

“A hope unprepared to accept things as they are”: Engaging John de Gruchy’s challenges for “Theology at the edge”

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ABSTRACT

This article argues, in conversation with the work of John de Gruchy, for the continuation of the struggle for the integrity of the prophetic witness of the church in the world. Prophetic theology is, as all true prophetic theology always is, indeed a theology “on the edge” – always on the edge of challenge and risk, of confrontation with the powers and principalities of our present age. The article also challenges the waves of Christian neo-fundamentalism washing over Africa and much of the global South with its toxic neo-colonialist package deal of scriptural selectivity, violent homophobia, patriarchal power, and anti-justice agenda. Prophetic theology should be much better prepared to take on the challenges posed by it. Prophetic theology, furthermore, is not rooted in the hope of acceptance by those who rule the world, but grounded in the hope that is unprepared to accept the world as it is and as the powerful have made it; a hope in the reign of God that will overcome the reign of terror that rules our world.

KEYWORDS

Prophetic theology, Justice, The church struggle, De Gruchy, Hope

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1. A THEOLOGY AT THE EDGE

The invitation to contribute to this conversation on theology, the church and continuing struggles is double-edged: it invites reflections on “a theology at the edge” and on the fact that the struggle for justice, peace and the restoration of human dignity in the world, as well as the struggle for the integrity of the prophetic witness of the church in the world “continues.” In and of itself this is an extremely important understanding and point of departure. It determines whether our theology, in the words of the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as it speaks of the church, is ready to “stand where God stands: namely with the wronged and the destitute.”¹

The conclusion I draw from this is that, for the purposes of this discussion at least, theologians recognize that there is a struggle and that it is continuing in its multi-faceted realities across the globe. Second, that the struggle we are speaking of is not the struggle within the halls and the politics of academia: for example whether theology, as a discipline, a science if you will, even the “queen of sciences”, actually belongs in a public university, and has come under renewed attack from the so-called New Atheists.² “The struggle” is the life-and-death struggles of people, oppressed and marginalized and driven to despair by fear, intimidation and the sheer exhaustion of constantly living on the edge of survival against forces too brutal to adequately describe. This is true whether we speak of children pulverized by drones in Pakistan or Afghanistan, women subjected to rape as weapon of war as is the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; men and women beheaded in Iraq because they are considered “infidels” or young African American men murdered by police while walking down the street in Ferguson, Missouri simply because they happen to be black.

Third, we are speaking of a theology deliberately conscious of the fact that it is “a theology at the edge”. So we are not speaking of theology in general. We are speaking of a certain expression of theology, a prophetic theology, the theology that

1 For the full text of the Belhar Confession, see *World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Semper Reformanda*. Accessible: <http://wrcr.ch/belhar-confession/>

2 See e.g. Tara Isabella Burton, “Study Theology, Even If You Don’t Believe in God”, *The Atlantic*. Accessible: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/print/2013/10-study-theology-even-if-you-dont-believe-in-god>. Burton points out that in the United States thirty-seven states have laws limiting the spending of public funds on religious training. She quotes New Atheist Richard Dawkins who argues that “a positive case now needs to be made that [theology] has any real content at all, or that it has any place whatsoever in today’s university culture.”

responded to the struggle in South Africa with prophetic truth and faithfulness, standing with the oppressed in *their* struggles against oppression in colonial times and during the reign of apartheid, and now in global struggles against imperial powers. The expectation is for theology not just to be “relevant”, whatever that may mean, although one hopes that at the very least it means reflecting intellectually and with integrity on the people’s struggles. But it means more; we are informed. It means, in the words of S’bu Zikode of *Abalhali baseMjondolo*, (the Shack-Dwellers movement in KwaZulu-Natal), the ability and willingness “to be inside the struggles of the people and to be inside the discussions inside the struggles of the people” recognizing the people as equals and the primary agents in their own struggles for justice and dignity.³

In the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his classic, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, renowned South African theologian John De Gruchy suggests four “significant and interlocking challenges that have emerged for the church in South Africa at the start of the 21st century.” The first is the livelihoods of the poor. The second: human sexuality and gender justice. Third is the impact of pluralism; and fourth, the effects of globalization.⁴

De Gruchy knows that although the struggle against formalized, legalized apartheid has come to an end, the struggle for justice is not over, and that that struggle has evolved into global struggles, against new forms of global apartheid, new and renewed struggles for justice, all struggles that challenge prophetic theology at its deepest core. There is nothing romantic or sentimental about it. What has kept the struggle against apartheid alive, De Gruchy asserts,

was not any romantic optimism that all would eventually work out for the good, but a ‘hope against hope’ that engendered action. Such hope is unprepared to accept things as they are because it is founded on the conviction that this is not how things are meant to be, and that good will triumph over evil. Keeping such hope alive is the heart of Christian political witness, a hope that celebrates every achievement of justice, no matter how small, en route to the kingdom of God.⁵

3 See Gerald West, “Peoples’ Theology, Prophetic Theology and Public Theology in Post-liberation South Africa”. Accessible: <http://www.academia.edu/7263452>, 13,14.

