

Turning the tide of the city: An ecumenical vision of hope

ABSTRACT

This paper was presented as a keynote speech at the Conference of Churches in the Western Cape entitled Turning the Tide of the City of Cape Town, 22 August 2000. The conference focused on four areas: poverty, reconciliation, morality, family and AIDS. This paper argues that the central crisis of Cape Town is a crisis of “hope”. Hopelessness is the mother of its apathy and despondency. It then makes a proposal of the ways in which church leaders could engage the notion of “social hope” in their ministry.

INTRODUCTION

When last have you heard people singing the well-known song: “We shall overcome? We shall overcome, someday; for deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome someday”? During the seventies and the eighties this was the song most sung on the streets of Cape Town. Christians had this song on every sheet they prepared for a vigil, a service or a march against Apartheid in the City of Cape Town.

What has happened to this habit of the heart on the streets of Cape Town after 1990?

The Christian faith was born in a world of conflict-ridden cities¹. In the days of the early church, Christianity focused on the most prominent mega-cities of Jerusalem and Rome as well as the great metropolitan city areas of the Mediterranean world. Today, Christians again face a world of exploding mega-cities in raging conflict. Cape Town is one such city. But this time: nobody is singing - “We shall overcome someday...”

Contemporary Christianity shares more than just conflict-ridden mega-cities with Jesus and the early church. We also share the desperation of the needy and the despair of the poor. Now, as in the time of Jesus, the church is called, not only to survive the conflict, but also to serve the needy and empower the poor.

We also share the great divisions of partisan factions with the times of the early church. In the days of the early church, the Zealots, who trained Simon Peter, eagerly drew their swords against the city, its police and its political and religious leaders. Indeed, they drew their swords against the whole establishment, whether good or bad. The Pharisees, on the other hand, corrupted not only the city of Jerusalem but also its culture and its religion. The Sadducees, in turn, refrained from wholesale corruption, but had given up the belief that the resurrection is possible.

South African Church leaders are facing the same challenge Jesus and the disciples had to confront in Jerusalem: How are you to look upon the city? Is it the City of Sodom and Gomorrah or is it the City of God²? This is the primary decision that a competent leader should make if he or

1 Cox (1996:xii-xiv).

2 This notion was used by Augustine in the *City of God*.

she seriously wants to Turn the Tide of the City? You have to name the city either City of God or City of Sodom and Gomorrah! This primary choice is important because it decides your understanding of the church and its mission in such a context. On the one hand, your mission may be determined by the drawing of the sword, by calls for death as penalty or as revenge, or in acceding to corruption or even in abandoning the possibility of resurrection. There are devious people in Cape Town who have already opted for the figurative “sword” or the literal “bomb”. On the other hand, churches are in a prime position to plant the symbolic flag of peace on Table Mountain, to unashamedly choose life (Deut. 30: 15,19) over-against every call for death as a solution, and to publicly proclaim the resurrection (I Cor. 15). You have not chosen to be here, you have been called by God who creates, protects and provides for the City of Cape Town. From among all of the politicians, the economists, the artists and all the other non-governmental organisations, you have been chosen as the church of God to carry the flag of peace to the highest peak of Table Mountain.

NAMING THE DRIVING SPIRITUALITY

“As we enter the twenty-first century”, says Eldin Villafañe, the eminent Evangelical scholar of Christian social ethics at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Boston, “there is no greater need for evangelicals in the cities than to articulate, in both word and deed, a social spirituality”³. The Evangelical social ethicist also makes a very strong argument that city mission requires two types of transformations. He writes:

Jesus Christ, the Anointed One (Lk. 4:18; Acts 10:38), is the paradigm *par excellence* of this spirituality. Through the power of the Spirit the believer is both “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18) and challenged to follow him: “as the Father has sent me, I am sending you... receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 20:21-22). Thus, the double focus and goal of Christian spirituality has (1) a vertical focus - the continual transformation into the likeness of Jesus, the resurrected Lord; and (2) a horizontal focus - the following of Jesus, in similar obedience of the Father’s missional calling (Lk. 4:18-19). Both of these foci and goals can only be carried out in the power of the Spirit and undergirded by God’s love. Both have a vertical and horizontal dimension that interrelates them and dynamically “nourishes” them. “Transformation” needs “following” and “following” needs “transformation”. Both have a personal and social dimension that equally interrelates them and dynamically “nourishes” them.

