

CREDIBILITY AND THE COMMUNICATIVE POWER OF THE CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

As a result of the profound divisions among the South African churches, the credibility and communicative potential of the gospel and the church is in jeopardy. There is concern about the future of Christianity in our country. In a situation of conflict between religion and political radicalism, people are usually estranged from the church. When the church chooses a certain ideological or political stance in a polarised society, groups of Christians are usually disinherited by the church. In times of radical change, young people are testing and weighing the message, values and praxis of the church. If Christianity is to survive in the new South Africa, reconciliation and a more united message and existence of the churches is needed. This can be achieved by an interaction between theological theory for the existence of the congregation, and the concrete praxis of the congregation.

1. Introduction

While there are signs that the long-standing ideological and political rivals are seriously striving to co-operate in bringing about a new non-racial South Africa, the churches are still as divided as ever.

Although one has to admit that the churches associated with the SACC played a major role in preparing - through their witness - the situation that is now evolving, the division between them and a great number of Christians and church groups in our country is as wide as ever. The problem which this article addresses, is the question whether this vast group of Christians (Pentecostal, independent, house groups, Afrikaans churches, etc) will be disinherited by Christendom in the future. One can argue that these groups have to be re-evangelised with the gospel as interpreted by the churches of the SACC, but the problem is more complicated than this solution. It concerns the credibility of the church, and the communication of the gospel to next generations of South Africans.

It has to do with the very message of Christianity, namely repentance, forgiveness without conditions, reconciliation, witness, peace ... It concerns human relationships. Is it impossible for Christians to find one another and achieve reconciliation across racial, cultural, theological, ideological, political and economic boundaries? Can faith in Christ break down these barriers or are the powers of political conviction racial prejudice, self-interest, fear and bitterness invincible?

The credibility of the gospel and the church is at stake. If we could create a community of reconciled people in the church, who can live together as Christians, at peace with God and one another, then the church will be communicating an answer to the present crisis. If we fail to do so, then those outside the church and our own youth might interpret it as the church's failure in the hour of national crisis. In South Africa today a community within the church, in which barriers of alienation and separation have been demolished, would communicate a powerful message to the fearful, the despairing, the vindictive and the estranged. For this reason I should like to speak about the communicative power of a credible church.

My concern is about the future of Christianity in South Africa. Will we retain the youth - both white and black? What is the church communicating to them in this hour of crisis? Can people as polarised as modern South Africans be united by Christianity? If they cannot, then our youth may turn to secular movements for answers and bid Christianity goodbye.

In order to achieve a realistic vision of the unity of the church and a *modus vivendi* in which church groups can tolerate each other, an interaction between ecumenical theory and the ethos of a church group as to their comprehensive *praxis* is needed.

2. Reasons why people are outside the church

Theologically it is a fact that God's acts are the fundamental cause why people accept him as their Saviour and join the church. The concept which embraces all God's acts, which reveals their full meaning and expresses their ultimate purpose, is the kingdom of God. As such it is part of this kingdom, but - more than that - it is the militant vanguard of the kingdom (Heyns 1978:354). The church, we know, is a sign of the kingdom of God. Hence the church is the arena where the action takes places and decisions are taken.

There is a close relation between existence in faith and membership of the church (in the broad sense of an organised faith community). In the Netherlands the church lost its credibility and many of its members left it to practise their faith outside the church. This desire for free practise of Christianity, outside the confinement of the institutional churches with their reluctance to change, was a great cry in the Netherlands in the sixties and seventies. However, a thesis at Nijmegen University (Goedhart 1984:117) showed that when people try to practise their Christianity outside the church, they become unbelievers within one generation. This was proven by a massive study, *Secularizing en ontzuiling in Nederland* (Secularisation and 'de-churchification' in the Netherlands). It was found that the number of Christian

believers outside the church was negligible (Vossen 1986:127). Hence empirical research affirms that one has to look for Christians within the church, and that those outside are in fact targets for evangelisation.

As a practical theologian I should like to take an empirical look at people's reasons for leaving the church and remaining on the outside (cf Pieterse 1986). There are five major theories to account for this:

- a) The marginalisation theory (Luckman 1967): The traditional church has become a peripheral phenomenon in modern society; the majority of people leave it due to secularisation and are non-members.
- b) The privatisation theory (Dekker 1975;1977): Society has become so vast and complex that the individual withdraws into his/her private life; religion has become part of this private life, and as such falls outside the church.
- c) The market theory (Berger 1967): Religion must compete on the open market with other agencies claiming people's attention. Thus religious values have become a matter of personal choice - and many people settle for non-Christian values.
- d) The theory of a conflict between religion and political radicalism (Glock & Stark 1965): Progressive politics and the church are usually opposed to one another.
- e) The disinheritance theory (Laeyendecker 1967): The church tends to function increasingly within a particular social stratum, such as the middle class, thus 'excluding' members of other social strata.

