

Reconciliation, Sectarianism and Civil Religion in South Africa and Northern Ireland

In the week of prayer for Christian unity in 1986 and again in 1987 I was invited by a group of Roman Catholic priests to live in the Clonard Redemptorist monastery in the Falls Road area of West Belfast in Northern Ireland to preach at a series of Protestant Catholic rallies in the Roman Catholic church there and in different Presbyterian Churches in the City, as well as address other meetings, all on the subject of unity and reconciliation. The Falls Road area is one hundred per cent Roman Catholic, nationalist and anti-Protestant. The British Army has built a wall thirty feet high to divide it from the Shankhill area which is one hundred per cent Protestant, loyalist and anti-Catholic. Every hundred yards in the Falls Road was a British soldier with a machine gun, while an army helicopter overhead was monitoring the possible activity of I.R.A. gunmen. We have the tragic scene of apartheid in Northern Ireland. How does one preach the Gospel of grace and reconciliation in such a context?

On my second visit in January 1987, I preached at a rally in the Falls Road on John chapter seventeen, on our Lord's high priestly prayer for unity. I told them that the previous year the question was put to me very bluntly. "How can you, a Scottish Presbyterian minister and Reformed theologian, worship with Roman Catholics?" My answer was that God does not accept us because we offer Protestant worship, or Roman Catholic worship, or some beautiful Anglican liturgy or "free prayers"! God accepts us by grace alone, not because of any offering we sinners can make, but only for what we are in Christ and on the ground of that One Offering which He has made once and for all - for what we are in the Person of Him who intercedes for us. There is only One True Priest in His Church, Jesus Christ, and only One Offering which is truly acceptable to God - the One He has provided for us, for all nations, for all times. That is the heart of Reformation teaching, as Calvin expounded it in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. If therefore Christ, our great High Priest, invites me by grace to participate through the Spirit in His intercessions for unity and communion with the Father (for that is what worship is) in spite of all my sins and failures and misunderstandings, and also invites our Roman Catholic brethren by grace to participate through the Spirit in His intercessions in spite of their sins and faults and misunderstandings, am I going to say, "Lord, I am not coming with these people! They are not acceptable to me!"? That would be a betrayal of the meaning of grace. It is only by grace that any of us can worship "in the name of Christ". The Church as the Body of Christ is a "royal priesthood", which is called out of all nations to participate by grace through the Spirit both in Christ's intercession to the Father on behalf of the world and in Christ's mission of reconciliation from the Father to the world. Our worship and mission of reconciliation to the world are the gift of sharing in Christ's worship and mission. "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest whom we confess" (Heb.3 v.1. N.I.B.)

For four hundred years, from the time of the Reformation, the Reformed churches have stressed sola gratia on the vertical plane, that God accepts us freely and unconditionally for what we are in Christ by faith alone, be we Jews or Gentiles, male or female, black or white. But so often we betray this Gospel by not working it out on the horizontal plane, by failing to accept one another as freely and unconditionally as God in Christ has accepted us. The New Testament knows no divorce between the vertical and the horizontal. The Apostolic message is: Accept one another as Christ accepted

us to the glory of God" (Rom. 15,12). "Quench not the Spirit . . ." "Be generous to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4, 32). "Be forbearing with one another, and forgiving, where any of you has cause for complaint: you must forgive as the Lord forgave you. To crown all, there must be love, to bind all together and complete the whole . . . You were called as members of a single body" (Col. 3, 13ff). In the definitive passage on grace and reconciliation in Ephesians ch. 2, the Apostle says: "By grace you have been saved through faith . . . His purpose was to create in Himself (in Christ) one new humanity out of the two (Jew and Gentile) thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility." Our Christian dogmatic starting point for all ethical, social and political action and reflection is the indicatives of grace. We have been made one new humanity in Christ, therefore . . . !"

What are the things then which obscure this Gospel of grace and prevent us from accepting one another (e.g. people of other races and denominations) as freely and unconditionally as God in Christ has accepted us and made us "one single new humanity". I select a few points from Northern Ireland and South Africa.

