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THE REFORMATION QUESTIONS AND OUR QUESTIONS

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The issues of the theological debate during the Reformation are important for us in the first place because we belong to the traditions that crystalized during that debate. They are also important because they teach us about the need for the church to continue to address and challenge itself in relation to the living issues of the day. In this paper I will undertake an exercise of looking at the Reformation theological questions in relation to how the same questions are framed and conceived during our time in my situation. This is not a case of testing the relevance of the Reformation theological themes. On the other hand it is an attempt to find out what we can learn from them and to what extent we need to go beyond them in the process of relating the understanding of the gospel to the context of the church.

In South Africa we are going through a period of crisis. Racial divisions within the church and the violation of human rights without have placed a strain on the credibility of Christian witness. There is a growing disillusionment about the practicality of treasured Christian concepts like love, peace and reconciliation as working formulas for resolving racial tensions. In certain circles the question is whether we can still afford the luxury of living and operation in separate confessional compartments while the world around us is raising doubts about the relevance of being a Christian in the first place. What is the functional relevance of our theological and confessional traditions in a world whose perception of reality is largely conditioned by experience of pervasive injustice, oppression, greed and violence to name a few?

Against this background let me proceed to deal with the key questions and theological concepts.

1. THE JUSTICE OF GOD AND HUMAN SINFULNESS

For Luther the basic, theological and existential question was how a sinner can be justified in the sight of God: "how can I be holy when I have sin and I am aware of it?" "(Luther's Works 26, p.233, Saint Louis) I am not going to discuss the merits of the answer to this question which Luther discovered in the Epistle to the Romans. That has been expertly canvassed in the course of the work of this Joint Commission as the Third Draft on Ascertaining the Far-Reaching Consensus on the Doctrine of Justification shows. I will rather focus attention on the shape of the religious question itself to which the Reformation provided a theological answer.

The concept of the justice of God is transitional to that of the Reformation formulation of the question in terms of justification and that of our situation, which is how to cope with injustice in the world.

Let us compare the experience of Luther and that of a detained youth in a South African prison.

There is similarity between Luther's experience and that of some of our pastors and members of the church. Let us take the case of a pastor or church youth leader who is detained in solitary confinement for an extended period in prison. I hope you will not feel that the comparison is spurious.

Both Luther and the South African detainee have something in common, which is going through a traumatic religious experience in a private cell. For Luther it was a monk's private cubicle and for the detainee a prison cell of indefinite detention and solitary confinement. Unlike Luther the detainee has no feelings of guilt because he has in fact done no obvious wrong. Like Luther he yearns for God not in order that God may be merciful towards him for his sin, but that God may vindicate his innocence. Young people who have shared with us their prison experiences recently stated that what kept them going in solitary confinement was faith in God, prayer and the conviction that they were innocent. This leads me to the aspect of the perception of the justice of God.

Luther had no problem with the legitimacy and the application of the justice of God: the problem for him was that he rightly deserved condemnation in the light of the justice of God. God's saving act of justification transcended the critical act of the justice of God, and was thus a way out, that is, an avenue of God's mercy.

On the other hand the detainee questions the efficiency of the justice of God itself. In some of the freedom songs with religious themes, there are lines like; "What have we done, What have we done?" "How long shall we continue to suffer in this way?" It is the old cry of Job, "Why should the righteous suffer?" Has God's justice lost its divine punch? It is also the cry of the Psalmist; "O God why dost thou cast us off for ever? Why does thy anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?" (74:1).

- More than this the detainee has developed an attitude of cynicism towards justice, including divine justice. In life generally he feels that he gets less than his due. He experiences "justice" in the shape of harsh injustice. His real problem, even in the darkest moments of religious agony in the prison cell, is not so much how his sinful life fares on the scales of divine justice as how he can cope with human injustice. It is as if God has withdrawn himself in order to allow injustice to run the show. As a reaction to this state of affairs, the detainee is crying for a God of justice rather than primarily a God of justification. The main point here is what the detainee's religious perception is rather than whether he is approaching God rightly or wrongly.

2. THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Luther used the concept of the "theology of the cross" in order to criticize what he called the "theology of glory." In his 19th and 20th theses of The Heidelberg Disputation we read: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." (LW XXXI, Pt 1, p.52)

The "theology of glory", on the other hand, attempts to know God directly through his manifestation of power, wisdom and glory in the world. The "theology of the cross" recognizes him precisely where he lies hidden in the unseemingly situations of life like serving and suffering for others. The new freedom in Christ does not manifest itself in glory and power over others, but in self-giving and service for others.

