'Kairos' Theology in Apartheid South Africa

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This paper is about theological discourse in South Africa during apartheid. John de Grouchy has identified four theological approaches that emerged during that period. These theologies are: (1) confessing, (2) black liberation, (3) feminist, and (4) *kairos* or prophetic.[1] In this study, I dwell on the *kairos* theology. I examine its impacts on apartheid and propound its implications for African Christianity.

Definition of 'kairos'

In Greek, there are two words that express time: *chronos* and *kairos*. The term *chronos* refers to the chronological or sequential time, whilst the terms *kairos* signifies any intervening period of time during which something special occurs.[2] The term *kairos* implies the 'right' or 'opportune' moment during which God creates an opportunity for the church to fulfill a particular assignment in its community. Looked at from another angle, it stands for, 'the appointed time in the purpose of God', during which God acts, presumably through the church.[3] By implication, it adverts to the moral controversy that faced the church in South Africa at the height of apartheid.

The origin of 'kairos' theology

The *kairos* document was a biblical and theological response to the socio-political crisis that faced South Africa during the mid 1980s. At the time, the country experienced serious social and political turbulence. After years of oppression, the oppressed majority became impatient and turned militant. They engaged in acts of civil disobedience and in outright violence. In response, the South African security forces sought to impose 'law' and 'order', launching a vicious in which many people lost their lives. Many more were badly beaten and maimed. Others were detained.

During this tumultuous period, a group of theologians, pastors, and academicians—156 people in all—met in Johannesburg to consider a response to a crisis that threatened to rip the country apart. After analyzing the social, economic, and political problems that bedeviled the country, these people

produced a report, the *kairos* document. In that document, a genre of prophetic theology, they agreed to forge a common position against apartheid,[4] agreeing to collaborate in overthrowing it.

What the *kairos* theology entailed

First, the authors of the *kairos* document called on the church in South Africa to reject the ideology of apartheid, which a segment of the church—the Dutch Reformed Church—had endorsed.[5] They insisted that the ideology was based on a blatant misreading of biblical texts and concepts, steeped in exegetical and interpretive fallacies:

> Both the oppressor and the oppressed claim loyalty to the same church…. There we sit in the same church while outside Christian policeman and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace. The policemen and soldiers are following order which ultimately come from the nationalist party from leaders who, with few exceptions are members of the Dutch Reformed Churches. The theology of these churches has allowed the Nationalists to rule South Africa with a clear conscience, convinced that their power to rule comes from God.[6]

The authors of the*kairos* document struck apartheid at its root, its ideological moorings. They impugned its moral legitimacy, declaring that it was morally repugnant, biblically indefensible. Related to that, they disputed the integrity of preamble of the South African Constitution, which implied that God approved of apartheid. They rightly considered that statement as 'mischievous, sinister and evil as any of the idols that the prophets of Israel had to contend with.'[7] Importantly, they introduced a 'moral dichotomy' in South Africa, forcing members of society to decide on which side of the ideological divide they would stand.

Second, the authors of the *kairos* document challenged the lack of seriousness in the so-called English churches about apartheid. They felt that these churches had been remiss in their obligation to scrutinize the philosophical basis of apartheid.[8] As such, though these churches rejected apartheid, they did so in a superficial and nondescript manner. And instead of challenging apartheid programmatically, these churches instead called for 'reconciliation' in society

and with the Dutch Reformed church, as if the ideological conflict, the moral controversy, that was inherent in apartheid was actually reconcilable. The authors of the *kairos* document believed that any reconciliation would only make sense if it entailed an admission that apartheid was fundamentally evil. They contended that reconciliation would only be sensible and justifiable if it entailed a just political settlement to end apartheid. To them, reconciliation could not just entail fabricating a peaceful coexistence.[9] Reconciliation needs to reflect justice and repentance. Unlike the English speaking churches, which were stuck in inertia mode as they pursued an elusive reconciliation, the *kairos* document was, however, urgent about calling for action. The document exhorted all churches to do more than just preach against social injustice. It called on churches to intervene in cases of systematic human injustice, whenever human dignity was roundly undermined. It reminded the church that it ought to do more to truncate the misery of the oppressed and downtrodden.[10] Effectively, it called the church to repentance.