4 John W. De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th anniversary edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), xiv.

5 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, xiv.

De Gruchy is absolutely right of course. The important point he makes here, in my view, is not just that we struggle in hope, but that both the struggle and the hope that drives it are rooted in hope against hope, which means at its essence that despite the “realities” we are facing, political, economic and otherwise, threatening hopelessness and deadly retaliation from the powers that be and their collaborators even in the church, it is unprepared to accept the world as it is, that it is driven toward justice, grounded in the expectation of the kingdom of a God who is all in all justice. A God, who, we are promised, shall not rest until justice is established in all the earth. (Is 42:1-4)

During the past two decades, both at the start of our democratic era and as events have unfolded in South Africa, some of us have engaged, and continue to engage those challenges for the church and for theology. The struggle for justice and peace, for dignity and equality, for a genuinely transformed society reflecting, nurturing, and promoting true, reconciled diversity; for a better, ecologically responsible, justice-responsive, more humane, inclusive world continues, and it is waged on many more fronts than we foresaw twenty years ago.

There were those, theologians still standing in the tradition of critical, prophetic theology, who insisted early on amidst the euphoria of, and following 1994 that in South Africa we are nowhere near a “post-apartheid” society, that political liberation must be followed by socio-economic liberation and that this liberation is not to be found by plunging blindly into the abyss of neoliberal capitalism in unthinking imitation of the rich North. We argued that the shift of power into black hands is not *ipso facto* a shift toward the kind of justice that defines freedom, and that the people having the vote is not the same as the people finding their voice. That the struggle to understand the power of power and its ways with human beings did not end with the struggle against apartheid. We pointed out that our reconciliation process would remain incomplete, unfulfilled, unsustainable, and cheap if it is de-linked from the costly demands of the systemic *undoing* of injustice and the equally systemic *doing* of justice, from personal and political repentance, restitution and the restoration of human dignity. We warned that an incomplete revolution is the same as a postponed revolution, and that if we could not find the courage to squarely and honestly face the sins of our past, we would not gain the integrity to face the challenges of our future. We were largely ignored, marginalized, and in some ways attacked and targeted because our expression of a liberation theology within the context of post-

1994 South Africa did not fall in line with the demands of the new, national, official narrative of a post-apartheid, de-racialised, reconciled rainbow nation.⁶

In that sense, prophetic theology is, as all true prophetic theology always is, indeed a theology “on the edge” – always on the edge of challenge and risk, of confrontation with the powers and principalities of our present age. In South Africa, we are called to do our theology within the context of a constant awareness of a post-1994 government who, in perfect imitation of the pre-1994 government, is a government, as John Calvin admonishes King Francis I of France in his letter to that king included in his *Institutes*, “whose heart is presently turned away and estranged from us – even inflamed against us.”⁷ Calvin ends his letter to the king with the prayer, in my view not incidentally but quite consciously reminding the king of the One who has ultimate authority and to whom *all* authority is subject, “that the Lord, the King of kings, establish your throne in justice and your seat in equity.” This is not wishing-well politics, pious sophistry or sycophantic babble. It is prophetic admonition. First, the king may be king, but the Lord is “King of kings”. The king serves a higher authority.

6 For a sermon from early 2001 (on Psalm 126), critical of South Africa’s socio-economic and political choices in the negotiations and since 1994 and the resultant processes of impoverishment of the poor, see Allan Boesak, “The Tears of the Sower”, in: *The Fire Within, Sermons from the Edge of Exile* (Cape Town: New World Foundation 2004, and Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2007); for more sustained critique see Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience, African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2005); Allan Boesak, *Running with Horses, Reflections of an Accidental Politician* (Cape Town: Joho! Publishers, 2009), especially chapters 11, 13, and 18; Allan Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope, Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012); Tinyiko Sam Moluleke, “May the Black God Stand Up, Please!: Biko’s Challenge to Religion”, in Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson, (eds.), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 115-126.; *The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, Society and Politics*, papers from a consultation hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) in partnership with the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Spirituality, published by IAM, (Stellenbosch: 2009); For a secular prophetic critique raising the same concerns see e.g. Richard Calland, *Anatomy of South Africa, Who Holds the Power?* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006); Christi van der Westhuizen, *White Power: The Rise and Fall of the National Party* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007); Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy* (Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 2002). See also my forthcoming *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid, The Challenge for Prophetic Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

7 *Institutes*, Vol. I, Preface.