#### (1) Sectarianism

Belfast must be one of the most evangelised cities in the world! Yet the tragedy is that it must be the most sectarian city in the world. What is sectarianism? As I see it, sectarianism arises when two things happen, firstly, when any group or church makes an absolute identification between their formulations of the truth and the Truth, and then secondly says, "We shall only accept you IF you accept our formulations of the Truth!" - and the Gospel of grace is betrayed by what is sometimes an arrogant self-righteousness, which can even lead to the active persecution (by violence or "godly discipline"!) of those who do not agree with us. God does not accept us on the ground of our formulations of the doctrines of grace (or our assent to the truth of the doctrine of "justification by faith alone"). He accepts us by grace for what we are by faith in Christ. Why then should we impose a condition of acceptance on others, which God does not?

What we see in much Protestantism, we have seen also in Rome. For four hundred years, from the Council of Trent to Vatican II, Catholic Rome was dominated by that kind of sectarianism - "We shall only accept you IF you accept our Roman dogmas" until Pope John XXIII, on 11th October 1962, had the courage to say that "The Substance of ancient doctrine held in good faith is to be distinguished from the formulations in which it is clothed". This "realist" break with "nominalism" opened the door to reformation, to reformulation, to Vatican II. Prior to that, Protestants were "heretics and schismatics". But since then Rome has called us "separated brethren" accepting us for what we are in Christ. But it is that kind of sectarianism which we witness today among many Protestants in their attitude to Rome! Catholics are dismissed as unacceptable "heretics". Only when we can both meet as "separated brethren", living by grace and seeking together the Truth as it is in Christ, can there be any hope of reconciliation.

It is particularly sad when Christians in the Reformed tradition who allegedly take their stand on "the doctrines of grace:" substitute their formulations of grace for the reality of grace itself, and make their acceptance of others conditional on doctrinal conformity. Then grace is betrayed.

- SECTARIANISM
- (1) IDENTIFICATION OF "OUR FORMULATIONS OF THE TRUTH" WITH "THE TRUTH" IN SOME ABSOLUTE WAY, ("WE HAVE THE TRUTH!")
  - (2) ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS CONDITIONAL ON THEIR ACCEPT OUR FORMULATIONS. ("WE SHALL ACCEPT YOU IF YOU ACCEPT OUR FORMULATIONS!")
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- NATIONALISM  
"CIVIL RELIGION"
- (1) POLITICS
  - (2) EXCLUSIVE ROMANTIC LOYALTY TO "OUR NATION", ETHNIC GROUP, VOLK (FOLKLORE - POLITICAL MYTHS)
  - (3) RELIGION (SECTARIAN) - NON-CHRISTOLOGICAL BELIEF IN "PROVIDENCE" GUIDING "OUR NATION"

PROBLEM FOR POLITICIAN - HOW TO HANDLE THIS FUSION OF ①+②+③

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- "IDEOLOGY"  
(EG. APARTHEID)
- (1) SERVES VESTED INTERESTS
  - (2) INTERPRETS (DISTORTS) REALITY (AND BIBLE) IN THE INTEREST OF VESTED INTERESTS
  - (3) PASSIONATELY BELIEVED IN BY SINCERE PEOPLE

[This of course raises the epistemological and hermeneutical question of the relationship between "truth of statement" and "Truth of Being". They are not to be confused, but not to be separated. The fundamental function of dogmatic statements is to point beyond themselves to the Truth of God, "the Truth as it is in Christ", the Gospel of grace.]

