

LET US NOT BE AFRAID TO SAY IT

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I

Helmut Gollwitzer, along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller, Werner Koch and others, one of the courageous pastors of the Confessing Church in Hitler's Nazi Germany, has described his times as "a world shaken by deadly convulsions." It was a time when the church found itself very much at the cross roads. He was speaking of the indescribable horrors inflicted upon God's most vulnerable children in Germany, and how in their aftermath, those horrors have metastasized across the world. He knew, as the whole Confessing Church did, that in that world the church could not remain neutral. It had to make choices and those choices could only be for the poor and the destitute, the despised and the humiliated, the oppressed and the discarded.

He saw the power of Hitler's words as they mesmerized a whole people and captivated the Church. Yet he saw also how the power of the Word of God can challenge the power of evil when the words themselves become action, when we take the risks that Christ took for the sake of that salvific intervention in history. He discovered this because he was not afraid to follow the full consequences of his prophetic faithfulness in the struggle against Hitler. His ministry became a commitment to the struggle for justice, truth, and prophetic faithfulness, and in so doing it became the faithful presence of the promises of God. Preaching and confessing Christ in Gollwitzer's world shaken by deadly convulsions, he held fast to Christ, the center of his faith and the hope of the world, and this brought him to painful but righteous choices, struggle and sacrifice, and his discovery of the inseparability of faith and costly discipleship.

It is the discovery we made as well in South Africa as we faced apartheid, the heresy of its theological and biblical justification, and the challenge for the church to choose for justice in the struggle against evil. We discovered that it was not so much the survival of the church that was at stake. At stake was the integrity of the church and its prophetic witness; at stake was the Gospel itself. In moments like this fundamental decisions must be taken and these are the decisions on which the life of the church depends.

The world in which we live and are called to witness as the Church of Jesus Christ is equally a world shaken by deadly convulsions. The combined wealth of the world's richest 1% has overtaken that of the other 99% in 2016. More than half of the wealth in the world is in the hands of just 62 individuals, more than is owned by the entire 3.5 billion of the world's population. One in nine people do not have enough to eat and more than 1 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day. The so-called economic recovery of the last few years was in essence only a recovery for the rich: the richest 1% have seen their share of the global wealth increase from 44% in 2009 to 48% in 2014, and has climbed to more than 50% in 2016. In concrete terms members of the global elite had an average wealth of \$2.7m per adult in 2014. In comparison 80% of the world's population had an average of a mere \$3,851 per adult. In a time of economic crisis and calls for more austerity for the working classes the wealth of the richest 80% doubled in cash terms between 2009 and 2014. This is a world shaken by deadly convulsions.

I am not even speaking of the death toll of hundreds of thousands in the senseless, endless wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan; of the millions of refugees from North Africa, Syria and other war torn and economically devastated places. Neither am I speaking of the more than 10,000 refugee children who have gone missing on the borders of European countries or even inside those countries where the hostile systems put in place there have exacerbated their refugee situation. Ours is a world shaken by deadly

convulsions, and the people of the United States might not feel those convulsions yet, but they must not be unaware of the fact that they are causing a great deal of those convulsions.

Pope Francis, in his speech at the World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia, spoke words of strength and wisdom we would do well to ponder:

Do we realize that something is wrong in a world where there are so many farmworkers without land, so many families without a home, so many labourers without rights, so many persons whose dignity is not respected? Do we realize that something is wrong where so many senseless wars are being fought and acts of fratricidal violence are taking place on our very doorstep? Do we realize something is wrong when the soil, water, air and living creatures of our world are under constant threat? So let us not be afraid to say it.

These are words I suggest we take time to reflect on.

In fundamental ways, the Belhar Confession of my denomination, and of yours, come June, God willing, has become a defining, prophetic presence for us in our witness to and in the world, in the process becoming a witness against ourselves. It has indeed become the most potent self-critical presence in the life of my church. By far the most well-known words in the confession are the words found in the 4th article: *We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, and that God calls the church to follow God in this... that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream; that the church as the possession of God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged*

who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

For Belhar, following the Reformed tradition as a whole, it is clear: God's preferential option is for the poor, the destitute and the wronged. Those of us who call upon the name of Jesus must stand with those, because God stands with them in *any form of suffering and need*, and against *any form of injustice*. Every form of injustice is a form of exclusion. Because of the choices God makes, because of where Christ stands, we are, Belhar says, *obligated* "to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another." What Belhar is pleading for is the courage, compassion, and commitment to interrupt the works of evil in the world by the undoing of injustice, and by doing the deeds of justice, peace and love required by Yahweh. These are the promises of God of which we are called to be the faithful presence in the world.