Second, the “throne” and the “seat” that is, the way earthly authorities should rule, should be in justice and equity. These are the criteria God has laid down, by which the king’s rule will be judged, these are the expectations of the people. These are the criteria that will determine whether any rule is legitimate.

Thus it is also a theology *with* an edge: a prophetic, political edge which comes from the edge Jesus himself gave to his ministry in the proclamation of the kingdom of God, and in his embrace of the struggles of the poor and the powerless, in such stark contrast *with* and in opposition *to* the reign of Caesar and the Temple elites in Jerusalem. That struggle, reminding earthly powers and authorities of the limits of their power and the criteria for judging their rule, continues.

It is a theology at the edge in another sense as well, I think. It is one which De Gruchy only fleetingly refers to, but then it is one that none of us discerned adequately in the final years of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties. I am speaking of the waves of Christian neo-fundamentalism washing over Africa and much of the global South with its toxic neo-colonialist package deal of scriptural selectivity, (otherwise known as biblical inerrancy), violent homophobia, patriarchal power, and anti-justice agenda. Its justification of war and violence in the name of Jesus, its religious exclusivism coupled with unbridled political ambition in its so-called dominion theology, and its prosperity gospel grounded in the embrace of and enslavement to capitalist consumerist ideology. In its alliances with capitalist power and the global media, it represents an edge, perhaps in the sense of a precipice, and prophetic theology should be much more aware and much better prepared to take on the challenges posed here. It certainly is dragging Africa, its churches and its societies, to the edge of a disaster every bit as devastating as colonialism.⁸

However, John De Gruchy also points out that we have misconstrued that hope, and ended up with the “hope for a time after apartheid, articulated by many in the churches as an anticipation of the kingdom of God.”⁹ While it provided the energy for perseverance in the dark night of despair he says, it also showed us as “somewhat naïve”: De Gruchy explains: “The end of apartheid did not mean the end of colonial

8 The highly negative impact of this religious force on the questions of justice, equality, and dignity as embraced by the South African Constitution for the life of women, especially with regard to gender-based violence for example is only just beginning to be scrutinized in any systematic, academic fashion. See Elna Boesak’s Master studies research in progress at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, “Channelling Justice? A Feminist Exploration of North American Televangelism in a South African Constitutional Democracy.” The impact on the rights and dignity on the lives of LGBTI persons is another example of what exactly we are facing here.

9 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 230.

power relations, or more precisely, the power relationships that had been established in the colonial era along racially discriminative lines.”¹⁰

In our discussions on the meaning of a theology at the edge while the struggles for justice, freedom, and human dignity continue, some socio-historical, theological reflections on De Gruchy’s thoughts may not be out of place, keeping in mind my suggestion that a “theology at the edge” is as much a theology “*on* the edge” and a theology *with* an edge.

2. A RESTLESS PRESENCE

Throughout the history of struggle in South Africa, prophetic Christian leadership had always had a strong presence.¹¹ For all intents and purposes this leadership came to an end with the exile of the liberation movements in 1960, and probably definitely with the deaths of Chief Albert Luthuli in 1969 (for the ANC) and Robert Sobukwe (1978) for the Pan Africanist Congress. One can, of course, certainly argue that as far as the ANC is concerned it did find some expression in the leadership of Oliver Tambo, albeit in drastically changed circumstances in exile that made its recognisability, let alone its acknowledgement and practical application, much harder. I suspect that Tambo had to have held his Christian convictions as much more personal than political and public, except where it was expected of him as leader of the ANC in their efforts to build relationships with churches in the struggle.¹² This leadership represented the presence of a prophetic church, never fully reflected in the institutional church, but in the prophetic witness and faithful resistance of the multitude of Christians whose faith led them to political activism, the church as “a restless presence that disturbed the church and the world”¹³ as Charles Villa-Vicencio describes it, who understood the call to costly discipleship, righteous choices, and sacrificial witness. It is, in the words of Martin Luther King,

10 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 230.

11 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 47ff.

12 For example, in 1988 Oliver Tambo and I shared a platform in New York City’s Riverside Church in the context of that church’s decision to honour the legacy of assassinated Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme. Tambo’s speech was about the struggle but clearly written for a Christian audience, and one I felt, he was not uncomfortable with at all.

13 See Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid, A Socio-Theological History of the English-speaking Churches*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 5.

Jr., “the church within the church, a true ecclesia and the hope of the world.”¹⁴ It is a church driven by a radical gospel of compassionate justice, hope and liberation.