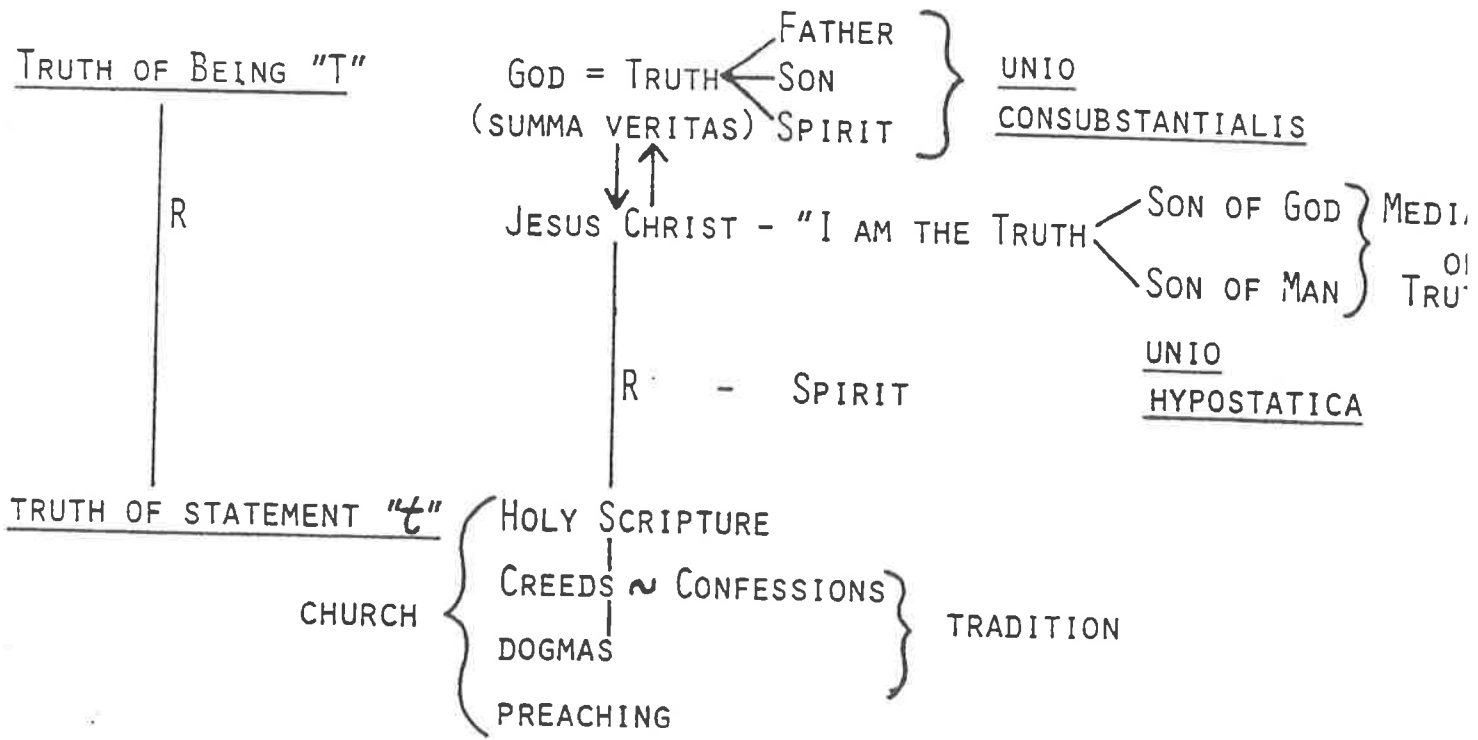
This does not mean that we condone any doctrine we regard as false, e.g. apartheid. We must always seek to be true to the Truth and seek careful dogmatic interpretations of the Gospel. But the first step on the road to reconciliation is to recognise that the Truth is in Christ, not in us. We see through a glass darkly, not yet face to face.