The “vertical transformation” focus and its interrelationship with the horizontal are noted well in 1 Jn 4:7-13 (NIV):

... let us love one another, for love is of God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we love God,

3 Villafañe (1996:12-18). Cf. also Lane, G A 1984. *Christian spirituality: A historical sketch*. Chicago: Loyola; Gutierrez, G 1984. *We drink from our own wells: The spiritual journey of a people*. London: SCM; Meehan, F X 1982. *A contemporary social spirituality*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

but that he loved us and send his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ... Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

The “horizontal-following” focus and its interrelationship with the vertical are noted well by Jesus’ missional self-understanding (which should also be ours) in Luke 4:18-19 (NIV):

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has send me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

... The brokenness of society (so visible in the *barrios* and ghettos of our cities), the scriptural missional mandate, and the Spirit’s love constrain us to feed the hungry, visit the sick, and prisoners, shelter the homeless and poor - to express God’s love in social concerns. We do this as an expression of faithful obedience and authentic spirituality⁴.

This means that we will all have to learn to match the concern for the vertical with the concern for the horizontal.

Gerd Theissen systematically describes the Jesus Movement as a “renewal movement within Judaism” in his book *The First Followers of Jesus*. He gives content to the concept “renewal movement” by using terms such as “transitions”⁵, “deep-seated crisis”⁶, “a deep-seated change in role-structure”⁷, “fundamental change”⁸, etc.

Using the methods of sociological analysis⁹, he studied the synoptic gospels and the historical works of Josephus establishing three distinctive procedures. As to these procedures he draws constructive conclusions (taken from the evaluation of prescientific statements), analytical conclusions (taken from texts which allow an indirect approach to sociological information) and comparative conclusions (taken from analogous movements).

Theissen argues that the Jesus movement evolved from a crisis of renewal in Palestinian Jewish society¹⁰. From this crisis of renewal a formative reciprocal interaction between the Jesus movement and the Jewish society resulted. Four factors played a central role in this interaction,

4 Villafañe, E (1996:13-14). Cf. also Costas, O E 1982. *Christ outside the gate: Mission beyond Christendom*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

5 Theissen (1977:1).

6 Theissen (1977:97).

7 Theissen (1977:115).

8 Theissen (1977:116).

9 Books that were published on a sociological analysis of the New Testament include, among others, the following:

Tidball, D 1983. *An introduction to the sociology of the New Testament*. Exeter: Paternoster; Keck, L E 1974. *On the ethos of Early Christianity*; Smith, J Z 1975. *The social description of Early Christianity*; Theissen, G 1979. *Zur forschungsgeschichtlichen Einordnung der soziologischen Fragestellung*; Holmberg, B 1990. *Sociology and the New Testament: An appraisal*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. The book by Holmberg provides an adequate list of published works on pages 19, 20 and 158-170.

10 Theissen (1977:97).

namely socio-economic, socio-political, socio-ecological and socio-cultural aspects¹¹. In the background of this formative interaction the pax Romana of the era of Augustus figured predominantly. This peace had positive results for Palestine as for trade and commerce which led to changes in the social structure of the country¹². Consequently, a form of social mobility was generated which led to upwards and downward trends “that shattered traditional values and norms and called forth a longing for renewal”¹³. The Jesus movement of Jesus was one such movement that resulted from the search for transformation and renewal. Theissen¹⁴ subsequently argued that the absence of the reference to the imminence of the Rule of God outside Palestine and Paul’s marginal reference to this idea (Rom. 14:17, 1 Cor. 4:20) speak for themselves. It tells us that the proclamation of an imminent government of God has its sociological significance in transitional Palestine. It echoes, among others, that country’s wrestling for a satisfactory solution to the problem of government¹⁵. A specific feature of Palestine in the time of Jesus and the disciples was the challenge posed by the various structures of government, namely the religious aristocracy (the Pharisees and the Sadducees), the Herodian rulers and the Roman procurators.