That is why throughout the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s for example, the struggle was so much characterized by a spirituality of politics, so inspired by prophetic faithfulness, so infused with sacrificial commitment. It is a spirituality that would not be so explicitly reclaimed until the final phase of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s.

But then came the 1960s, the decade of the Sharpeville massacre, the Rivonia trial, exile and Robben Island, bans and persecutions on a scale not experienced before, and the unprecedented suppression of all political activities. In that period the voice of that prophetic church fell silent. We – I am speaking of those of us in the black churches who followed our prophetic calling in our participation in the campaigns for freedom – allowed our fear of the apartheid regime to overcome our fear of the Lord and our prophetic faithfulness. We acted as if the exile of the liberation movements was also the exile of the prophetic church, and as if the imprisonment of our leaders was also the captivity of the prophetic church.

There were of course voices that made them heard throughout that difficult decade, mainly through documents and declarations, and not for one moment do I underestimate their value and the expressions of protest they represented at the time. But in truth they were by and large the voice of white Christian leadership, moderate voices who could not authentically reclaim the radical, nonviolent, Christian militancy of an Albert Luthuli for example. Nor could they speak with any credibility for the black masses or for the black church.¹⁵

At best, these voices may have represented a theology of protest, while what we actually needed was a theology of resistance. We did not understand well enough that protest, without the framework of resistance, without the proper understanding of the realities of power and powerlessness, and without the vision of enduring liberation, was doomed to remain a form of begging.¹⁶ We would beg to be listened

14 See Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”, in James M. Washington, *A Testimony of Hope, The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 300.

15 I refer especially to the Cottesloe Declaration (1960) and the Message to the People of South Africa (1968). I pursue this argument in more detail in another context in a forthcoming publication, Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid, The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan), chapter 3.

16 It was philosopher and literary scholar Adam Small who in 1973, at the beginning of the waves of protest of that era against apartheid through the Black Consciousness

to; beg to be responded to; beg for crumbs from the oppressor's table because we did not vigorously enough claimed our seat at the table. Neither did we make clear enough that the table set by the oppressor is not acceptable to a people bent on defining their freedom for themselves. So we protested against the *consequences* of the decisions made for us by others while we should have been the ones making the decisions regarding our own future for ourselves.

As far as the black church is concerned, however, while we may have turned silent on the issues that mattered, we did not stop preaching. We did not understand that in a very real sense, we had come, to use the phrase of American homiletician Richard Lischer, to "the end of words",¹⁷ or more specifically, to the end of those particular kinds of words. If words were to be spoken, other words were called for. However, we preached not a liberating Jesus. We preached a colonized, domesticated, de-justicized,¹⁸ depoliticized, spiritualized Jesus, as if the Jesus speaking in Luke 4: 16-20 did not exist, or did not speak of us. We preached a Jesus that knew nothing of justice or of judgment on injustice. The black church preached a Jesus that would not be offensive to the apartheid regime, not cause discomfort for those whose approval we sought, nor constitute a danger to ourselves. Prophetic faithfulness, for the most part, was alien to the life and testimony of the black church.

3. BIKO AND THE CHILDREN OF SOWETO

Then, in the 1970s, two major events occurred: Steve Biko and the coming of Black Consciousness, and Soweto and the revolution of the children. We were at first stunned, then shamed, then converted by Biko's critique on Christianity and more specifically, on the black church. "If in the past," Biko told us, "Christianity was the perfect instrument for the subjugation of the people, now the interpretation of Christianity and the Bible are the tools for the maintenance of subjugation."¹⁹

Movement, first raised the question of protest as a form of begging, providing valuable food for thought as we entered the final stages of the onslaught against apartheid through the United Democratic Front, see Adam Small, "Blackness versus Nihilism", in: M. Mothlabi (ed.), *Essays on Black Theology* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1972), 14-15, cited in Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed, Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 7.

17 See Richard Lischer, *The End of Words, The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

18 I borrow the term from Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: rights and wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 96ff.

19 See Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like, Selections from his Writings* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996), 58-59.

In the first instance Biko was criticizing the white missionaries and the white church for their use of our faith and the Scriptures to justify oppression. But in the second instance Biko was challenging the black church. *We* were the ones whose interpretation of the Bible became what he called a “poisoned well” from which our people were forced to drink. There was, he seemed to say, nothing redemptive, liberating or hopeful we had to say to the people.