II

We South Africa's reconciliation process has been held up as a model for the world to emulate. Not just for Christians and persons of faith, but for politics as well. Our colonialist, imperialist past, the legacies of slavery, genocide and dispossession; and later the dehumanization and destruction of apartheid have placed before us life-altering choices.

Now reconciliation claims space in the nation's memory and in the nation's daily life. But reconciliation itself should become a sacred space - if it becomes a place of remorse and repentance, of forgiveness and the restoration of justice and hope. However, today, almost twenty years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, after the euphoria of a freedom fought for but not yet gained, after forgiveness given but justice denied, after sacrifices made in hope on top of the sacrifices made in struggle, we have learned to speak less triumphantly, but more thoughtfully; with less certitude but with more

conviction; with more humility but even more conscious of the presence of God, of reconciliation. When we speak of reconciliation now, we cannot do so without first having taken the shoes of our feet, for it is holy ground.

So we should be clear: reconciliation is not a triumphant cry ending with an exclamation mark. It is a question, waiting for an answer. The answer is already given by God, but the church has not yet responded, and where we have responded, we have not responded well.

We have not been willing, or ready, to understand that reconciliation, if it is to be meaningful, durable and sustainable, should be real, radical, and revolutionary. It is real, and not a cover for political pietism and Christian quietism. It is radical, because it is about much more than harmonious personal relationships. It is about the restoration of justice, rights, and human dignity. It is never shallow, but goes to the roots of things. And it is revolutionary, because it seeks the transformation of persons, and societies, their systems and structures; it seeks the transformation of the world - it is the ministry through which God is reconciling *the world* unto Godself.

In a sense, because we have heard Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, the church knows that reconciliation is not an “option”, as if we can weigh other options, consider the feasibility and the risks, take into account the political possibilities and the economic consequences, make decisions on minimalist versus maximalist approaches, hedging against the shocking demands of the Gospel with calculated, pre-emptive incrementalism. Reconciliation is a calling, the very essence of costly discipleship.

In 2nd Corinthians 5 Paul tells us that long before we knew it, God was already at work, reconciling the world to God self in Christ, not counting their transgressions against them. Then God interrupted God’s own work, making room for us, entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation, so that we, having become a new creation and urged on by the love of Christ are now called to be ambassadors of Christ in the work of reconciling the world to God.

But please note two further things: even as we are new in Christ and reconciled to God in Christ, Christ still entreats us: be reconciled to God! To do the work of reconciliation is no easy thing: it calls for daily conversion, commitment, and obedience, for renewed reconciliation with God, if we are to respond to that calling. It is necessary: for if in order to reconcile the world with God Christ had to give up his life, what makes us think that we will get by with anything less than that?

Second, whereas first God worked without us, now that we have been called to this ministry of reconciliation we have become co-workers with God. For that reason Paul's proclamation of the ministry of reconciliation does not end with chapter 5:21 as some of us might think; it ends with chapter 6:13. Paul begins by making sure we understand: in this work we are not alone, we are working with God: "As we work together with God..." And in truth we are not able to do this work on our own. It is too hard. Once we commit to this work, as servants of God we should be ready for every challenge. That is what Paul explains in vv. 4-10. This is what we face as we engage in the ministry of reconciliation: great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger. This is how we endure: by purity, knowledge, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech. But we are not alone, because we stand not in our own might but in the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left.

Paul says this, because he has learned what reconciliation is, and what it is not. Whereas the classic Greek writers used the word reconciliation for peace treaties, political agreements and interpersonal relationships, they used the word as representatives of the Greek Empire. For the empire reconciliation always meant to become reconciled with the goals of the Empire, the will of the Emperor and with what is good for the Empire. So the violent subjugation of nations could be seen as an effort to reconcile those barbarians with the

Empire, end the strife caused by their resistance, and celebrate their assimilation into the Empire by accepting the domination the Empire imposed.

The Pauline emphasis on reconciliation comes from his understanding of the life, message, death on a cross, and resurrection of a Roman colonial subject named Jesus, from the town of Nazareth in the occupied territory of Galilee. Paul preached a Gospel in which every call to reconcile with God meant resistance, a reminder that one cannot call Jesus Lord and be reconciled with the Emperor who considered himself as God, son of God, prince of peace, morning star, giver of life, savior of the world. All these titles the early church claimed instead for Jesus, the revolutionary peasant from Galilee, the one who embraced the status of a slave, as the lowest of the low in Roman society claimed his place as the true Son of God, the true Prince of peace, the true Savior of the world.