The last two theories (d and e) are particularly relevant to our situation and I shall therefore deal with them in slightly more detail.

First we shall consider the theory of the conflict between religion and radical leftist political movements. In Europe the strained relations between the churches and such political movements go back more than a hundred years. Political movements of the radical left call for radical social change, while the churches tend to move away cautiously - if at all - from the *status quo*.

As a rule the churches are a stabilising, integrating force in society and they are therefore often - with some justice - accused of serving the established order. It is this alliance of the church with its established order which poses problems for the radical left. Members of such groups leave the church and are often violently critical of it. The analysis of the South African situation in the Kairos document - in terms of state theology, church theology and prophetic theology - has a bearing on this. State theology and church theology cling too stubbornly to the established order and therefore impede radical change. Exponents of radical change tend either to leave the established churches, or to exercise pressure on them, or to form their own theological movements and churches. To these people the conservative churches have lost credibility because they do not identify sufficiently with the struggle of the oppressed. On the other side of the political spectrum (radical right) the same process is on its way in our country.

In the second place, we should look into the disinheritance theory. Its exponents claim that there are developments within churches which exclude people from other social groups. The church or denomination gradually acquires a certain character imparted by its leaders. This causes other groups in that church to feel dissatisfied because the church's character is not compatible with their specific aspirations and social situation. In this sense, then, they are 'disinherited'. One could distinguish between the socio-economically disinherited, the culturally disinherited and the psycho-socially disinherited. In our situation one should distinguish another group - the politically disinherited (cf the Introduction). The Afrikaans churches are still officially labelled 'heretics' by the ecumenical organisations.

The disinheritance theory accounts for the church's loss of miners and industrial workers. Throughout the world churches are inclined to be middle class. Because the church tends to be defensive towards modern thought and culture, artists and the intelligentsia often leave the church or remain outside it. This places church policy-makers in a painful dilemma, since any choice favouring a particular trend could mean 'disinheriting' another group. This disinheritance situation gives rise to two developments: splinter groups within the church and members who leave the church altogether.

An important tenet of this theory is that the survival of a church depends to some extent on consensus in the socio-economic, social-political, cultural and psycho-social spheres. This theory, pertaining to racial prejudice and political difference, accounts for the tension and disintegration of relations between the white Dutch Reformed Church, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the Dutch Reformed Church of Africa and the Reformed Church in Africa.

Here too the church's credibility is questioned in a situation of racial, political, ideological and theological divisions. Whichever side the white Dutch Reformed Church for example chooses, there will be factions that will question its credibility. Hence people become estranged from the church when the church loses credibility in their eyes. This problem, and that of communicating the gospel in such a situation, is what this article seeks to address.

3. The problem of credibility of the church in South Africa

The basic cause of the crisis in South Africa is indisputably the divisions between people and the consequent polarisation. This polarisation profoundly divides the people. Different ideologies are diametrically opposed. There are deeply rooted differences about the economic system to be followed - a free market or socialist system. There are deep political differences about the methods of dismantling *apartheid* and the creation of a new South Africa - whether by peaceful or violent means. Hence different groups in the country disagree fundamentally about the political, economic and social structuring of society. In the present emotional climate the question is increasingly: are you for or against us? The churches are to confront this choice as well.

The great question is what position the youth - both black and white - would like the church to adopt. There is great uncertainty and bewilderment among the youth of this country. In my experience they appear to demand that the churches should show the way to justice, freedom and peace. One thing is certain, youth is testing and weighing the church right now. This is a normal reaction. In my view J Habermas's rationalisation concept (Habermas 1982) is a useful one for analysing the way in which youth is testing the credibility of the church at present.

Rationalisation in this context is a process by which human ideas about the world and human behaviour are systematically subjected to rational appraisal according to certain criteria. It is based on a classification of the human life-world into objective, social and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension is factual, the social concerns the shared norms and values of groups of people, and the subjective is the person's inner world. These are three aspects of the same experiential reality, but it is necessary to separate them because people use different criteria to evaluate ideas and statements about each of these facets. The criteria for the objective dimension are truth and effectiveness; the criterion for the social sphere is correctness; and that for the subjective world is authenticity. Rationalisation occurs whenever social norms are appraised, discussed and evaluated. Hence it directs and steers youth's weighing and evaluation of the world they live in, in that they examine the truth, correctness and authenticity of their life-world as constituted by the older generation (Vossen 1986:124-125).