The children of Soweto did not so much critique us with words as with their courage, their sacrifices and their blood. They showed us not only the emptiness of our words, but called for the end of those – to be replaced by deeds of courage and commitment. That was the beginning of what African American theologian Gayraud Wilmore, in regard to the situation of black America, called the “radicalization of Black Christianity.”²⁰ It was then that we were able to move from a theology of acquiescence to a theology of refusal, from a theology of resignation to a theology of hope, from a theology of protest to a theology of resistance. Then we began to ask the fundamental questions about power and powerlessness; when we understood that the issue was not simply one of equality in society but really the question: what *kind* of equality in what *kind* of society? We then began to inquire not just about justice and injustice, but also about the nature of structural, systemic injustice. We talked not just about poverty. We began to debate the socio-historical processes of generational wealth and generational *impoverishment*.

In the process we began to understand the struggle better and in different terms. It became clear to us not only that there *was* a struggle, but that the struggle was *ours*, not somebody else’s, not even another generation’s but *ours*; that in that struggle one had to take sides and that neutrality was no longer possible. We understood that the struggle, in a very real sense, was not simply black and white, that in other words, there were black people and white people, for different political and personal reasons, on either side of that struggle. Seeking the enemies of liberation and justice based on skin colour and racialised sentiment was both delusional and futile.

We understood as well that it was not just about the prophetic voice of the church but also about the prophetic *participation* of the church in the resistance to evil. It became clearer to us that the church was fundamentally divided: there was the church that benefited from our oppression and therefore acquiesced in it, and there was the church that suffered under oppression and felt called to rise up in resistance to it. Both could not be the church of Jesus Christ. That was the understanding that

20 See Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism, An Interpretation of the History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1973], 2006).

would become so fundamental in the theological discourse and call to repentance, conversion, commitment and action of the *Kairos Document*.

Our thinking became more systemic and we discerned that the struggle was not just against the consequences of an evil system but should be aimed at the pillars that upheld that system. And as we better understood apartheid both as a system of capitalist, racial domination, and an evil, based on a deliberate distortion of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we defined the pillars on which it was built:

- Colonialism and its vile legacy, which included slavery, subjugation, dehumanization, dispossession and generational trauma;
- Social Darwinism, expressed in customs, laws, and attitudes enshrining white superiority and black inferiority which provided the basis for South Africa's peculiar racist, pigmentocratic societal structures;
- Socio-economic exploitation inextricable from, but not exclusively based on race, but also for example on gender injustice;
- Cultural domination resting on cultural annihilation on the one hand and cultural assimilation on the other, the key being that the culture of the subjugated peoples and groups are always deemed worthless compared to the culture of the dominant groups, and therefore unworthy of consideration and contribution;
- Power in its different forms: psychological, ideological, political, and economic power; as well as the power derived from international (white) solidarity and global systems of domination;
- A belief in white innocence based on a powerful ideology of white, and in many ways particularly Afrikaner, victimhood;
- Violence in all its forms: systemic, structural, and pervasive; ideological and physical violence, guaranteeing and solidifying control;
- And finally, and in South Africa absolutely crucial, ideologized religion, (sometimes called civil religion) its belief systems, central to which was the belief in white exceptionalism in general and Afrikaner chosenness in particular with its unique and exclusive covenant with God, and its power in the justification of domination and subjugation.

Once we understood this and found the words to express it both politically and theologically, the church could reclaim its prophetic role in the struggle for justice and freedom. Pertaining to this last point, for those of us in the black churches of the Reformed tradition, it was of course, of utmost importance to reclaim that tradition

as a tradition of freedom and liberation, and the Bible, as Richard Horsley *et al* speak of it, as “a faithful history of resistance against empire”²¹ and imperial power.

4. OUTMANEUVERED BY DEMOCRACY?

Then, in 1994, for the second time, that prophetic church lost its voice. In an analysis over several pages in my *The Tenderness of Conscience, African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*, I explore some of the reasons for this,²² and Gerald West explains how successful the ANC leadership, from Mandela to Mbeki, had become in appropriating biblical language, stealing that language from the church so to speak, crafting it into not just the language of government but the language of the ANC itself²³. This, coupled with expectations which De Gruchy, correctly, calls “somewhat naïve”, not only outmanoeuvred the church, it made us feel redundant.

He especially identifies our “confusion” in the “anticipation of the kingdom of God” with the coming of democracy under ANC rule. Again, De Gruchy is right. We did identify the victory of the ANC with the victory of justice. We went further:

- We forgot the lessons we have learnt from our earlier understanding of the workings of power. We forgot that it is never just *who* is in power, but *how* they use their power when in power;
- More importantly perhaps, we have not reckoned with the fatal, seductive power of power and that, in its inverse imitation of God, it is not a respecter of persons;
- We forgot what John Calvin had taught us: that the true measurement of a just government is how justice is done to the poor, the wronged, and the oppressed.
- We confused access to political power with closeness to the throne of God.
- We exchanged our prophetic faithfulness for what we called “critical solidarity”, except that our solidarity was more expedient than critical. More tragically, but unavoidably, our solidarity with those in power all too soon replaced our

21 See Richard A. Horsley, (ed.), *In the Shadow of Empire, Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville, KY: WJKP, 2008).

