

The Role of the Church in Moral Renewal

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It is a mammoth task to talk about the role of the church in our contemporary South African context for a variety of reasons:

- 1) One of the reasons is that there are different understandings of the church (ecclesiological) informed by different theological traditions, historical contexts, as well as practical considerations.
- 2) The other serious difficulty is that the church exists in a dynamic environment confronted by numerous challenges – e.g. the conspiracy of postmodernism/globalisation - creating a high level of uncertainty about traditional ways of knowing and doing theology – or what we have referred to in the past as hermeneutics of suspicion.
- 3) The other difficulty in our context is the decline of the ecumenical movement, characterized by fragmentation and the promotion of ecclesiological self-interests of our denominations – promoting the privatization of our faith. The ecumenical imperative that informed our prophetic stance as churches during the apartheid years has been lost or compromised.
- 4) There is a pervasive attitude of fear to be prophetic as well as the tendency to shun critical self-examination in our context by our churches because of political expediency or correctness.
- 5) I am sure as members of this audience you will be able to share your reasons too, why talking about the role of the church is becoming more difficult, in our context.

Be that as it may, as serious and theologically conscious members of the churches we have no choice but to speak about the role of the church in our context. Thus, I believe, my invitation to speak about “being the church in the present South African context,” to explore the challenges as well as the opportunities of being the church specifically in promoting moral renewal.

One of the resources I have found extremely relevant to our topic are essays by British theologians: *“On being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community”* edited by Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (T. & T. Clark 1989). These have encouraged me to reflect about my ecclesiology as I attempt to respond to this topic.

In my reflections in the past, in the black theology movement as well as in the development of contextual theology, I have emphasized the idea of theology as communal praxis in the struggle for liberation. I am still of the view that Christian faith is a communal response to God's call to participate in the liberating life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. That this faith response has political, social and public dimensions. That this faith response is historical, eschatological, and liberating.

Werner G. Jeanrand suggests that the communal Christian praxis has three dimensions.

“The three dimensions of Christian faith praxis can be distinguished, but should never be separated. The entire Christian community lives by proclaiming God's creative activity in history and especially in the story of Jesus Christ, by celebrating God's presence in this universe especially through but not only in the feast of the Eucharist, and by actively participating in the transformation of this world according to God's **salvific** plan. This threefold identity of the Christian community is an identity in process.”

I share this view, especially these three dimensions particularly as they inform and shape the ethical imperatives of being the church in the South African context. This suggests an evolving understanding of our role in our moral responsibility as churches, but I will return to this issue when I focus specifically on the role of the church in the process of moral renewal.

With this basic view of the church, I want to suggest that the church in South Africa over the years has made a significant contribution in the moral renewal of our society. John de Gruchy in his book *“The Church struggle in South Africa”* traces the various expressions of the churches to exercises their ethical responsibility in the context of apartheid, focusing on the historical context, apartheid and churches, growing political conflict, black renaissance, protest and challenge, and concludes by focusing on the idea of the Kingdom of God in South Africa.

John de Gruchy makes a very pertinent point relevant to our topic when he observes:

“But the renewal is nonetheless a timely reminder to the church in South Africa that its resources ultimately lie beyond itself. The struggle of the church is impossible without the power of the Holy Spirit, for it is God alone who can liberate the church and equip it for its task. But God requires more than passivity. He requires obedient discipleship. Thus the struggle of the church requires a servanthood-spirituality.” (p.236)

The churches have in many of their pronouncements on the South African context raised moral issues from a wide range of perspectives.

For example, the Council of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in 1915 emphasized:

“The church must, therefore, always recognize and teach that it is a Christian responsibility that law and order – in the state, as well as church and family life - be honoured and maintained” (p.207 Villavicencio)

As another example, *A Message to the People of South Africa 1968* makes the following observation:

“We believe that this doctrine of separation is a false faith, a novel gospel: it inevitably is in conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which offers salvation.” (P.214)

Another example is the pronouncement on *Divine or Civil Obedience 1973*:

“When the Government deviates from the Gospel, the Christian is bound by his conscience to resist it. Even if this results in breaking the law, it has to be done because God’s law will be maintained above the law of man (Acts 4)” (p.220)

Also, the NG Mission Church in “*Confessions of Faith*” 1982, makes the following statement:

“We declare that Apartheid (separate development) is a sin, that the moral and theological justification of it makes a mockery of the gospel, and that its consistent disobedience to the word of God is a theological heresy.” ([p. 241)

I cite these examples to demonstrate that churches over the years have raised ethical issues in their efforts to promote moral renewal in the South African context. For those of you who would like to review these statements, I encourage you to read Charles Villavicencio’s book “*Between Christ and Caesar, Classic and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*” (David Phillip 1986).