For the purpose of this study it is important to note Theissen’s important statement regarding the effect that discipleship had on Palestine in transformation:

“...we proceed on the assumption that the Jesus movement not only emerged from a social crisis but also articulated an answer to this crisis which does not have a sociological derivation. This assumption is not made on arbitrary grounds. The following considerations will help to justify it:

The social crisis explains why renewal movements came into being. It does not explain the particular form of the renewal movements.

A sociological analysis may be able to illuminate the genesis of religious phenomena, but it does not explain the effect or lack of effect.

Finally, an analysis of religious phenomena cannot ignore religious self-understanding and its awareness of its own autonomy”¹⁶.

He then continues to state revealingly that:

“When a society is involved in a crisis its chief concern is to overcome and reduce the tension within itself. It has to consider questions like: should the tensions be increased to the point of rebellion? Is it necessary to provide opportunities for letting off steam? Is there a need for compromise? ... There is (then) a good deal of unnecessary social experimentation ... Jewish society in Palestine also experimented in this way. By various means the renewal movements which emerged within Judaism sought to overcome increasing tensions. Only a little of their activity has made a lasting impression, but among what remains is the work of the Jesus movement: They experimented with a vision of love and reconciliation”¹⁷.

11 Theissen (1977:33-95).

12 Theissen (1977:45).

13 Theissen (1977:45).

14 Theissen (1977:65).

15 Theissen (1977:65).

16 Theissen (1977:97-98).

17 Theissen (1977:98).

This understanding helps one understand the following parables of the story of the early church¹⁸

The Parable of Recreation

The New Testament calls us to transformation, to be born again (Jn 3). This proclamation is Christologically founded in Jesus Christ as the “new Human being”. It speaks of the new creation, the new heaven and the new earth. It alerts us to the fact that God is doing a new thing among us and in our history. This newness is the Gospel. Gospel is therefore re-creation. Recreation calls the Christian to a special nurturing task as responsible citizens in their cities.

The Parable of Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus is pivotal, not only for Christian doctrine, but for the Christian life itself. If the resurrection did not happen, Christian faith is false and the Christian life a lie [1 Cor. 15]. As such, the resurrection is central to ethics, “it is the sine qua non of the Christian life itself”¹⁹. McClendon²⁰ identified the following ethical propositions central to the ethics of the resurrection:

(i) Resurrection is the vindication of justice

Reference is made to the way Jesus understood the Old Testament concept *tsedeqah* as described in the so-called “alien righteousness”.

(ii) Resurrection is a new way of construing the world

Reference can be made to Col. 1:18 (RSV) which states that “He is the beginning, the first born from the dead”. In the risen Christ a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) has come to life.

(iii) Resurrection is the ultimate transformation

The resurrection injects an element of surprise and hope into human life. The resurrection makes it clear that our lives belong to Christ. Our lives are thus marked with unfathomable surprises as to endings and turns that are part of the way of the resurrection. This is the central point of faith. If we have to hope only for this world in the way that it is manifesting itself, then Christians are to be pitied more than any other religious person.

The Parable of Eschatology

McClendon, quite rightly, reminds us that the resurrection cannot stand alone. We have to go beyond that to embrace the eschatological reality. This is essential for a theology of transformation²¹.

18 I have chosen to use this term because of contextual reasons (the high illiteracy rate of South Africa) as well as theological reasons. Allen Verhey’s book: *The great reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* confirms that parables were used in the New Testament to shape the character of the followers of Christ by telling stories. These parables were creatively adapted to form the ethos of the early followers of Christ (Verhey 1999:45-48).