In this process values and norms are no longer taken for granted. In times of upheaval and uprootment the correctness, plausibility and authenticity of values are examined and weighed in argumentative communication (Vossen 1986:126). The more black and white youth enter into discussion with one another, the more the white youth will assess, judge and reject the existing order which is changing, but in which they grew up. Afrikaner youth grew up with the church's message that racial separation is not counter to Scripture - in some cases it was said that Scripture prescribed *apartheid*. They grew up with the idea that God was on their side. In the course of doing their national service they may have felt that they were fighting for Christianity against the powers of darkness (the now unbanned political organisations).

Once the transformation has been made, when the 'powers of Evil' may in fact be governing the country, this could give rise to a great crisis among our white youth: a feeling that God has forsaken them, or the church has misled them. This would plunge the Afrikaans churches into a tremendous credibility crisis and estrangement may set in on a massive scale.

How can the church communicate the gospel in such a time? I do not profess to know the whole solution. I shall merely try to grope for an answer in one direction, that is, to reiterate the biblical ideal of the community of faith, in order to direct our *praxis*.

4. A reconciled Christianity is a city on a hilltop

Among modern communication scientists it is widely accepted that deeds speak louder than words. We are living in an age of verbal inflation. As a doer of deeds the church conveys a mighty message. Unless it confesses in words that Jesus is Lord, it cannot be the church in any real sense, but it can also communicate a vital message by its way of existence. If a hierarchically structured church (such as the Roman Catholic Church) holds forth about democracy, the words are cancelled out by its manner of existence. By the same token a church's conduct invalidates its message if it confesses the unity of believers in Christ, yet functions in isolation from other racial and political groups. Thus in our situation the church, through its mode of existence is speaking a word - and a forceful word at that - to the people of this country (cf Nagy & Ott 1979:44f).

The way the church as a community of believers operates in its actual congregational life will communicate a clear message to our country with its polarised human beings. Bijlsma (1981:16) says that the church stands out and attracts people by the fellowship of its members with one another and with their Lord. Through its very mode of existence the community of believers comments on and interprets the world, demonstrating what God wants human society to be like (Webster 1974:106).

The Bible clearly indicates the ideal for the Christian's life of fellowship with one another. In Acts 4:32-37 we have a picture of the first congregation existing in perfect harmony and mutual acceptance as believers in Christ. The voluntary sale of land to provide in the needs of fellow Christians indicates willingness to make personal sacrifices for the sake of fellow believers. This principle of willingness to sacrifice personally for the sake of fellow believers in the churches, on a basis of complete mutual acceptance, is extremely relevant to the situation. It demands a spirit of readiness from us (the whites) to sacrifice for the sake of a deep, close fellowship with fellow believers of other races in the face of all the social and other tensions this incurs. It demands also of black Christians a readiness to make sacrifices by forming a close fellowship in Christ with white Christians in the face of the prevailing atmosphere in black society. Realising God's intention for his church to coexist despite all our differences does not come cheaply. It demands sacrifice.

However, once this principle is accepted and close mutual involvement is realised in the Christian church, it gives rise to gladness (Acts 2:46), when we rejoice in the return of Christ (De Villiers 1977:65). This is when God's plan for mankind triumphs, and then the church communicates a plausible message to the world, 'and having favor with the people' (Acts 2:47).

If there were any doubt whatsoever about God's will for the unity of all believers, irrespective of divisions between Jews and Gentiles, this is totally wiped out by Peter's visions (Acts 10:9-16). The vision does not discriminate in any way between clean and unclean animals - 'clean' and 'unclean' in Scripture denoting things or persons that are acceptable or otherwise to God and fit to be included in worship and religious life (Leviticus 12:4). When God performs a purificatory act, Peter is not permitted to declare things unclean and reject them as food. God's voice from

heaven (Acts 10:13) is a phenomenon frequently accompanying an event of cosmic significance (cf Matt 3:17; John 12:28; Acts 9:4). The fact that the injunction not to discriminate between so-called clean and unclean animals is repeated thrice, underscores its importance and validity (De Villiers 1977:217). God's will has been declared and is not open to misinterpretation of any kind.