Even though the image of the cross of suffering is foreign to African thinking, the reality of what it points to has been clearly grasped by many a detainee. This has happened when they understand suffering in the course of the political struggle, in relation to the goal of total liberation, as redemptive suffering. When there are memorial services for political activists who are killed or executed judicially, one often hears speakers saying; "The tree of liberation is watered by the blood of those who die in the struggle." This is reminiscent of the famous statement: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church!"

I have to admit, however, that the "theology of suffering" is not one of the fashionable themes in current theological debate in spite of the fact that suffering is the most common political experience. This is because it is very often seen as one of the antitheses to liberation, a mere sterile by-product of oppression. Suffering as an experience has another dimension. For this reason one has to make a distinction between "oppressive" and "redemptive" suffering. Oppressive suffering is destructive because it is a direct product of basic oppression which is experienced passively. At its level people perceive themselves as merely victims.

Redemptive suffering is experienced at a level where people transcend their suffering and discover that they can do something for one another. Such suffering is constructive and has an impact because it is endured as a result of daring to live for others. As the cross was in the case of Christ, so has the prison cell for a detainee become the symbol of a life lived for a redemptive purpose. The martyrs of the twentieth century no longer die on the cross; they die in a prison cell. The Reformation debate on the theology of the cross can therefore be profitably continued on the South African soil with the aim of interpreting theologically and constructively the prevailing political experience of suffering on the part of many who have dared to live for others.

I am tempted to think that the current theologies of liberation in South Africa lack the dimension of the theology of the cross. They bristle with a resurrection imagery, of Jesus Christ, the freedom fighter, rising up against the powers that hold people captive in the realm of the dead, crushing them and rising in victory on Easter morning.

I miss the Christ of Good Friday who was sustained on the cross not by the sight of the sudden collapse of the enemies surrounding him but by the hope that he will rise again after death. There is a need to account theologically for the experience of many detainees who die in prison without living to see what they died for; of men who die in foreign countries of exile without living to see return to the promised land. Like soldiers who die in battle theirs is to make Good Friday a reality so that others may see the dawn of Easter. In fact for many people life is a long Good Friday. They are sustained by and live in the eschatological hope of the inevitability of Easter.

3. LIBERATION AND RECONCILIATION

According to Luther the freedom we have in Christ binds us to others in love and service. "A christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." A christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." (LW XXXI, p.344)

Christ frees and unites. Like Jesus Christ who demonstrated his lordship over the powers of the world by the way of the cross, the christian manifests his new freedom by reaching out to others and offering himself as a gift to them. As a free lord he can afford to descend to the feet of others in service. Luther states it as follows:

“When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises.” (LW XXVI, p.11ff).

In our situation we do not speak in terms of freedom and bonding to other people. On the other hand we use the concepts, liberation and reconciliation. The problem is that in current theological debate we speak as if the two relate to different levels or stages of social commitment: liberation is an enterprise of progressive, liberal theologians while reconciliation is the quagmire of cautious, conservative theologians. As a matter of fact reconciliation received a very rough treatment in the first edition of The Kairos Document. It cannot be said that the Second Edition gives the concept any kid-glove treatment either.

According to my observation the problem is in trying to "reconcile" the concepts of liberation and reconciliation and failing to realize that the two point to two aspects of a whole. Christ frees and unites. Freedom or liberation is an outward and divergent movement while unity or reconciliation is an inward and convergent process. Both have one axis. The other reason for confusion is that the two can be interchangeably used to describe both a political and a theological process. People do not always announce in what sense they are using each term at a given moment.

For instance some invoke the concept of reconciliation in order to try to appease the wrath of the victim of injustice. In this context reconciliation is used as a pacifier for crying children.

On the other hand we speak of groups called Liberation Movements in the same breath as we exhort people to work for the liberation of socio-economic structures and in the church highlight the need for a liberation theology. Matters come to a head when we then try to find the place for the theological concept of reconciliation in this mushroom of parallel ideas. One should be forgiven if one asks: are we talking about reconciliation in the sense of an unconditional truce between the fighting armies? Are we talking about the harmonization of conflicting political goals like oppressing others and struggling for liberation? Or are we using the word reconciliation in a similar sense and theological context in which Paul used it? Are we discussing Christian principles or military-field strategy?

It is against this background of ill-defined concepts that one should try to understand the appeal of the Kairos document.

"It would be quite wrong to try to preserve 'peace' and 'unity' at all costs, even at the cost of truth and justice and, worse still, at the cost of thousands of lives. As disciples of Christ we should rather promote truth and justice at all costs, even at the cost of creating conflict, disunity and dissension along the way. To be truly biblical our church leaders must adopt a theology that millions of Christians have adopted—a biblical theology of direct confrontation with the forces of evil rather than a theology of reconciliation with sin and the devil." (Kairos Document, Revised Second Edition, Braamfontein, p.11).