For the early church, reconciliation means that there “is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” That’s reconciliation, and it is real, radical and revolutionary. As a rich, privileged, slave holding member of Roman society it is necessary that Philemon, in order not to set dangerous exceptions, keep the slaves in their place and the slave masters secure, find and punish his runaway slave Onesimus. But as a follower of Jesus, he can no longer reconcile himself to the rules and obligations of Roman society. So he will welcome Onesimus, no longer as a slave and not only as a brother in Christ, but a beloved brother in the flesh. That’s reconciliation, and it is real, radical and revolutionary.

This understanding had and has all sorts of radical consequences for the way in which we understand reconciliation.

III

So let me repeat: I believe that unless reconciliation is radical, real, and revolutionary, it is not true reconciliation. That is why I, with my friend Curtiss Paul DeYoung, co-authored a book titled *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*. As I understand biblical reconciliation, it is not possible without:

- Acknowledging the alienation that now calls for reconciliation;
- Confronting the evil of the past and present, including the evil within ourselves that refuses to acknowledge the evil of the past and present because it benefits us;
- Remorse and repentance
- Forgiveness
- Justice
- Reconciliation is possible only among equals.

Let me, for a moment, speak from my South African experience. In South Africa, as a prophetic church, we did not remain as vigilant in the new dispensation under the African National Congress as we were in the time of the white minority apartheid regime. We surrendered the terrain of prophetic faithfulness and allowed it to become the playground of political expediency and propaganda. So before we knew it, former President Thabo Mbeki and presently Jacob Zuma were more at ease with using the Bible to expound their particular brand of state theology than we were able to offer prophetic witness to the nation standing on the truth of that very same Bible.

We confused Nelson Mandela's South Africa, "a nation at peace with itself and the world" with the shalom of the kingdom of God. And we did that because as a church we no longer stood where Christ stands, and is always to be found. Instead, we found our place and took the elevated and lofty view from the hill where the Union Buildings stand, and no longer looked from the depths of the flooded valleys of misery and poverty where the neglected and

the destitute still cry for freedom and justice. We have identified with Pharaoh, not because Pharaoh had let God's people go, but because Pharaoh now looked like us.

Finally, and perhaps more important than we dare to admit: in a much more intimate, but simultaneously spiritual and political way, as we became more and more mesmerized by Mr. Mandela, we became more and more embarrassed by Jesus. That meant, and that is a matter equally as grave, that as we became, with the politics of the day, more and more obsessed with reconciliation as a "national project", we became less and less possessed of reconciliation as Gospel imperative. Enchanted by the spirit of the times, we let go the hand of the spirit of reconciliation entrusted to us by God.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission started its work, it created a terrain where the prophetic voice of the church could, and should have been vitally decisive. I am not speaking of the willingness or unwillingness of churches to testify before the Commission. I am, rather, speaking of bold intervention in the processes of reconciliation itself; of taking the initiative to define reconciliation, not to protect the "purity" of its Christian nature, but in order to prevent it from becoming no more than a form of political pietism. To ensure that a term so intrinsically biblical should not become too easily estranged from its radical character; too easily reduced to an excuse for the domestication of justice and consequently of the continuation of injustice.

We never publicly, consistently, and prophetically proclaimed reconciliation as not a handy tool for, and relatively harmless result of, politically negotiated settlements, but as a radical biblical demand even though we were aware of how reconciliation as a recognizably Christian concept became the hallmark of South Africa's reconciliation process. We did not remind the nation that if reconciliation is to be real, durable and sustainable, it has to be radical and revolutionary, and that reconciliation, in order to be real, has to be effectively

and attentively translated into political and socio-economic reality with the restoration of justice at the heart of it.

We did not insist, publicly, prophetically, and consistently, what we have known from the beginning and actually preached during the struggle, that reconciliation is not possible without confrontation of evil – both the evil from the past, the evil of ongoing injustice, and the evil within, namely the evil of acquiescing to that injustice because it is to our benefit. That reconciliation is not possible without equality, which means profound and fundamental shifts in power relations. Neither is reconciliation possible without the restoration of justice, human dignity and hope. We forgot to remind the nation that reconciliation is not possible without restitution. I do not mean reparation which has resurfaced in the debates around reconciliation in South Africa – I mean *restitution* which is hardly ever mentioned. Most importantly we did not proclaim as loudly as we could, that reconciliation is costly, that it is never cheap, and that a “miracle” such as we claim our transition to be becomes valueless if it is divorced from the costliness of remorse, repentance, restitution, and the restoration of justice, and the consequences of these for politics.