22 See pp. 154-159.

23 Gerald West, “People’s Theology”, pp. 2-5: “Not only was Mandela the one who seems to have called for the return of religion to a national public role, he is also the one who has set the parameters of religion’s public role.” Mandela made clear that that role should focus on matters spiritual, working toward what the ANC called “the RDP of the soul”, leaving the matters of politics, social and economic reconstruction and development (RDP) to the state.

solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, because, in the new situation of (black) power politics in South Africa, there was so little *benefit* in it.

- We surrendered the terrain of prophetic faithfulness and allowed it to become the playground of political expediency and propaganda. So before we knew it, Thabo Mbeki and Trevor Manuel, (and presently Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa) 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.²⁴
- 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.
- 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.

Unless we understand what that fiery nineteenth century black Presbyterian preacher, Henry Highland Garnet, understood about the situation of black people in the United States when he warned that "there are pharaohs on both sides of those blood-red waters",²⁵ we might not understand that we have not only lost our edge, but that we are standing on the edge of what might be a precipice rather than at the edge of a rediscovery of our prophetic calling and of the things that make for peace in the world today.

But there is a matter equally as grave. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission started its work, it created a terrain where the prophetic voice of the church could,

24 See Gerald O. West, "Thabo Mbeki's Bible: The Role of Religion in the South African Public Realm after Liberation", in: Duncan Brown, (ed.), *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa, New Perspectives* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 87-106; on Zuma and Ramaphosa and their use of the Bible, see Gerald West, "People's Theology, Prophetic Theology, and Public Theology in Post-liberation South Africa".

25 See Henry Highland Garnet, "Call to Rebellion", in *Crossing the Danger Water, Three Hundred years of African-American Writing*, edited and with an introduction by Deirdre Mullane, (New York: Doubleday, 1993, 11-121). The citation is on p. 119. Also accessible at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2937t>

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.²⁶ 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 on-going injustice, and 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 that has resurfaced in the debates around reconciliation in South Africa – I mean *restitution* that 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, John De Gruchy reminds us in his important work on reconciliation as “restoring justice”, is a word that easily “trips off our tongue.”²⁷ I agree. Christians

26 For the way I use this term see Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation, Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012).

27 John De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 171.

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 Mangaung²⁸, “a forgiveness that kills.” We did not prophesy to the nation that there are things that while they might be forgivable, are never excusable,²⁹ and that only through the grace of God does 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.

Frank Chikane has made a point that is relevant here. The process of equating reconciliation with negotiations and political settlements, (as we have done in South Africa) he writes, is a “simplistic understanding that robs the word reconciliation of its deeper meaning. Negotiations can result from political pressures or from a mutual decision by parties to avoid a war because the costs are too great. This does not mean that the parties have had a change of heart – they are simply relocating the battleground to the negotiating table or to parliament.”³⁰

28 A participant in my “Conversations on Reconciled Diversity” held during 2011 in Mangaung, Bloemfontein under auspices of the University of the Free State.

29 I borrowed this thought from journalist Elna Boesak in her response to FW De Klerk’s May 2012 public attempt to defend and justify apartheid in an interview on CNN: “Apartheid can be forgiven but not excused,” see Elna Boesak, “Time for apartheid’s truth to be spoken,” *Sunday Independent*, May 21, 2012. Accessible: <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/time-for-apartheid-s-truth-to-be-spoken-1.1301002>. [Online 9/20/2014].

30 Cited by Mahmood Mamdani, “Reconciliation without Justice”, *Southern African Review of Books*, 46, (November/December 1996), 4-6.

Chikane is not wrong, of course. In truth though, I have argued elsewhere,³¹ the battleground is not relocated to parliament or the negotiating table, or even the board room table where so many of our political aristocracy find themselves these days. Negotiations and political settlements have relocated the battleground to the townships and the streets, to the shacks and the hovels and the refugee camps, where people do daily battle with poverty and hunger and rats, and with the consequences of decisions made by political and economic elites who cannot adequately represent the interests of the poor.