So the Church has always been challenged to exercise its moral responsibility in different contexts. But the critical issue we have to discuss today is, what is that role in our particular context, hence the topic “The Role of the Church in Moral Renewal.”

One of the definitions I have found useful in helping us to focus on the ethical responsibility of the church is the one offered by Professor James Burtchaell: as he puts it:

“The Church is a community of moral wisdom, accumulated, passed on, challenged and revised.” (From “*Christ to the World*” p.65)”

I like this definition, because from an African theological perspective moral wisdom embraces certain virtues (e.g. of *ubuntu*, collective responsibility) which constitute or are responsible for character formation. They define our identity.

In an essay which is a chapter in the book edited by Mongezi Guma and Leslie Milton “*An African Challenge to the Church in the 21st Century*”, I refer you to the essay “*Choosing who we are: a Christian perspective on the moral crisis confronting the South African context.*” Let me quote from that essay:

“Choosing who we are in the new South African context poses a serious hermeneutical challenge for the churches as they review and revisit their mission mandate and moral responsibility.” (p.68)

My position has not changed since the publication of that essay. I am still of the view that churches as communities of moral wisdom play a very crucial role assisting us individually and collectively to choose who we are as we seek to be faithful to the imperative of the gospel. I want to suggest that this moral wisdom which is embodied in the mission mandate of the church seeks to promote those Christian virtues, practices, narratives, traditions that shape our identity as responsible moral beings. I go back to the observations made by Werner Jeanrond of the threefold dimension of the Christian faith praxis.

The church as a community of moral wisdom proclaims God’s liberating activity by challenging and exposing the prevailing moral decay in society. The church as a community of moral wisdom through its prophetic witness becomes the voice of the voiceless. Through its activities and practices, the church promotes a vision of just moral order. From this perspective, the local congregation becomes the site for critical moral discourse as current issues of the day are discussed by members of the church (teaching ministry of the local church.)

The church as a community of moral wisdom plays an important role in the promotion of virtues and shaping of character through reclaiming the resources of our faith, e.g. the scriptures, worship, spiritual disciplines and active social service. In this regard, my own perspective has been influenced by Stanley Havermas, John Yoder and especially by African traditional wisdom (African Proverbs).

I believe the church as a community of moral wisdom, particularly as accumulated wisdom, poses a hermeneutical challenge. One of the unresolved issues that we need to revisit is our mission mandate, through re-reading of the scriptures in our context. This entails grappling with the resources of our faith as we engage with contemporary moral issues. Our seminaries/universities do not

prepare us very well to engage in this work. As we grapple with these issues of the day, we need critical biblical reflection as well as deep understanding of those African moral values that constitute what I want to call African moral wisdom.

The other critical issue confronting the church as a community of moral wisdom is to provide leadership by focusing on those pressing issues confronting society today. Let me mention some of these issues. There is no doubt in my mind that, despite our new democratic dispensation, we continue to confront poverty, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, racism,, domestic violence, crime, unemployment, corruption, avarice/greed, issues related to homosexuality/ same sex marriage, land issues, poor housing, inadequate health care and an inadequate educational system. These issues demand the attention of the church as we strive to build a just and caring society. These issues demand our response informed by the resources of our faith.

I believe I need to state what I understand by morality. For me, morality is a way of life based on patterns of behaviour, values, standards and beliefs about what is good and right informed by the resources of my Christian faith. However, this understanding of morality is a way of being in the world with special focus on a worthy life, or a life well used, to be emulated and shared with others. This way of life informs my moral identity. This understanding of morality is nurtured within the Christian community, hence my emphasis on character formation and the significance of moral virtues, such as patience, humility, hope, courage, gratitude, peace, contrition, joy, self-control, patience, perseverance, compassion, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness, forbearance. I am sure you can add more virtues as members of this audience.

One of the challenges confronting the churches in our context is to promote these virtues through the teachings, worship and spiritual disciplines of the church. It poses a serious challenge for churches to put their houses in order. For, as we examine the current role of the churches, there is more to be done. As a local pastor, I know we are not doing much to promote moral renewal. The focus is on maintaining the status quo, of not challenging even the contradictions that prevail at the moment.

