

## Response to W Sebothoma

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Responding to Sebothoma's paper is no easy task. In the first place, the paper ranges through a full spread of disciplines, from Old Testament studies to church history, philosophy to ideological discourse, with a fair sprinkling of Latin quotations. Along the way, he addresses a large number of issues, like Marxism, capitalism, ideology, ethics, justice and mercy. Truth be told, one could respond to any one of these issues - but that would not be fair to the paper as a whole. Holding the paper together is a central theme, which although it almost disappears at places, returns again and again.

My first task is therefore to deconstruct Sebothoma's paper and attempt to reach to the heart of his discussion. This is essentially a personal response and I am sure to distort some or other aspect - but I will attempt to remain true to what I perceive to be the spirit of the paper - the quest for the answer to what went wrong with our (South African) system of values.

Sebothoma begins with the article of Terreblanche which raises the question of what he calls a conceptual blockage, meaning the inability to escape from a particular world-view. Sebothoma goes back to the roots of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the start of salvation history (defined as struggles between good and evil), where he discerns elements of a conceptual blockage. Where David sins and is forgiven, Saul and Uzziah are given no chance to confess. An intriguing moral dilemma arises in which we witness two types of sin - sin which stems from human weakness (Bathsheba) and sin which arose from an attitude of mind (rebellion against God). Tax-collectors and sinners are the chosen audience of Jesus, because they are capable of true repentance in contrast to the Pharisees who are not. The idea of a conceptual blockage and its effects on the Church is Sebothoma's main theme.

Sebothoma begins the long journey through church history to the present, pausing only to define some key concepts. With the Constantinian relocation of Christianity from atheistic sect to state religion, one witnesses several problems arising. There is the removal of the prophetic aspect of the church *vis-à-vis* the state, and the divorcing of faith and reason. Later we have the competition between capitalism and Marxism, with modern Christianity choosing the former as its bedfellow and the latter as its foe. Idolatry has emerged but in a new form, as the Marxist critique of capitalism demonstrates. But Marxism itself has not blazed a trail of genuine democracy, in spite of its promising ideological insights. As a criticism of other ideologies it is without equal, but it fails to translate into the classless society. As a criticism of the church, Marxism points to the manipulation of a theology of apathy that diverts the eyes of caring humanity into a spiritual abyss of self-contemplation

and ethical piety. In conclusion the church has therefore, from time to time, worshipped ideals or false ideas of God and silenced what theologians of the left have called the subversive memory. The Church is captive to a conceptual blockage.

The last aspect addressed by Sebothoma is that of schisms in which he draws attention to the cultural baggage, which not least in Africa, has dogged the spread of the gospel. Indeed, one might argue that the colonialists used the gospel message as a means to serve the ends of the empire. In bringing spiritual light, they also wittingly or not increased the darkness of oppression, injustice or exploitation.

Sebothoma concludes that we need to re-evaluate our priorities and to penetrate behind the veil and recover the essence of Christian teaching - to reject the ideologies of false gods which lead to conceptual blockages.

In response to the paper I wish to raise three issues:

1. Following the understanding of a conceptual blockage as a fundamental rebellion against God, which leads to a state of ethical paralysis and guiltlessness, how does this relate to South Africa today? Are we to understand the present reform initiatives on the basis of the Paul Kruger version of sailing around in the world? Is the government still captive to ideology, trapped (in its conceptual blockage) at the various socio-religio-political levels so that it is incapable of getting around *apartheid* - at best it is moving around in *apartheid*? The reform initiatives are just *apartheid* in a new 'just' or 'Christian' cloak? The outward legal structures are replaced by hidden checks and balances which ensure that nothing which will affect the white reality are eventually moved out of place. Is the commitment on the part of Big Business and the commercial world to Free Enterprise really only a means of creating an even more frightening monster than *apartheid*? A means of fastening the iron shackles more firmly around the poor and oppressed but no longer in the name of separate development - now in the name of democracy and individual initiative and prosperity.

If Sebothoma is right, and the reason for our present state is indeed some form of conceptual blockage, then one cannot expect a change to come - there is no reason for guilt or confession, for no real wrong has been committed. There is no reason for Hebrew *Teshuvah* (repentance and conversion) just for a mild re-direction in the name of economy and as a way of subverting the spikes of sanctions.

2. My second response is at the level of the church. If the history of the church is indeed tied to the struggle of salvation history, a conflict between right and wrong, where is the true church today? Is it an emulation of the church of the past, perhaps the early Jesus community? Is it a mild reflection of the church of the future to which we all reach out and never touch? Or is it possible to find or grow a church which is without idols and schisms and committed to orthopraxis? Is it possible for that church to wrest the humanitarian cause back from Marxism and to make it its own?

Such a church is only possible through the gateway of a religious conversion that breaks the conceptual blockage (if that is possible) or involves the recovery of the subversive memory. (Perhaps in the evangelization of the church by the poor). To

recover its prophetic function, the church has to distance itself from power (government), from idols (like prosperity or capitalism) and from pursuit of the spiritual at the expense of human (sectarianism). Can the church make the transition? Can one of the pillars of oppression change suddenly to become a force for change - or is it too much a victim of the downward spill of conceptual blindness, where good and evil blur, and God and government are indistinguishable?

3. What went wrong? Sebothoma has suggested that the church has failed on several fronts and that it is not immediately seen as the hope for the future. Instead of a proud champion of God's justice like a young warrior, the church resembles an old and broken-down grandfather, desperately trying to remember his youth so that the obvious decrepitude will not seem so severe. So, we ask ourselves, is there some light ahead? Can real conversion break out, even in the church? Can God change a valley of dry bones and produce an army of fighting men?