The unity of all believers, irrespective of rank, sex or social position, is strongly affirmed in Galatians 3:23-29.

The way, the means, by which to arrive at this sonship is solely and simply faith.

(Ridderbos 1978:147.)

The believer is baptised into Christ (Gal 3:27), and faith - not race or political ideology - is the sole norm determining membership of the church (Gal 3:26). Paul then deals with three sets of contrasts: between Jew and Greek, bond and free, male and female. All these divisions are abolished - in Christ Jesus all are one (Gal 3:28).

In the church we, in Christ, are all one, a new mankind (Eph 2:11-22). In faith we are all fellow citizens and members of the household of God (Eph 2:19). This unique fellowship is possible because Christ is our peace. Through his act of reconciliation he broke down the dividing wall of hostility (Eph 2:14). The Lord of Peace is mighty enough to overcome all enmity and bring reconciliation and harmony among polarised people (Schnackenburg 1982:112). This applies equally to South Africa today. Those of us who view the world from the vantage point of Christ's victory over the real forces of evil, can never accept that peace and reconciliation are impossible. Our endeavour should be to realise this biblical ideal for the life of the church through the church's *praxis*.

This is easier said than done. Probably we should be working on the attitudes of church members. Along with social and political change there should also be a change of attitude, mainly among whites, but also among blacks. A change of attitude cannot be achieved solely through dialogue and sermons: while these things go on, the people - white and black Christians - must meet one another in concrete situations. In the process of changing attitudes scriptural norms and values on these issues must be conveyed in a formative way (cf the excellent work on this subject by Van der Ven 1985).

When the Group Areas Act is scrapped in the course of the current reform process, blacks moving into the geographical areas of white congregations must be welcomed into the bosom of the church - not reluctantly, but from the heart. The congregation must be prepared to evangelise those who do not belong to any church. Jan Hofmeyr's study of so-called 'coloureds' in the Cape Peninsula showed that they prefer to take part in church-based social activity: '... 39% rated political activity as potentially helpful to the local community, 65% rated church-based activity as helpful and 81% rated their own church as helpful' (Hofmeyr 1986:33). The church still has a chance to prove its credibility among many people in this country.

The church will pass youth's test of its credibility only if they perceive in it a community of believers reconciled across the barriers of colour and political

ideology. In our crisis situation a reconciled church can powerfully communicate the gospel message purely by virtue of its way of life. Then it will fulfill its function as a city on a hill or a lamp on a lampstand (Matt 5:14-16). To achieve this there should be intentional interaction of theological ideal and concrete *praxis* in order to shape *praxis* consciously in the light of the theoretical ideal. Congregations should be sensitised to engage purposeful in this interaction. Otherwise, as with the ideology of *apartheid* in the past, the ideal is not open to clues from *praxis*, and *praxis* becomes blind ideological *praxis* without the interaction with the ideal (theological theory) (cf Van der Ven 1985a).

This theory-*praxis* interaction can also enhance a new manner of ecumenical co-existence between various church groups in our country. If we support an ecumenical idea of uniformity between the great variety of church groups (rooted in groups with their own ethos) as an ideology, then reconciliation and peaceful co-existence would be difficult. What is required is a wide-ranging inquiry into every group's myths, their social understanding, their norms and values, their spirituality, their vision of the church, etc., to enable us to obtain a comprehensive understanding of their ethos. Once we have empirical knowledge of the concrete situation, then a critical interaction with the current theory can be undertaken.

This creative interaction would lead to a new understanding of the ecumenical situation in South Africa. It is our view that the processes should be facilitated in which church groups with a different ethos should be encouraged to find ways and means of living together as reconciled Christians without being bulldozed into a uniform oneness. Once this has been achieved, a process should start where the different ethos of groups could be transformed into a wider consensus. This whole exercise would be a powerful communicative act, demonstrating the churches' competence at reconciliation and the creation of a peaceful situation. Academic research is needed which has a direct bearing on current church *praxis* in this regard. Actions by church leaders and local congregations in support of this direction of thought should be maintained. An example of such an action would be that of the National Conference of Churches held at Rustenburg during November 1990. This was a fine first step.

5. Conclusion

I have hope that in the times ahead the church in this country will succeed in powerfully communicating the gospel, but then it will have to reform itself into a truly non-racial community. It must practice the directions of the ideal biblical community of faith as theological theory of the existence of the local congregation. If there can develop a real interaction between theological theory and *praxis* (the kernel of practical theological approach) in the church, I believe that we may move in the right direction.

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