19 McClendon (1988:247).

20 McClendon (1988:248-259).

21 See my proposal for a theology of transformation in H R Botman 2000. *Theology after apartheid: Paradigms and progress in South African public theologies*. In: Alston, WM (ed) 2000. *Theology in the*

In the spring of 1988, Dirkie J Smit challenged me to work with him on an article of “Exegesis and proclamation” for publication in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, December 1988. He had chosen 1 Corinthians 7:20-31 for this joint reflection.

This challenge has taught me that the nature of true eschatological ethics is in living “as if the status quo is not” and in the assumption that the time is short and that the scheme or form of the world is passing by. With these verses in 1 Corinthians chapter seven, Paul established a “critical reserve” to the way things are. The requirement of eschatological ethics is that any theology that says “no!” to the status quo must simultaneously shout “yes!” for the new creation that is becoming a visible reality in our midst and times. “In pronouncing this important ‘yes’ the Christian ought to remember that we need much more than just the horizon of creation to conceive of the fullness of the new creation”²². Transformative living is living in the presence of the future inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

NAMING THE TIDE OF THE CITY

The social and political transformation of South Africa brought serious challenges for discourses in social ethics. The challenge was epitomised in President Nelson R Mandela’s last opening speech of the Parliament on 5 February 1999. He said: “Our nation needs, as a matter of urgency ... an RDP of the soul.” This means “...discipline – the balance between freedom and responsibility: Quite clearly, there is something wrong with a society where freedom is interpreted to mean that teachers or students get to school drunk; warders chase away management and appoint their own friends to lead institutions; striking workers resort to violence and destruction of property; business-people lavish money in court cases simply to delay implementation of legislation they do not like; and tax evasion turns individuals into heroes of dinner-table talk. Something drastic needs to be done about this. South African society - its schools and universities, in the work-place, in sports, in professional work and all areas of social interactions - needs to infuse itself with a measure of discipline, a work ethic and responsibility for the action we undertake.”

Ever since that time several leaders started to speak of the challenge in South Africa as a crisis of the moral fibre of the nation. The challenge of the city was subsequently called a moral crisis. Politicians have, subsequently, argued that the establishment of the social foundation of society requires partnerships among the different structures of society. Government and church leaders met to discuss issues of an ethical nature such as moral codes, integrity and corruption. Business leaders and government discussed the issues of a work-ethic and of job creation. The ministry of police and local communities formed community-policing forums to deal with crime and violence in society and even in this process people sought renewal of values to fight crime. In many parts of the world the quest for morality became almost an industry on its own.

However, says Jakes Gerwel (Cape Town, 10 August 2000), the most frequently asked question by international scholars, diplomats and politicians who called on Nelson Mandela’s presidential office is “How long will the people of South Africa remain hopeful?” Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches has recently, for the first time ever, openly

service of the church: Essays in honor of Thomas W Gillespie, 36-51. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

22 Botman, H R and Smit, D J 1988. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 “To live... as if it were not!” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 65, 74-77.

criticised Kofi Annan of the United Nations for jointly publishing a consensus document on “A Better Society” with the World Trade Organisation. When asked about his reasons for such open criticism he said: “We have lost confidence ... in the hope that the trickle down effect” predicted by the economists will assist with poverty alleviation (Geneva, 7 August 2000, ENI report). At a recent meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa, the outgoing General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Charity Majiza, has stated that the poor people of South Africa are “losing hope” (21 June 2000, Huguenot College, Wellington). Neville Alexander, an influential secular scholar, declares (in an unpublished paper presented at the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, 10 August 2000) that “there is no hope that the government can deliver” to the poor anything beyond, what he calls, “creaturely basics” such as the smallest possible roof over your head and some water for your toilet. The limits placed on the capacity of governments by the current global economic context prohibit the fulfilment of this dream. Charles Villa-Vicencio has been speaking quite frequently now of the need to relinquish our earlier hope for reconciliation. The best we can do now, he argues, “is to assist people to simply get along” (tolerance). President Thabo Mbeki’s call for an African Renaissance is nothing but the philosophical recognition that a continent without a hopeful ideology is doomed to disappoint itself. Hope, they all seem to sense, is in short supply. After the first democratic election in 1994 we have seen an upsurge in social hope in South Africa and now we have reached a downward curve. The nerve centre of our times, I want to suggest, may just be the reality that **hope is a precondition for sustainable livelihoods, for fighting poverty, for seeking reconciliation and justice, for building stronger families, for standing firm against the scourge of AIDS and for pursuing peace in the city.**

