it is on the issue of true and authentic Christian discipleship that Tutu shows prophetic rage. We are on trial, he says, for being Christian, and “that by a government who calls itself Christian.” Right at the start, Tutu wants to clear up the matter of authentic Christian identity. “It may be that we are being told that it is an offence to be a Christian in South Africa.”¹⁶ This sentence alone delegitimizes the government’s claims of “Christianity.” Tutu speaks of the unmentionable cruelties of government policy, its “homelands” and “resettlement areas” which Tutu bluntly calls “dumping grounds.” He mentions the bannings and arbitrary detentions, the “twilight existence” of such South Africans, all in the name of God. But if God were this, Tutu declares, “I would not worship Him, for He would be a totally useless God.” Tutu stresses the difference: “Mercifully, [God] is not such a God.”¹⁷ Tutu’s judgement on apartheid however, *is* merciless. Echoing the ecumenical consensus, he tells Eloff, “I will demonstrate that apartheid, separate development or whatever it is called is evil, totally and without remainder; that it is unchristian, and indefensible.

This government has no right to pass judgement on the Council of the churches. Only the churches may rightfully judge the Council. Tutu knows the government has no real case against the Council, so he dares the government to take them to court, even if

¹⁴ *Hope and Suffering*, 138-9

¹⁵ *Hope and Suffering*, 133

¹⁶ *Hope and Suffering*, 124

¹⁷ *Hope and Suffering*, 125

he knows that “there is an array of draconian laws at the disposal of the government.” But Tutu wants those laws to be seen for what they are: legally untenable and morally unsound.

And it is not as if the Council is afraid to defend itself before the world, to account for “the hope that is within us.” (I Peter 3:15) It is not that the churches claim infallibility, but it is “our member churches and not the government” that have the right to determine what mistakes are being made.” Then Tutu takes it even higher, taking it beyond the churches: “The government ... has not competence whatsoever to pass judgement on this. God alone can do that.”¹⁸ Because of this, Tutu, while conscious of the powers of the Commission, wants them to know that, “now and always,” he does not “fear them,” for it is “trying to defend the indefensible.” He then launches into a theme that would become typically Tutu:

Apartheid is as evil and vicious as Nazism and Communism and the government will fail completely for it is ranging itself on the side of evil, injustice, and oppression. The Government are not God, they are just ordinary human beings who very soon – like other tyrants before them, will bite the dust. When they take on the SACC, they must know that they are taking on the Church of God and those who have done so in the past, the Neros, the Hitlers, the Amins of this world, have ended up ... as the flotsam and jetsam of history.¹⁹

This is the boldness that makes Desmond Tutu say, “[Therefore], this Commission, with respect,” is not only “totally superfluous,” it is also “perfectly obvious and unsubtle.”²⁰

It is this spirit of boldness that Desmond Tutu has held onto to this very day that inspires this prophet of truth and boldness, whether it is the apartheid regime, the current African National Congress regime with its corruption and greed and disdain for the poor; or the church which knows no justice, or compassion, for God’s LGBTQI children.

The spirit of boldness that strengthens us to remind the world of the sins of the powerful, makes him speak the truth to the powerful of the world, such as Tony Blair and George W. Bush, speaking up on behalf of God’s suffering children in Iraq and

¹⁸ *Hope and Suffering*, 127

¹⁹ *Hope and Suffering*, 127

²⁰ *Hope and Suffering*, 1

Afghanistan and Syria, calling them “war criminals.” It is the same Spirit that made him testify over forty years ago,

The Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour declare for all to know that life will triumph over darkness; that goodness will triumph over evil, that justice will triumph over injustice and freedom will triumph over tyranny. I stand before you as one who believes fervently what Paul wrote when he said, “If God be for us, who can be against us?”²¹

It is the same Spirit that keeps Desmond Tutu unflinching in his advocacy for freedom and justice for the Palestinian people.

“As South Africans and Germans,” he wrote in his earnest plea on behalf of Palestine to the German churches in 2015, “we arguably know better than most, from our own histories, what damage the authors of injustice and hatred inflict upon themselves. Those with the power to commit inhuman acts profoundly damage their own humanity. Because of our special knowledge about human rights and justice, I believe that there is a particular onus on our countries to contribute to lasting peace and stability in the Holy Land. Is that not how families should work? As Christians, it is our duty to side with the oppressed, the downtrodden, the poor, the prejudiced and unjustly treated – ALWAYS. There is no place for neutrality, because it favours the oppressors. Always.”

Much has happened since then. Too much suffering, too much pain, too much destruction, too much death. Too many children killed, too much justice delayed, derailed and destroyed. Too much lawlessness, too much hard-heartedness. In 2015, Desmond Tutu was 76 years old and the churches did not listen. God has spared him all those extra years so we could hear him speak, preach, pray, plead, admonish, encourage. And it was always about justice. ALWAYS. Dare we now celebrate his 90th birthday, praise and thank God for this remarkable man and walk away, still not listening? I shudder to think what would become of us.

Now, after all these years, is not the time for wavering, hesitation or procrastination. And should we be fearful of the powers that be, or fearful of our own guilty conscience, recall the faith of Desmond Tutu, in times a million times more fearful than yours: “If God be for us, who can be against us?”

²¹ *Hope and Suffering*, 127-8

For after all, we are what we are, not because of Desmond Tutu, but because of our Lord and Saviour Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet from occupied Galilee in occupied Palestine, the anointed One of God.

Thank you.