## (2) Civil Religion or Nationalism

Nothing can more entrench the sectarian spirit than different forms of "nationalism" and "civil religion" as we see in many parts of the world today, in Islamic as well as Christian countries. What is nationalism? Sociologists recognise it as notoriously hard to define. There is surely nothing wrong in being proud of one's nationality. But "nationalism" as a "civil religion" arises when three things are fused together: (1) our politics - be it Republicanism or Unionism in Northern Ireland: (2) a romantic exclusive ethnic loyalty to our own nation or Volk: (3) religion, be it Catholic or Protestant (or Islamic). Then the "nationalist" or "loyalist" party feels it has divine sanctions for its policies, those who do not accept its terms can be ruthlessly excluded, and the road is set for violence. The tragedy then from the Christian point of view is that what controls behaviour towards others is not the Gospel of grace and reconciliation, but our political commitment and romantic ethnic loyalty - be it pro-British or anti-British. Of course "nationalism" so often arises out of situations of injustice and tyranny, and feeds on the resulting fear, frustrations and anger.

It was against the "nationalism" of the so-called "German Christians" that the Barmen Declaration of 1934 was drawn up by the Confessing Churches to say that there is no area in life which does not belong to Jesus Christ, to whom alone we owe exclusive loyalty. It was against that same kind of "nationalism" of the white nationalist government in South Africa that the black Dutch Reformed Mission Church drew up the Belhar Confession of 1982 to break down the barriers between "black Christians" and "white Christians" in a cry for justice. In Northern Ireland, there would appear to be two kinds of "Irish Christians" on either side of the sectarian divide - "nationalist Christians" and "loyalist Christians". For this reason a group of leading Roman Catholic and Protestant churchmen, in June 1986, produced A Declaration of Faith and Commitment by Christians in Northern Ireland, modelled on the Barmen Declaration calling for Catholics and Protestants to give their supreme loyalty to Christ in a common concern to work for justice for all.

The ideology of apartheid in South Africa was hammered out on the anvil of "Afrikaner Civil Religion". The Nationalists who came to power in 1948 were (1) Republicans in their politics, (2) romantically Afrikaner and traditionally anti British and (3) Dutch Reformed Calvinists. "Afrikaner civil religion" with all the mythology and folk lore which goes with it was fed by historical memories of the Boer Trek of 1838, Blood River, "the day of the Covenant" 16th December 1838, and bitter memories of the Anglo Boer wars. When the Germans failed to defeat the British in the 1914-18 war, the Afrikaners formed the secret Bröderbond to preserve and promote Afrikaner



R { "NOT TO BE CONFUSED"  
 "NOT TO BE SEPARATED" } HOLY SPIRIT (ANALOGY, ETC.)  
 - MEANING OF LANGUAGE, GOD-TALK

VERSUS { SCHOLASTIC NOMINALISM, DOGMATISM - "NOT TO BE CONFUS  
 SECTARIAN FUNDAMENTALISM  
 RELATIVISM (= OPPOSITE TENDENCY) - "NOT TO BE SEPARA

- DETACHING STATEMENTS FROM THEIR ONTOLOGICAL GROUND IN THE TRINITY AND INCARNATION
  - AND ATTACHING THEM TO SELF (SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE) AS MYTHOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING
  - CP. SCHLIEREMACHER, DILTHEY AND R. BULTMANN + *RADICAL FEMINISM*
- (FUNDAMENTAL FOR PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF TASK OF CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS)

culture and language. In the early 1930's a group of young brilliant Afrikaners, Dierderichs, Cronje, Malan, Moeller and others went to study in Germany and brought back the neo-Fichtean romantic concept of the Volk and grafted it onto Afrikanerdom laying the ideological basis for the Nationalist party. All this gave to the Afrikaners a sense of Messianic destiny to solve the problems of South Africa. Like the old Israel after the Exodus, they were a holy nation, who had lived by the Bible and the sword, fighting the Matabele, the Zulus and the British.

The question for the Church in Northern Ireland and in South Africa is: what controls the behaviour of the Christian "nationalist" or "loyalist"? So often it is not the Gospel, not the message of reconciliation, but political aspirations, romantic ethnic loyalty to the Volk with all the accompanying folk lore, and sectarian religion, be it state religion, individualistic pietism or scholastic Calvinism. Politicians are at their wits end to know how to solve the problems of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the real solution is in the hands of the Christian church. Only the Gospel of grace can liberate Christians from animosity, prejudice and sectarian hate. When we give our exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ, He takes us up into His all inclusive love and lifts us out of those sectarian barriers by which we exclude one another. It is for the Church to disentangle herself from romantic racist attitudes, from arrogant sectarianism, that politicians can work together to find solutions. If this is true in Northern Ireland, it is certainly true in South Africa. But how can a Nationalist government, which is the embodiment of Afrikaner civil religion, ever have the liberty to seek true justice for all ethnic groups?