Forgiveness is a word that easily “trips off our tongue.” Christians use it effortlessly, ceaselessly and thoughtlessly. We did not, consistently, publicly, and prophetically remind the nation that forgiveness is indispensable, but never sentimental; that forgiveness has personal, communal, and political dimensions; that forgiveness includes respectful room for righteous anger. We did not insist that forgiveness is always the prerogative of the victim, never the right of the perpetrator; that it is a gift, never earned but always freely given, and that forgiveness is a soul-restoring, life-giving act, but without the reciprocity of justice it becomes, in the words of an old, wise pastor of an African independent Church in Mangaung the black township outside of the city of Bloemfontein, “a forgiveness that kills.” We did not prophesy to the

nation, as journalist Elna Boesak urged us to understand, that there are things, that while they might be forgivable, are never excusable, and that only through the grace of God do the inexcusable become forgivable. And we did not spell out, never even asked, what the political implications of such an understanding might be.

We did not publicly, consistently and prophetically insist that whichever way one describes it, and despite its appropriation by politics or even its *necessity* for politics, forgiveness is not naturally a word from the political lexicon. One expects it rather at the end of a process of remorse, contrition, repentance, confession and conversion, as perhaps a comma or a question mark, not simply as triumphalist exclamation mark at the end of negotiations. Forgiveness, by its very nature, belongs in the realm of the impossible, and the impossible is only possible through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. And again, we did not ask what the political implications of *that* understanding might be.

IV

My friend, Judge and pastor of New Millennium Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, Wendell Griffin, writes about a New York Times article which reported on a 2015 Baptist gathering, convened by Rev. Dr. Ronnie Floyd, leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Rev. Dr. Jerry Young, president of the National Baptist Convention. The invitation to the selected group offered “a public conversation on racial reconciliation.”

Afterwards, the reporter, Laurie Goodstein, asked a question: “Are there concrete things you see your churches taking on together? What about issues like criminal justice or sentencing reform?” Griffin was struck by the answer given by the two leaders: “We are going to encourage our pastors to swap pulpits, get them uncomfortable or at least different environments than they are used to.” I will let the prophetic voice of Wendell Griffin speak for itself:

“Rev. Floyd and Rev. Young plan to swap pulpits.

Meanwhile, a black person is slaughtered by a law enforcement agent every 28 hours. Eric Garner was choked to death by police in Staten Island, New York. Michael Brown Jr. was slaughtered by a cop in Ferguson, Missouri. Police later assaulted Brown's neighbors with tear gas when they protested his slaughter. Twelve year old Tamir Rice was slaughtered by police in Cleveland, Ohio. Monroe Isadore, a 107 year old black man, was slaughtered by police while lying in his bed in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Eugene Ellison, a 67 year old black man, was slaughtered by police in his apartment. Walter Scott was gunned down by a cop in North Charleston, South Carolina. Freddie Gray was slaughtered while in police custody in Baltimore, Maryland. Sandra Bland was viciously mauled by a Texas cop and later found dead in her jail cell.

Rev. Floyd and Rev. Young plan to swap pulpits.

Meanwhile, people in Flint, Michigan (a predominantly black city) are suffering from poisoned drinking water. Black students are targeted and diverted from education to incarceration thanks to racially disproportionate disciplinary actions

Rev Floyd and Rev. Young plan to swap pulpits.

A report released in August 2015 about sentencing disparity for major homicides in Arkansas revealed that white persons charged and convicted of committing murder are more likely to receive substantially more lenient sentences than black persons. Although data show illegal drug use happens at the same rate across all racial groups, black and brown people are disproportionately arrested, charged, convicted and sentenced as felons for possession of illegal drugs.

In the face of these and other countless examples of systemic racial inequality, the two leaders of the two largest Baptist bodies in the United States plan a pulpit swap.”

To do what Yahweh requires, to engage in a faithful ministry of reconciliation, we do not need pulpit swapping as much as a commitment to the fundamental transformation of our churches, our societies and our world, to make of them places of the undoing of injustice, the doing of justice, and the embrace of human dignity. If we, in the course of that work, swap pulpits to seek hope and courage together, it becomes an entirely different thing.