Does the Reformation shed any light? It occurs to me that when Luther refers to a Christian as being free from everyone else (Lord) and being bound to all (servant) he is in effect alluding to what Liberation and reconciliation in moral terms are about. When in Christ we are made a new creation, we are raised above the old creation and potentially liberated beyond its reach and power (2 Cor 5: 17). Paul in this context immediately shows us the other side of the coin, the aspect of reconciliation. As free kings we are bonded to others in love. When we love others we open ourselves to them. We make ourselves vulnerable. This is what is tender about love. To love means to gravitate to the other and stop minding to strip naked in his or her presence.

It is to make yourself available and vulnerable to the other. The Achille's heel becomes visible to all the loved ones.

This is the scandal of love. This remains true even when we refer to our God as love. Only a God who loves, gravitates towards or reconciles himself to his creatures and makes himself vulnerable even to the point of death.

There is a healthy tension between liberation and reconciliation which does not need to be resolved without rendering each concept lose its theological nuance. A similar tension exists between the struggle for one's identity and one's moral task of identification with the situation of the other. In the case of one, we freeze into the state of who we should be, and of the other, we melt into the situation of another person. We are operating like a two-stroke engine, and that is great.

4. ECCLESIASTICAL AND POPULAR ECUMENISM

Article VII of Augustana reads: "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian Church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word."

Let us forget for a while the polemical nature of the Article and see it as a commentary on at least one aspect which is on the agenda of the ecumenical dialogue, both multilateral and bilateral. I am referring to the on-going dialogue about matters of faith among historical churches. That is at least true as far as "ecclesiastical ecumenism" is concerned.

It must be pointed out that the current ecumenical dialogue is largely on the level of concepts about faith, life and church order. It is elitist and document oriented. On the part of the participants in dialogue it assumes a reasonable knowledge of Church History and the history of the evolution of Christian Doctrine. This is in addition to the knowledge of the Bible and its original languages. Worse still, whether one is an African or Asian, one must know Latin and be able to decipher the script of the German of Luther's time and have a historical grasp of the ecclesiastical and secular politics of the Middle Ages. How else can one even begin to identify the essential theological, political and economic ingredients in the historical debate about justification by faith? It is quite a tall order!

I am not by any means disparaging scholarship or suggesting that sound theology is possible without the grasp of the tools of scholarship. On the other hand I am highlighting a problem in the way ecumenical dialogues are held. I shall say more about this later.

On the grassroots level there is another level of ecumenism, popular ecumenism. In my situation each church seems to be divided into two, the official church and the people's church.

While theologians of Faith and Order, and perhaps of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission, are seeking convergence in understanding certain key matters of doctrine and practice, people in the pews have gone beyond seeking. They have sought and apparently found what professional theologians are still seeking. Let me make an illustration in two areas:

4.1. People's Liturgy

During moments of sorrow and distress it is customary for people to render mutual help or express some form of solidarity. This is regardless of the boundaries of denominational affiliation. At funerals there are usually night vigils where ecumenical liturgical patterns created by the people themselves have emerged. These they take back to their respective churches. Thus in the Lutheran Church we now come to condone the clapping of hands and singing of choruses during certain occasions. Some Lutherans even claim the ability to speak in tongues. This is not official practice and yet it is so common. It has gate-crashed into the Lutheran Church as a result of the people's movement, popular ecumenism. This is an area where the so-called independent churches have transformed the main line churches below the noses of their pastors and bishops. The Augsburg Confession and the Altar Book still retain their official character, but in the meantime church life is transformed to the point where they are silent.

Even though there is so much singing of choruses in our congregations, not a single chorus is listed in our hymn book. Similarly even though clapping of hands and dancing have come to be accepted as liturgical forms in our congregations, none of these is mentioned in our altar Books. It looks as if a liturgical coup d'etat has overtaken the church in the early hours of its history while it continues to enjoy the sweet dreams of Augustana, German chorals and the Lutheran Mass. Popular ecumenism is taking over. It is different in spirit and style from the celebrated Lima Liturgy. The only thing that can be said about it is that it is ecumenical. Through the Swedish Youth group, Fjedur, it has made inroads in Europe. It is only now for "ecumenical theologians" to give recognition to it.

4.2. People's Theology

Black theology was the first model to catch the imagination of ordinary people. It is common these days to use the term "liberation theology" for the same thing. Ordinary people: students, workers and political activists speak about liberation theology. It is fashionable in a meeting regardless of who the participants are to have an item on liberation theology or casual references to it. People have appropriated the theological territory. They may not understand its contours and layout or who legitimately owns it. That is why the first edition of the Kairos Document was also signed by people who, you would correctly say, have never studied theology or read any book on theology.