It is relocated to poorly equipped schools in areas where children do battle with inferior education and the consequences of inadequately trained teachers. The battleground is shifted to the hearts of children who struggle with trampled dreams, fragmented hopes, and piecemeal joys; to the lives of young people bewildered by disappointments and disillusionments who face heavily armed soldiers in tanks with stones and who get shot to death from Israeli gun boats on the beaches of Palestine. It is relocated to the violent streets where generationally induced violence of colonialism and apartheid, slavery and genocide still makes its victims by the millions. It is relocated to the Wall in occupied Palestine where Israeli apartheid strips Palestinians of their rights, their ownership of the land and their dignity through relentless checkpoints where hope is surrendered to the merciless tyranny of irrational fear and nationalistic egotism. The battle is relocated to the bodies and souls of women, terrified at home through gender-based violence and betrayed in church through the pernicious heresies of female subjugation and male domination and through a denial of the law of Christ.

The battle is relocated to hospitals and clinics in poor communities where there are never enough doctors or nurses, where medical equipment does not work properly, where clean bed sheets are an unbelievable luxury, where the infant mortality rates are frighteningly high, and where HIV infected patients cannot take their medicine even if it is free, because they do not have any food to eat.

It is relocated to the lives of the unemployed who do battle with political promises, government statistics, and the grim realities of their own lives; to the lives of the barely employed who battle with waves of despair, remnants of hope, and elusive dignity. It is relocated to the rain forests of South America and the plains of Canada where indigenous communities do battle with the carelessness of governments and the untrammelled greed of international corporations. It is through those eyes and

31 See Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 156-157. Much of the following paragraphs are taken for that argument.

on these battlegrounds where the struggles, disdained and ignored in the elite pacts made by the powerful and privileged continue.

This is the edge of our theological reflection and action, and of our prophetic witness.

5. WHERE TO FROM HERE?

So where do we go from here, now that South Africa's democracy is twenty years old but the foundational tenets of our Constitution have already come under threat and even sustained attack? Now that, as journalist Elna Boesak once remarked, we have buried the ghosts of racism, ethnocentricity and narrow, tribal nationalisms in a grave so shallow they rise to haunt us at the slightest provocation? Where do we go from here, now that our foolish embrace of neo-liberal capitalism has immeasurably deepened the misery of millions while immeasurably enriching the few, and the gap between rich and poor has made us one of the most unequal societies on earth?

Economist Sampie Terreblanche, in his aptly titled book, *Divided Land*, after painstaking and sober analysis in six preceding chapters, speaks the prophetic language the church should speak when he exposes the facts and statistics to the light of prophetic truth:

When the ostentatious consumerism, the waste, the greed, and the arrogance of the very rich are compared to the misery and deprivation of so many impoverished people, we have no choice but to be shocked at the vulgarity and offensiveness of the lifestyles of the rich. Are the rich and the poor really citizens of the same South Africa? Has the time not arrived for a new Codesa [Convention for a Democratic South Africa] on the question as to why so many persons are so inordinately rich and so many more persons so hopelessly poor? Why do the churches not engage in open war on behalf of those undeservedly poor and against those so undeservedly wealthy? How are we ever going to bridge the gap between rich and poor in this divided land?³²

That is indeed the question.

32 Sampie Terreblanche, *Verdeelde Land, Hoe die oorgang Suid-Afrika faal* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2014), 148, my translation. Terreblanche makes the point that according to Swiss bank Credit Suisse there are, amidst the shocking poverty, some 71,000 dollar-millionaires in South Africa, citing Die Burger, 15 March 2012. Elsewhere in the book Terreblanche speaks of the need for a new "Justice and Reconciliation Commission" p 141, and again on p 147.

Our gains in gender justice are seriously threatened and in many ways already overcome by the grim statistics that make South Africa the “rape capital of the world.” Where do we go from here, now that our dedication to the protection and promotion of human rights, equality, and dignity for all, including those from the LGBTI community are threatened, attacked and flouted by Christian fundamentalists, ignored by judges and magistrates who pay obeisance to patriarchy but show little allegiance to equal justice; by gangs of Christian thugs who have taught us the meaning of “corrective rape” in the name of Jesus? Where do we go from here, now that carelessness, corruption, and incompetence are paralyzing services to the people and laying waste to the hopes of our elders and the dreams of our children? Where do we go from here?

As a very first priority, I should think, we must not abandon the correctness of our decision to forsake revenge, retribution and punishment and to pursue reconciliation. In fact we must publicly, consistently and prophetically reclaim its foundational righteousness. But we must work hard to make reconciliation real, radical and revolutionary. We must step away from the temptations of what I have elsewhere called political pietism and Christian quietism and the lure of cheap reconciliation, and embrace justice, dignity and costly discipleship. We must take the restoration of justice and human dignity to its full, public, vivid and concrete conclusions.