Wolfgang Huber, the Bishop of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD), wrote a delightful book called *Gerechtigkeit und Recht* (Justification and Justice). Looking at his own country and the world, he makes the most inspiring argument. What is the real name of our crisis, he asks, and answers: “that we have lost our hope”. He argues that the people hoped for freedom and all that they have to show for it, is democracy; the people hoped for justice and they received the welfare state. I hear the same kind of thing happening in South Africa. We have hoped for jobs, but now we have economic globalisation; we have hoped for reconciliation but now we are thinking of settling for tolerance; we have hoped for peace, but now we call for more visible policing; we have hoped for life, but now we are calling for the death penalty. We have hoped, but now we can no longer sing “we shall overcome some day”, for deep in our heart we no longer believe that we shall overcome someday.

The Grimm’s Fable

One of Grimm’s fairytales tells the story of the boy who went out to learn how to be afraid. He goes through some of the most horrifying experiences that would frighten the living day light out of Superman. However, he is unimpressed by it and finds nothing that frightens him. Then one night his wife, who loves him deeply, teaches him the meaning of fear when she pours a bucket of cold water full of prickly little fish over him as he sleeps. He is finally overcome by a nameless horror and an abysmal fear. “Ah!,” he exclaimed, “now I know what it is to fear”²³.

Three people have reflected on the meaning of this fairytale for modern people from a philosophical and theological perspective, Sören Kierkegaard, Ernst Bloch and Jürgen Moltmann.

23 The story of the youth who went forth to learn what Fear was. In: *The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (published by Routledge in London in 1993, pages 29-39).

Sören Kierkegaard developed the story philosophically in his famous book entitled *The concept of Dread*.

One of Grimm's fairytales is a story about a lad who went out to seek adventure in order to learn how to shiver with fear. We will let the adventurer go his ways without concerning ourselves further about whether he met horror as he went or not. What I should like to say here is that this is an adventure which everyone has to face: the adventure of learning to know how to be afraid, so as not to be lost, either through not having learnt how to fear, or through being completely engulfed by fear. The person who has learnt how to be afraid in the right way has learnt the most important thing of all.

Kierkegaard takes his point of departure in the understanding that sustainable livelihoods need fear.

Ernst Bloch reads the fairytale differently.

Once upon a time a man went out in order to learn how to be afraid. That was easier to do in times past, when fear was always close at hand. The art of being afraid was something people were terribly proficient in. But now, except where there is a real reason for fear, a more appropriate feeling is expected of us.

The important thing is to learn how to hope. The labour of hope never gives anything up ... Hope is higher than fear. It is not passive like fear. Even less is it locked away into pure Nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself. It expands men and women instead of constricting them and hedging them in...²⁴

Ernst Bloch calls his book *The Principle of Hope* (1986, London: Oxford).

A third scholar, the theologian Jürgen Moltmann, takes the same fairytale up again in 1994, as South Africans for the first time could snake their ways towards the voting stations:

Without fear we should be blind, ruthless and rash. ... How could we hope for life, liberty and happiness and snatch hopefully at the chances of these things which the future offers, if we did not simultaneously fear death, oppression and misfortune ... In this respect "the concept of dread" and "the principle of hope" are not opposites at all²⁵.