As I think about the role of the church, I am reminded of the observations which Dietrich Bonhoeffer made about the churches of his day:

“The church confesses that she has not proclaimed often and clearly her message of one God who has revealed Himself for all times in Jesus Christ and who suffers no other gods beside Himself. She confesses her timidity, her evasiveness and her dangerous concessions. She has often been untrue to her office of guardianship and to her office of comfort. And through this, she has often denied to the outcast and to the despised the compassion which she owes them. She was silent when she should

have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven.” (p.113)

These words come from Bonhoeffer’s focus on what he refers to as “*Ethics of formation*”.

Let me propose some practical steps for the churches to reclaim, revive, revisit their understanding as a community of moral wisdom.

(1)

I have already alluded to the fact that the church (es) must put their house in order. Today as churches, we reflect fragmentation, spiritual fatigue, and lack of zeal for prophetic social action. The ecumenical commitment is no longer a serious matter informed by our mission mandate.

Michael Kinnamon in his timely book “*The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and how it has been impoverished by its Friends*” makes the following observation:

“The single biggest problem facing the ecumenical movement (and the WCC) in my judgment is a widespread failure to grasp and teach the biblically based vision of the church and its relationship to the world that gave energy and direction to ecumenical work throughout most of the twentieth century. ... This vision has been domesticated by the churches involved in the movement, impoverished by those of us who are ostensibly its support.” (p.2)

I believe if churches are to provide leadership in the process of moral renewal, they must rediscover, reclaim their ecumenical vision. Moral renewal is a huge undertaking that demands shared commitment, shared resources and an ongoing commitment, a seeking our unity “that the world may believe” John 17:21 What I am suggesting is that moral renewal is an ecumenical project which God is calling churches to undertake in our context. This requires a serious commitment to establish an ongoing committee, group or initiative within Diakonia to focus on developing a creative, relevant programme of moral renewal amongst its member churches in our context.

(2)

To go back to a point I referred to earlier, the local church, as an expression of moral wisdom, is the site for moral renewal in every aspect of its activities.

We need to revive the teaching ministry of the local church by a special focus on bible study and spiritual disciplines that seek to enhance our moral vigilance. As a pastor of a local church in the Durban North area, I am challenged in my

sermons to focus on moral issues of the day in response to the imperatives of the gospel.

I have also stated that this is a leadership issue for our churches. One of the exciting projects of my church is the establishment of the Leadership Academy with full-time staff, designed to revive and promote the teaching ministry of the church. I am very excited about this because since retirement from higher education I have established a Centre for African Leadership Development which will be launched next month.

(3)

One of the ongoing challenges of churches in our society is their prophetic role. As communities of moral wisdom, the task is to promote and build a just and caring society.

This has serious implications for the churches in that they become the voice of the voiceless. They have a serious advocacy role. Churches more than before are called to interrogate government policies that have a great impact on the lives of the people. This calls for ethical analysis of social issues and problems. The challenge here is for churches to interrogate the prevailing policies, dominant cultural values and institutional power structures.

Here again, Diakonia has a greater role to play as it brings together secular scholars, theologians, political activists, church leaders to reflect on current policies and provide ongoing information to our members in our local churches. As we engage in this work, we become catalysts, prodding and challenging all about what kind of society we want to become.

(4)

The church becomes a community of moral wisdom through the process of character formation and ongoing moral discernment in response to the imperatives of the gospel. This role on the part of the church becomes more visible and relevant as it assumes its prophetic role, by reclaiming its ecumenical vision, focusing on the teaching ministry of the local church, becoming the voice of the voiceless. From this perspective, I believe the ultimate goal is doing God's justice as we build a just and a caring society.

I believe this is a mammoth task on the part of churches because it involves a process of critical self-examination, or what Cornell West refers to as tracking hypocrisy in ourselves and others as we exercise our prophetic role in society. Tracking hypocrisy in the South African context, I believe, is what the church as a community of moral wisdom should be about.

Let me conclude my remarks by thanking Diakonia for this opportunity to reflect on this important topic as a means of promoting ongoing discussion and dialogue. Trusting that there will be more opportunities for us to revisit this topic especially in the context of the real issues we confront every day.

I have been inspired by the prophets and St Paul in my moral journey, so let me share two important readings that have been formative in my ministry over the years.

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness and walk humbly with your God?

1 Peter 3:13-15: Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear and do not be intimidated but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.

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