There is therefore another level of theologians, the level of the people. One can debate the question of legitimacy but no one can deny the reality of the appropriation of the theological territory by the people. This refers to people who come from different confessional backgrounds. People's ecumenism seems to have transcended the tricky issues of ecclesiastical ecumenism.

The point in all this is that as we try to resolve some of the questions which were left open in the debate of the Reformation, we should at the same time not ignore contemporary concerns even when they are not clearly articulated. and formulated.

If this is to happen, it is necessary that we should make a radical and critical review of certain aspects of the way in which confessional dialogues-bilateral and multilateral- are currently conducted.

4.3. Review Of The Current Method Of Ecumenical Dialogue

Nobody can ignore the fact that events around the year 1517 affected the unity of the church in a historically unique way. Hence no serious talks about the unity of the church can be conducted without reference to the theological issues and debates that precipitated the division of the church in the "West".

It is understandable therefore if the resolution of historical controversies and points of disagreement in theological debates is regarded as a barometer for ecumenical progress. One has always to remember, however, that the hierarchy of importance of those points of disagreement were largely determined by the order of the priority of the burning issues of the time. When new issues come to the fore there is a relocation of points of tension and stress in the theological fabric.

Disagreements which were critical at a certain place and time become less so at other times and places because of the shift in theological focus, and are resolved, as it were, by default.

The case in point is the controversy around the article on justification by faith. I have already, referred to the South African situation where political realities have precipitated a shift in focus from the question of the justification of God to that of the justice of God. This is not to say that justification is not theologically central and important. On the other hand it simply means that justification is not now in the spot light of theological debates and dispute. ^

I can even go further. During the Reformation the theology of justification came in as a critical principle in the problem of the relationship between faith and good works.

In the history of the church in Africa and Asia on the other hand the polarities are elsewhere. The historical problem has not been the place of good works in relation to faith. It was rather the problem of the place of traditional culture as a raw material in the structuring of theological reflection and concrete models of christian life.

One can say the Reformation addressed a problem of soteriology whereas the example cited in the case of Africa and Asia belongs to theological method.

For the sake of balancing issues let me argue the case on the basis of the doctrine of soteriology. In Africa the problem is Christ in relation to human ancestors as intermediaries in one's devotional life. It is the church, that is, church militant and church triumphant. It is the theology between the Second and the Third articles of the creed.

We have to come to terms with the truth that in certain if not most constituencies of the Lutheran and Catholic Churches, top priority issues are either those which were never raised at all during the Reformation or about which there was tacit agreement between the Reformers and the Catholic church. In South Africa, for instance, both Catholic and Lutherans are faced with problems of liberation and reconciliation, theology of protest and civil disobedience, etc. Does a common confessional study of these issues qualify as ecumenical dialogue?

What I am actually driving at concerning the problem of method in ecumenical dialogue may be summed up in these questions: Who sets the agenda of items for ecumenical dialogue? Is it the past, the present or both? Which dynamics, historical or cultural, are at work in the prioritizing of items for ecumenical dialogue? Is the Lutheran/Catholic dialogue not handicapped by the principle of historical and cultural determinism?

The fact of the matter is that the concept of "the ecumenical" is still one of the most loosely defined concepts in the Christian vocabulary. This is so whether one speaks of "ecumenical councils," "ecumenical theology" or "ecumenical dialogue".

Very often when one uses the term "ecumenical dialogue" in the context of the quest for church unity, what is assumed is the need to resolve historical, theological disputes as they are currently perceived in the light of European cultural experience. There is a certain orbit of theological debate and theological emotion and style which is very difficult to penetrate on the part of one who lacks the cultural nuance and subtleties of historical rootage that constitute a network of unspoken presuppositions in current ecumenical dialogues.

I am arguing a case for inclusiveness in ecumenical dialogue. The method should be such that the catholic dimension is reflected in the structure, projection and flair of conducting the dialogue. The European particularity of the specific historical questions important as this is, should not receive exclusive focus at the expense of the universality of Christian experience. For an examples, the question of justification by faith cannot be properly handled if the particularity of time and place, when and where it became a make or break of the unity of the church, is not taken into account. At the same time the perceptions of the rest of the ecumene, reflecting perhaps a differnt past, should be brought to bear on the current treatment of the issue. I have already referred to the interplay between the justice and justification of God. We should avoid the temptation of brushing aside the question of justice and merely relegating it to the sphere of social thics. Justice is as much a central theological issue of ecumenical dialogue as justification.

When this happens, and when a suitable, accommodating method for ecumenical dialogue is devised, bilateral and multi-lateral talks will become truly catholic. There will be harmony and a common purpose between the Reformation questions and our questions.

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