

The resolution recommends that churches should reconsider the conditions under which military chaplains are employed in the Defence Force. It also calls upon the churches to investigate the pastoral care available to communicants in exile or in arms beyond the borders of the Republic of South Africa.

The need to act in accordance with these recommendations has been intensified ever since the resolution was passed. The reliance on force for solving international and internal conflicts has been intensified. South Africa has become engaged in the Angolan war. Clashes occur with freedom fighters in Namibia. Weapons have been used in efforts of the police to put an end to demonstrations of young people against the policy of separate development. The use of weapons has produced counter-violence on the part of the demonstrators. The conflicts have led to hundreds of people in different parts of the country losing their lives, to detentions and to numerous black South Africans seeking refuge in foreign countries. Nevertheless leading politicians and government officials have repeatedly stated that the political system will not be changed. No longer is armed conflict at the borders of S.A. the main issue. Civil war has erupted within the country.

In its resolution on conscientious objection the SACC undertook an attempt to make Christians aware of a method in which they can counteract violence. Selective conscientious objection can be understood as an act by which an individual withholds his or her support to an aggressive and oppressive policy that is bound to lead to new and increasing violence within the state and in international relationships. It is one of the weaknesses of the resolution that it confines this withdrawal of support to a certain group of people and to a certain type of service, namely the military service. In the new situation, brought about by the recent demonstrations, it has become clear that churches and their members have to examine critically their actions and policies (e.g. economic policy, spending habits, wages, investments, doctrinal tenets) according to the criterion whether they support or withhold support from a policy of aggression and oppression. Such withdrawal of support can be a convincing action only if churches and Christians in general at the same time develop patterns of action and of fellowship which set an example to society (e.g. the self-tax movement)

In connection with a strategy of withdrawal of support of policies of oppression and exploitation, account has to be taken of a widely accepted interpretation of obedience to the authorities as an aspect of the biblical message. The way in which the text Romans 13 1:7 is understood, deserves special consideration. Many Christians believe that the demand of obedience to the authorities dispenses them from a personal responsibility for actions they commit in complying with instructions or a policy originating from the people who are in power.(42) The limitations indicated in Romans 13 1:7 to the authority of the political power, the reference to the function for the sake of which political authorities have been instituted, the context of the text in the letter to the Romans and the situation of the Church at that time, are frequently overlooked. Churches should undertake efforts to stimulate a better understanding of this text and related texts in their original biblical setting and to relate the present day situation to their interpretations.

The resolution of the SACC claims to be supported in its stand on conscientious objection by Reformation theology. It is, however, necessary to be aware that references are frequently made to the theology of the Reformers with a very different purpose. Quotation from Reformation writings are frequently used to substantiate the view that a law or an instruction on the part of the political authorities dispenses the Christian from taking a personal decision and from being held accountable for what he or she does or fails to do. It is therefore advisable to examine more closely how the statements especially of Luther and Calvin on obedience to the political authorities are to be understood.

On the continent of Europe Reformers like Luther and Calvin saw a need to counteract the traditional feudal warfare, inherited from the Middle Ages. Such feuds were recognised as a legal method of settling a dispute between free people. This practice caused disorder and disruption in a society which to an increasing degree became dependent for its welfare on trade and in which a gradual amalgamation of smaller geographical areas into bigger political units took place. In their concern for peace, Reformers pointed out that the settlement of legal disputes was not to be left to the discretion of individuals. God had instituted an authority for settling such disputes and for attending to justice in the community, namely the political authority.(43) A second aim of the Reformers, at least in the case of Luther and Calvin, was to insist that the State does not derive its authority from the Church. It is commissioned by God to issue laws and undertake steps for the preservation of mankind in the  
31/.... best possible

best possible way. The church has no right to control the State. The State has a commission of its own.

It is important to know that this emphasis on the authority of the State by Luther and Calvin is linked with an equally strong emphasis on the limitations of the authority of the State. Luther even formulated certain basic rights of the individual which the State has to respect under all circumstances. These basic rights have to be protected in any political system.<sup>(44)</sup> The limitations which according to the view of the Reformers are set to the power of the state, are very often neglected, when their views on political ethics are described. In order to understand their political ethics, one has to investigate exactly the problems of their time. In such an undertaking their statements obtain a new and intense relevance for modern problems, especially if one takes into account the change in the situation.

The Reformers at their time saw a danger to peace mainly in the tendency of individuals to take the law into their own hands and to settle their disputes with their opponents on their own. Today the most severe threat to peace in international relationships as well as within the individual state, emanates from the claim of absolute sovereignty allowing the individual nations state and the power groups controlling the government to settle their disputes on their own authority, on their own terms and according to their own standards and methods. The question arises whether churches in the modern age are not committed to deny the unlimited sovereignty of the individual state and to point towards the need of an international economic and political order and to the need of accepting an international authority for settling disputes about justice whenever conflicts occur within a nation state and in international relationships that endanger justice and peace on a global level.

Through its resolution the SACC suggests that a situation has arisen in which Christians in South Africa may be obliged to consider seriously the possibility of conscientious objection. This recommendation is the outcome of regarding South African society as a basically unjust society. A finding to this effect presupposes a criterion which makes it possible to judge what constitutes a fundamentally just or a fundamentally unjust society. The SACC apparently assumes that the members of South African churches are informed about such a criterion and that a fair degree of consensus exists in and between the churches on this point.

The criterion to which we refer is generally known as the concept of human rights. It is highly doubtful whether the constituency of South African Churches has become acquainted sufficiently with the concept of human rights. The task remains for the churches to consider and consult with each other on an understanding of human rights which conforms with generally accepted ethical norms and which can be used to test the legitimacy of laws or of political measures, passed by the government.

The resolution of the SACC calls for the study of methods of non-violent action for change. In South Africa attempts have been undertaken on various occasions to develop non-violent methods of change (Gandhi, Luthuli, the recent demonstrations in their original intent). On the whole these methods did not achieve fundamental changes in the existing political, social and economic structures. One of the main reasons for the outcome of these efforts was the lack of sufficient support from a wide section of the people. On the other hand it is clear that the present system can be upheld only as long as it has the support of a wide section of white people and as long as it succeeds in sowing divisions among the black people and utilising them for its own purposes. In this respect the churches have a great responsibility. They have the possibility of reaching a large part of the people of South Africa and of stimulating an awareness of the relevance of the gospel to the S.A. situation. The insight of Rev. Blaxall has to be taken seriously. "It is ultimately the people who matter and not the statesmen."

South Africans are at present involved in their own society in a conflict in which no breakthrough is in sight through a system of violence producing counter-violence. In this conflict the fellowship of Christians in the Church and their active participation in the responsibility for state and society is an essential part of their witness. In the New Testament the Church as the body of Christ is described as the new community in which the mutual rejection of people of whatever background is overcome. The South African conflict challenges the churches and their members to a conscientious self-examination whether they are prepared to practice what they proclaim.

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7th February, 1977.  
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NOTES.

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42. The German scholar Dr. Gerta Scharffenorth has undertaken a highly revealing study of Roman 13: 1-7 in the history of political thinking in Europe (G. Scharffenorth, Römer 13 in der Geschichte des politischen Denkens - unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Heidelberg). 1964

It would be important to undertake an investigation how Romans 13: 1-7 has been interpreted in South Africa in different contexts.

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