Third, the authors of the *kairos* document felt it was important to declare that God rejected any form of political oppression, which apartheid epitomized. If so, God would stand on the side of the oppressed, hence, the idea of Prophetic Theology. Implicit in the document is a discourse on the limits of civil obedience to state authority. The document suggests that citizens are not bound to submit to regimes that are roundly wicked and oppressive. Citizens can rightfully defy brutal regimes. Lash rightly asserts:

> This requires recognition that the government has lost its moral legitimacy and in accordance with Christian tradition may be called tyrannical, that there is an enemy of the common good resorting to terror in order to maintain its power and privilege; it is incapable of change.

The document rightly asserted that tyrannical governments, those that brutalize its people—lack the moral authority to govern, and should be overthrown.

To wrap up, the document was a noble action plan that called for social justice, equity, and mutual acceptance in society, true to some core Christian values. Anchored substantially on biblical thought, it was a fitting response to social injustice, to organized and structural wickedness, to an oppressive form of government that derived its mandate from biblical teachings. Significantly,

it gave oppressed people hope. Not only did it make them realize that God sympathized with them, but also, that He expects them to strive to liberate themselves, to work for a just social order, and not to accept their fate as an instance of 'providence'.

Nevertheless, though the document is still an authoritative critique against apartheid, some of its some features are morally problematic, at least from a biblical viewpoint. While it urged Christians everywhere to live out their faith and do their part to end apartheid, it seemed to permit some forms of violence. Whilst any subjugated people might seem justified to react violently, if only to defend themselves, the use of violence even in these special circumstances raises deep moral questions. And history shows that people suffering systemic discrimination can overcome such tyrannical arrangements through non-violent means. The case of the Civil Rights Movement in America—during the 1950s and 1960s—is illustrative. Indeed, the theoretical underpinnings of that movement—its philosophical rationale for rejecting racial segregation—might have informed the authors of the *kairos* document. Rather than justify some forms of violence, the document should simply have entailed a prophetic challenge to the church to strive to end apartheid, in collaboration with like-minded institutions, without using or condoning any form of violence.

Furthermore, on the issue of violence especially, the *kairos* document might have been more comprehensive. It raises more questions than it supplies answers. It might have explained how the church and society would deal with the attached psychological aberrations that the oppressor and the oppressed were experiencing.

Granted, the document's exposition of the idea of reconciliation is competent. Nonetheless, the document says little, save implicitly, about how reconciliation ought to have looked like regarding the obligations of the oppressed majority. How might the biblical themes of justice and repentance have applied to these people?

Implications and relevance of 'kairos' theology for African Christianity today

The church should strive to make its teachings relevant to the lived experiences of its people and community. The *kairos* theology is programmatic in tenor. It

would demand that the church act speedily and robustly to deal with instances of social injustice, especially those of blatant and systematic specie. The *kairos* theology ought to be a benchmark for Christian intervention in cases of social, economic, and political injustice. Britton rightly asserts that, ' the church needs to take a stand against injustice and devise a plan of action to lobby and advocate for the end of such oppression. The church ought to be 'in the business of liberation and transformation'.[11] In many countries of Africa, by analogy, citizens live in wretched circumstances, comparable in nature to the circumstances that obtained for the oppressed majority during apartheid. The privileged elite dominates the economy and politics of nations, leaving the majority of the citizens forlorn, marginalized, economically oppressed—a condition that is injurious to their human dignity. The church needs to speak out against such political and economic arrangements. It needs to encourage and educate citizens to demand for a just social order.

The church needs to base its social interventions on a biblical anchor. It needs to demonstrate its ability to analyze carefully socio-political and socio-economic issues. The *kairos* document not only described the myriad problems attached to apartheid, but significantly, it thoroughly analyzed even the presuppositions on which apartheid rested. Central to the *kairos* document was the assertion that the 'church theology', on which apartheid rested, was unbiblical. In dealing with cases of social injustice, it would be apposite for the church to show its ability to refute the ideological and philosophical foundations on which such systems rest. To that end, the role of advanced theological education cannot be gainsaid.