In Northern Ireland we see the tragic fusion of sectarianism and civil religion in extreme form in the formation of "Ulster Clubs" under the cry of "For God and for Ulster". In similar fashion we see the same fusion in the "Afrikaner Resistance Movement (A.W.B.)" led by Eugene Terreblanche under the cry of "My God, my Volk", the successor of the earlier quasi Nazi organisation, the Ossawa Brand Wag. Mrs. Thatcher was confident that by the Anglo Irish Accord a political solution could be found to the problems of Northern Ireland, but she failed to realise the power of sectarian civil religion on both sides of the sectarian divide.

### (3) Economic Factors - Vested interests

Economic factors are clearly a third force which keep people from accepting one another as freely and unconditionally as God accepts us. Apartheid is clearly an ideology to be understood in economic as well as ethnic terms. In sociological terms, such an ideology (1) serves vested interests: (2) interprets (distorts) reality (and the Bible) in the interest of vested interests: (3) it is passionately believed by sincere people. The Afrikaner rose to wealth and power by the economic trinity of (1) land, (2) security, (3) cheap labour. He sees all three threatened in the present revolutionary situation. It is this which lies behind the present emergency situation. Even where there is talk of abolishing apartheid, it is replaced by the ideology of the national security state, the allegation of the influences of "communism", to defend the same vested interests.

The cost of discipleship for the Christian can be to see that our loyalty to Christ must transcend our concern for our vested interests. The call for such is made in a multi-racial manifesto in 1987 entitled "Evangelical Witness in South Africa - Evangelicals Critique their own Theology and Practice". Such discipleship inevitably involves the call to

suffer, a point made powerfully by the Lutheran theologian Professor Dr. Klaus Nürnberger of UNISA in a powerful article: "By Grace Alone. The Significance of the Core Doctrine of the Reformation for the Present Crisis in South Africa", where he argues that the Gospel means "unconditional, suffering acceptance of the unacceptable", and shows what this means in the South African scene.

#### (4) Law and the Powers of Evil

The problem of reconciliation is unquestionably the problem of love - how to get people to love and accept one another freely and unconditionally. But love without justice, as the Kairos document so rightly asserts is sentimentality. There can only be genuine reconciliation in society when injustice is brought into the open and dealt with. Likewise there can be no true justice without freedom. Love, justice and freedom are the anatomy of true reconciliation, and are mutually dependent.

But the demand for justice without love can become demonic, as our Lord shows in the Sermon on the Mount. The Apostle in 1 Cor. 15, 56 makes the same point in asserting that "the strength of sin is the Law". What does this mean? I think it means in part that the powers of evil in this world exploit guilty situations and do so, so often, in the name of Law". It is so often in guilty situations, where there comes a God given cry for justice, that sinister forces in the name of "justice" can exploit people and enslave them. The best way to fight malaria is to clean up the swamps where the mosquito breeds. So the best way to deal with "terrorism" in so many parts of the world is to clear up the guilty social conditions where it breeds. Likewise in the name of "law and order" (which of course society requires) the forces of reaction and repression can silence those with legitimate grievances, and do so in terms of "State Religion" and the "security forces" as the Kairos document so rightly sees. Likewise the demand for "civil rights" can be a God given cry for justice where there is social evil and discrimination. But again even this can be used for destructive purposes and become an instrument for hate.

Jesus battled against evil in this form. It was evil in this form which put Him to death on the Cross in the name of law - Jewish law and Roman law. But it was over evil in that form that He triumphed in His death and resurrection, in reconciling the world to God and liberating humanity.