We must disavow the illusionary, deliberately created perception that the South African transition was a smooth, consensual, happy process, fair and just because we left the wealth and privileges of historically advantaged South Africans untouched, in exchange for the swift creation of a new, privileged elite of black South Africans. We must critically engage the idea that these arrangements are not only realistic political necessity but in fact the key to political and social harmony, and a model for other nations and societies. A theology at the edge will seriously and thoughtfully question why we are required to believe that “sunset clauses” and “the realities of the balance of power” are more expressive of reconciliation than “justice”, “equity” and “restitution”. We must ask much more critical questions about the secret talks and hidden negotiations that preceded the public negotiations, the so-called “end game” that dictated the rules for and content of what was to be called “reconciliation.” Indeed, we must seriously challenge the very notion that the “end game” was played by a selected few in the dark, privileged exclusivity of pre-negotiations, rather than by the people, out in the open, on the streets of battle and blood, sacrifice and death.

We must resist the temptation to turn what is a history of struggle into a single biography. I mean this: We must combat and correct the version that claims that the miracle of our transition was the work of Mr Mandela all on his own. Highly-respected American historian Taylor Branch, writing about Nelson Mandela’s

release from prison and his speech on that day in Cape Town, writes, “On that day in February 1990, Nelson Mandela, with one speech from the city hall balcony, demolished apartheid by calling for a united, democratic South Africa, free of revenge and retribution.”³³ Thus in one single sentence Taylor Branch eliminates centuries of struggle, denies all the sacrifices the people of South Africa have made, all the blood spilt by men, women and children in the course of three centuries of resistance against oppression. In the process he completely isolates Mandela from his people and their struggle, making him the ideological captive of the very forces who supported the apartheid regime for decades, who drunk the blood of our children in their lust for profits and who rejoiced when Mandela was branded a terrorist and left to languish in jail, robbing his people of his leadership and inspirational presence.

Such a distortion of history, such denial of the people’s ownership of their struggle and of their leader does not elevate or honour Mr Mandela. It imprisons him all over again, leaving him at the mercy of new ideologies of domination, manipulation, and dispossession. It trivializes the struggle and diminishes the sacrifices of the people who prayed for him, fought for him and kept our hopes and the dream of freedom alive with their blood all those twenty-seven years he was in prison.

A theology on the edge of rediscovering prophetic faithfulness demands that we be honest enough to step away from the naiveté John De Gruchy has warned us against; mature enough, wise enough, and true to our prophetic calling enough to see that the result of an incomplete revolution may very well be the realization of a postponed revolution. We must insist that a revolution - by whatever name it is called in the grand narrative of post-1994 South Africa - that simply re-baptizes the existing order instead of challenging and transforming it is not revolution. And we must realize that our revolution will remain incomplete until the people’s sacrifices, dreams and hopes are honoured with systemic and sustainable justice. A theology on the edge can do no less than this.

To end aggression and war; to seek a better, more just, more humane world in the undoing of injustice and the doing of justice; to save the earth from the calamities of our greed and rapaciousness; to restore human dignity as we protect and enhance human rights; to become the embodiment of hope for young and old; to believe that it is not wrong to dream and hope and work for justice; to reclaim the Bible from the

33 See Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 771. See my more detailed critique in “Deification, Demonization and Dispossession: Reconciliation and the Hopeful Sizwe”, in the Fall issue of *The International Journal of Public Theology*, 2014.

distortions of those who wish to use it as justification for injustice, inhumanity and ideologies of domination and violence: this is the edge our theology is facing.

It is also a theology on the edge of a sense of hopelessness. As things stand, prophetic theology is not on the edge of celebrated acceptance by the political aristocracy and privileged classes of the world. Greed and power continue to feed on poverty, powerlessness, fear, and hopelessness. All over the world, people's struggles for justice are responded to with mindless, desperate brutality. As things stand, president Zuma is far less likely to seek wisdom from John De Gruchy and Desmond Tutu than he is to ask advice from Ray McCauley and the court prophets of Victory Chapel International.

But the hope in which prophetic theology is rooted is not the hope of acceptance by those who rule the world and exult in the way things are. It is rather the hope that is unprepared to accept the world as it is and as the powerful have made it; a hope in the reign of God that will overcome the reign of terror that rules our world, knowing that, as De Gruchy affirms, "God's reign is always on behalf of those who suffer and are oppressed". So, De Gruchy writes, "we celebrate every achievement of justice no matter how small, knowing that it is a step towards the coming of God's kingdom."³⁴

As such it is a theology immersed in the struggles of the people, given its edge by the hopes of the people and the revolutionary message of Jesus. A theology on the edge of hopeful, real, durable anticipation: prepared for derision, persecution and suffering, for revilement and struggle, but unprepared, totally and resolutely, to accept the world as it is and things as they are.

34 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, xiv.