The church needs to work towards creating a new social order in Africa. In most of African, states are generally 'tyrannical', accountable to their people only superficially. For instance, in Kenya, were a review of the constitution is astir, the church should develop a *kairos* theology to ensure that the structures of government are organized in ways that promote the welfare of the majority of the people. The church must advocate for the equitable distribution of political and economic resources as well, doing so fearlessly. In the same vein, it should develop a response to the problem of negative ethnicity, which is a form of discrimination. Indeed, the problem of ethnic hatred has occasioned such misery in Africa as to make even apartheid seem only a minor problem: consider the genocides in Sudan and Rwanda, to cite a few. In fealty to the *kairos* theology, the church must declare that any social arrangement that entails ethnic or racial

discrimination is unjust. It should formulate a studied response to the problem of negative ethnicity.

The church in Africa should embrace a community approach to solving community or national problems. The *kairos* document was compiled after wide consultations and involved a spectrum of stakeholders. In resolving social injustice, the church should be ready to forge partnerships with like-minded institutions. These forms of partnerships should also be intramural, with church denominations agreeing to collaborate to deal with social injustice. As Oduyoye asserts—

> Africans recognize life-in-community. We can truly know ourselves if we remain true to our community, past and present. The concept of individual success or failure is secondary. The ethnic group, the village, the locality, are crucial in one's estimation of oneself. We need two feet to walk.[12]

The church should oppose any ideology that stimulates social disorder or inequalities. Increasingly, Africans are becoming individualistic. For many of them, the self is becoming the locus of identity and morality. They are defining themselves based on what they have achieved and prize self-sufficiency and self-advancement above all else. Individualism can be destructive to society. It can make the pursuit of wealth and advancement the reason for living, which tends to crowd out the need to care for the weak or oppressed. That individualistic lifestyle often makes societies nonchalant towards religion or spirituality. It can stimulate politicians to seek and retain power at any cost: the case of President Mugabe in Zimbabwe is illustrative. It can make the elite or the privileged reluctant to reform faulty social and economic structures that generate social and ethnic tensions (the turmoil in the Nile Delta in Nigeria is a good example). It should instead encourage society to solve social problem in the context of community. The ethos of any community can help mediate personal ambition. It can put community needs before personal greed. Poverty then becomes the problem of the society to deal, and not just of the poor.[13] The church must strive to ensure that the social and economic infrastructure in Africa promote the common welfare.

The church needs to be liberated from a 'dualistic' theology, a commitment that has made some of its members focus only on the spiritual life of the community.

The church should assume a more unified, coherent, and holistic approach to life. As the *kairos* document urge, God is just by nature. As such, He is concerned about all forms of injustice. Indeed, God stands for justice. He wishes that His church should resist all forms of oppression—whether socio-political or socio-economic—and even to take practical measures to deal with the same. God wants a social order that does not discriminate against people based on their race or ethnicity. After all, humanity, in all its racial hues, expresses God's image. At any rate, the church needs to state its stand against injustice and act. As the *kairos* document clearly asserts:

> we need a bold and incisive response that is prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and ambiguously taking a stand.[14]

Finally, the church needs to develop its intellectual base by coming up with positive theologies. It needs to develop reactionary and non-reactionary positions on theoretical and practical aspects of Christianity in Africa. Such an initiative would help believers in Africa feel that God cares for them, that He has revealed Himself to them that He speaks to them in His word directly and personally, that He is concerned about all aspects of their lives—that He is aware of (and sympathetic to) their historical injustices and present miserable circumstances. In developing (or refining) an authentic African theology, the church might first wish to evaluate some existing theologies, such as the Black and *kairos* theologies. But substantially, it should generate wholesome theologies that flow from scholarship, theologies that are at the same time not isolated from the real problems of daily life. It should draw from the experiences of various church workers, including evangelists.

Furthermore, theologians need to be exposed more and more to practical ministry opportunities. They need to gain a visceral understanding of the problems facing believers in particular context. With such experiences, they would publish books or papers that are informed by realistic experiences.

Once the church develops an authentic theology, it should communicate it to its members in simple and elegant terms. It should use these experiences to help these people modify or enrich their perceptions of God, feel more valuable and

important as persons, solve problems as communities, and give have more hope to face life, among other things.

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ENDNOTES

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12. Mercy Odoyuye, *The value of African beliefs and practices for Christian theology*.
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14. Kairos Document: *A challenge to the church* (1985).