The tragedy of the Christian church is that she so often fails to hear the cry for justice in guilty situations, but that same cry is heard by others who can exploit it in tragic ways. What so often prevents Christians from hearing that cry for justice is the fear of losing our vested interests. In the ministry of reconciliation, it is the duty of the Christian church, on the one hand to listen to the Word of God, the Gospel of grace and reconciliation, but also to listen to the cry for justice of the poor, the exploited and the oppressed, to fulfil our prophetic function in the world in seeking to give to all their humanity - in seeking love, justice and freedom for all.

The Kairos document sees clearly that there can be "no reconciliation without justice". The present struggle in South Africa is a struggle for that justice and liberty without which reconciliation is impossible. But here there is a weak part in the document where, in order to stress this, it wrongly says (p 12) that forgiveness is conditional upon repentance - that we are not expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner! No. Forgiveness (70 x

7), as love in action, is always unconditional as in our Lord's response to Peter and in His attitude to Zaccheus. But such forgiveness unconditionally demands repentance and must be received in repentance if there is to be genuine reconciliation, and such reconciliation will doubtless require reparation (as in the case of Zaccheus). In Calvin's language, the Bible teaches "evangelical repentance", not "legal repentance". Repentance is the necessary response to forgiveness, not its "condition". That, the Reformers saw, was the fallacy in the mediaeval sacrament of penance. The blacks should not say - We shall only forgive you IF you hand back the land (etc.) But the whites in receiving black forgiveness must repent and hand back the land. Reparation is not a condition of grace, but it may be a necessary response to grace. Not to forgive unconditionally is to be inhuman. But not to repent and see that justice is done is equally inhuman. The Gospel calls us to give to one another our humanity, as God has restored it to us in Christ. But is it for the whites to "tell" the blacks to forgive them? We can only ask others to forgive us when we freely admit our guilt and make amends. We need one another to be human, and the white cannot presume on black forgiveness while not seeing that justice is done.

#### (5) Theological Factors

When one reflects on Northern Ireland and South Africa one can see a deep dualism between the concerns for evangelism and the concern for social justice. In South Africa, the two great wings of white christianity are on the one hand, Evangelicalism, in the pietist tradition of Andrew Murray, the Aberdeenshire Scot who was six times moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, and on the other hand the Calvinism (and neo Calvinism) of the Dutch Reformed Churches. Both wings have done so much to evangelise the blacks, have them baptised and put into black churches. But too often they do not give to them their humanity. Why is there this divorce between evangelism and humanisation? The weakness on the evangelical side is the tendency to privatise the Gospel, and divorce the vertical from the horizontal, personal faith and holiness from social holiness. The weakness on the Calvinist side, in the tradition of the Canons of the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Confession of Faith, is to limit the Mediatorial Headship of Christ to the elect (the Church) and hence to interpret race relations, not christologically, but in terms of their notions of "natural law". Then the church and society derive their structures, not from Christ, but from "orders of creation", "ethnic diversity", "pluriformity of nature" etc. So by a misuse of Calvinism, and the "Neo Calvinism" of Abraham Kuyper and his school, with the notion of "independent spheres of sovereignty", theological justification was sought by the nationalists for "separate development".

As I see it, both wings, the evangelicals and the neo-Calvinists, have an inadequate understanding of the Incarnation. To hold out Christ to the world, in preaching and at the Lord's Table, is not only to hold out forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. It is to give to all their humanity. All races, be we Jews or Gentiles, black or white, male or female, are meant to see in Christ our humanity assumed, sanctified, offered "without spot or wrinkle" to the Father, and held out to us to be received in faith, for God's purpose in Christ was "to create in himself one new humanity" (Eph. 2)

When the whites took Christ to Africa, the blacks found salvation and eternal life in Christ. They found more. They discovered the dignity and the beauty of their black humanity. But when they say to the white Christians - the custodians of "civil religion" - "Give to us our humanity!" - they are told, as Archbishop Tutu was by the Eloff Commission, "Keep out of politics!".