However, the Bible has its own story to tell. 1 Peter 3:14 clearly says "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened". This is an almost direct quote from Isaiah 8:12, "Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it". While Isaiah calls us to fear God more, Peter goes a totally different way. "Always", he says, in the face of fear, "be prepared to give account of the hope that you have" (1 Pet 3:15). While Isaiah juxtaposes one fear with another, Peter places hope on the opposite side of and at a higher level as fear. When the people fear, it seems to say, you shall engage them *always* in the discourse of hope; you shall get them talking about hope; you shall engage them in actions of hope; you shall help them see the signs of hope. This is your Christian responsibility. Always, give account of the hope

24 Bloch (1959:1).

25 Moltmann (1994:52-53).

that is in you, because that hope is not your possession, it belongs to the world, it is hope for the world.

Hope is not the same as hope-fullness and simple optimism. The biblical call for hope is not a call to wishful thinking or false hope.

THE CHURCH AS A SPHERE OF HOPE

Hope lost leaves a vacuum that one must fill. Some of us fill the vacuum with cynicism. The Lutheran scholar Gregory Jones told me the other day that the cynic is nothing but a person of hope who has been beaten to despair by the facts and the statistics.

The city has become very much like the couple who walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus after the Easter weekend: "We have hoped...", they said. They have not lost all hope, but the little that is left, has been severely beaten by the facts, by circumstances, by the realities. They have now become realists satisfied to live with minimal hope²⁶. Jesus joined them on that journey and he did not leave until they have seen hope again. True hope can not be read from the front pages of the *Argus*, the *Cape Times* or *Die Burger*. It requires people who can see beyond the statistics, the facts, the threats, the deaths... people who can see the resurrection.

How should we, how could we do social ethics in the current South African context? There is only one alternative: we must find a fresh way into social ethics. This freshness should be found in the ways in which people are invited to imagine hope in the midst of hopelessness in accordance with Paul Ricoeur's argument that people are changed, not by ethical urging but by transformed imagination. Such transformed imagination must mean the development of an imagination of hope.

Hope in the prophetic tradition has been studied by Walter Brueggemann²⁷. He has done creative work around the post-exilic prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel and 2 Isaiah) and the relationship of their theology to social hope. These prophetic stories hinge on the socio-political crisis of the year 587 BC in Jerusalem. The year 587 is seen as the end of the known world and the struggle of the people to let go of its hopelessness, and to regain its new world and the opportunities of its new context. He argues that people in situations of crisis need leadership with prophetic imagination. They require leaders who can imagine God's presence in their predicament and the hand of God in the making of hope against all hopelessness. Prophetic imagination provokes new realities in communities, it gives birth to new actions in society because it has learnt to imagine that God is doing a new thing in the City.

Living in the context of urban poverty, even more than living in rural poverty, means living amidst the stark contradiction of the great gap between poor and rich. Living in the city for many people means being a beggar at the robots where the luxurious Mercedes stop. Such public poverty and displayed poor living conditions can lead to the exhaustion of hope, could crush hopeful imagination and lead to fear and resignation. People can, easily, lose their "confidence ... in the hope ...". They, then, need prophetic imagination.

In 1978 the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order at its meeting in Bangalore studied the implications of the notion of "hope" insisting that Christians are called to give account of the "hope that is in us". They developed the overarching idea of "hope as the

26 Smit (1983:42-51).

27 Brueggemann (1986:1-47).

resistance movement against fatalism”²⁸. They have outlined the following broad areas for reflection: (1) the church as a community of hope, (2) it shares this hope with others in the face of the common future, (3) knowing that hope is an invitation to risk.

CONCLUSION

The challenge we are confronted with calls for prophetic imagination. It requires leaders who have not been beaten to despair by the statistics and the figures printed everyday in the newspapers. Our times require leaders who know the poetic language of hope, people who can look at Cape Town and still see in it The Cape of Good Hope. Then, perhaps, will we again hear Cape Town sing: “We shall overcome...”

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28 Kinnamon and Cope (1997:166-171).