V

How do we uphold God's promises in a world shaken by deadly convulsions, where the vast majority of God's people are outcasts, leftovers, deprived of the joy of the Gospel, the good news that Jesus has indeed come to proclaim the kingdom of God, to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour? (Lk. 4:18, 19). I would like to suggest that we begin by doing as Jesus asks: repent, and believe the good news. We are in no position to offer comfort, compassion and justice to a suffering, bleeding humanity overwhelmed by a petrifying indifference, if we do not believe that there *is* good news they should hear. Or that the good news for the poor is such a shattering judgment on our own lack of prophetic faithfulness that we dare not say it.

We should learn to resist the temptation to see the global realities through the eyes of the powerful and privileged, but rather through the eyes of the suffering, the weak and the vulnerable, the dehumanized and the demonized, the outcasts and the excluded. Our theology, and hence our preaching, should be anchored in a theology attuned to the cries of the poor and oppressed because I believe John Calvin was right: the cries of the oppressed are the cries from the very heart of God. Calvin is quite radical in this: "It is then the same," Calvin says, "as though God heard Godself when God hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice." God presents Godself as the poor and the oppressed. We must be afraid to say it.

We must be more aware that we are living in an imperial reality. Empires, Walter Wink has reminded us, create not only realities of domination and subjugation domination. They also create the “myth of redemptive violence.” Instead of acknowledging the violence it uses because it is needed for continued domination, subjugation and exploitation, the empire “enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right.” Consequently violence is not only necessary; it is the only thing that “works”. “If a god is what one turns to when all else fails,” Wink argues, and he is absolutely right, “violence certainly functions as a god. It demands from its devotees an absolute obedience-unto-death... It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion of our society today.” We know Walter Wink is right, and we must not be afraid to say it.

At the heart of the gospel is the living, breathing vibrancy of audacious hope. And it is that “great hope” Gollwitzer reminded us of, and it is the hope “that does not disappoint.” (Rom. 5:2) We intervene in the history of the hearers by the proclamation of this hope. I do not mean hope as some vague theological, philosophical concept or religious construct. I speak of hope as African Church father Augustine did when he spoke of hope as a mother who has two daughters: Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the same. The anger of hope means that one refuses to accept something that is wrong, to put up with what is driving one to despair. The courage of hope means to have the firm resolve and commitment to pull oneself to one’s feet and to attack injustice, wherever it may be found, even if one has to pay a price for doing so. To proclaim and live hope is to have the anger and the courage that is needed to interrupt the endless flow of indifference that is engulfing the world. There is no hope without anger and courage, and we must not be afraid to say it.

I am not talking about casually and superficially mentioning the wrongs we happen to see. I am talking about *how* we say it. Do we say it with truth,

with courage, with compassion; do we say it with faithfulness to those who suffer? The wrongs we see are not just randomly happening, they are made to happen, and they are happening to the vast majority of God's children who are walking this earth. They are not happening randomly, they are deeply systemic, deliberately built into systems of oppression, domination, and dehumanization. And we must not be afraid to say it.

“Let us not be afraid to say it” means that the Pope knows, and we know, that because the perpetrators of these wrongs are powerful and rich and privileged we are tempted to speak in a language guaranteed not to give offence. We speak a language couched in such caution, such ambiguity, such fear, that it becomes almost meaningless. The truth is carefully camouflaged in our diplomacy. We must not only break the silence. We must speak a different language. Our language must be a courageous, liberating, transformative, healing, inclusive language, the counter language to the language of distortion and perversion, of hate and violence, discrimination and demonization; of subjugation and domination, of exclusion and extremism. It must be a language counter to the imperial language of pre-determined mendacity, pre-emptive legitimation and post-facto justification.

Over against the violent language of suppression, exclusion, and destruction the prophetic promise is the language of love, justice, dignity, inclusion and of indivisible justice. But as that other great theologian of the resistance against the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has taught us: “The time for pious words is over”, and we must not be afraid to say it. We know this because it is true: Danish pastor and resistance fighter against Hitler in those turbulent and dangerous times, killed by the Germans – shot like a dog and left in the fields – uttered a warning to the church, as valid today as it was then:

“When the deck is loaded, when cowardice heaps praises upon that which was before recognized as despicable, then it is the task of the church to realize that

the signs of the church have always been the dove, the lamb, the lion and the fish, but never the chameleon.”