

RACISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA. ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: The Ottawa 1982 Document. J.N.K. Mugambi

Additional Bibliographical Resource: A Document

Ottawa 1982: Resolution on Racism and South Africa

Ottawa 1982, Proceedings of the 21st General Council, Geneva: WARC, 1983, pp.176-180; cf. *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1*, Geneva: WARC, 1983, pp.26-30. (Public domain document; reproduced below).

God in Jesus Christ has affirmed human dignity. Through his life, death and resurrection he has reconciled people to God and to themselves. He has broken down the wall of partition and enmity and has become our peace. He is the Lord of his church who has brought us together in the one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is the father of us all (Eph. 4:5,6).

The gospel of Jesus Christ demands, therefore, a community of believers which transcends all barriers of race - a community in which the love for Christ and for one another has overcome the divisions of race and colour.

The gospel confronts racism, which is in its very essence a form of idolatry. Racism fosters a false sense of supremacy, it denies the common humanity of believers, and it denies Christ's reconciling, humanizing work. It systematizes oppression, domination and injustice. As such the struggle against racism, wherever it is found, in overt and covert forms, is a responsibility laid upon the church by the gospel of Jesus Christ in every country and society.

At the present time, without denying the universality of racist sin, we must call special attention to South Africa. Apartheid (or "separate development") in South Africa today poses a unique challenge to the church, especially the churches in the Reformed tradition. The white Afrikaans Reformed churches of South Africa through the years have worked out in considerable detail both the policy itself and the theological and moral justification for the system. Apartheid ("separate development") is therefore a pseudo-religious ideology as well as a political policy. It depends to a large extent on this moral and theological justification. The division of Reformed churches in South Africa on the basis of race and colour is being defended as a faithful interpretation of the will of God and of the Reformed understanding of the church in the world. This leads to the division of Christians at the table of the Lord as a matter of practice and policy, which has been continually affirmed save for exceptional circumstances under special permission by the white Afrikaans Reformed churches. This situation brings a particular challenge to WARC.

This is not the first time that the Alliance has dealt with this issue. In 1964 the general council, meeting in Frankfurt, declared that racism is nothing less than a betrayal of the gospel: "The unity in Christ of members, not only of different confessions and denominations, but of different

nations and races, points to the fullness of the unity of all in God's coming kingdom. Therefore the exclusion of any person on grounds of race, colour or nationality, from any congregation and part of the life of the church contradicts the very nature of the church. In such a case, the gospel is actually obscured from the world and the witness of the churches made ineffective." In 1970, the general council held in Nairobi confirmed this stance: "The church must recognise racism for the idolatry it is... The church that by doctrine and/or practice affirms segregation of peoples (e.g. racial segregation) as a law for its life cannot be regarded as an authentic member of the body of Christ." This strong language by WARC was not heeded by the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk who were mentioned by name, and it was not given any follow-up by WARC itself.

The WARC general council meeting in Ottawa 1982 declares:

The promises of God for his world and for his church are in direct contradiction to apartheid ideals and practices. These promises, clearly proclaimed by the prophets and fulfilled in Christ, are peace, justice and liberation. They contain good news for the poor and deliverance for the oppressed, but also God's judgment on the denial of rights and the destruction of humanity and community.

We feel duty bound by the gospel to raise our voice and stand by the oppressed. "None of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us, without at the same time injuring, despising and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do... We cannot love Christ without loving Him in the brethren" (Calvin).

In certain situations the confession of a church needs to draw a clear line between truth and error. In faithful allegiance to Jesus Christ it may have to reject the claims of an unjust or oppressive government and denounce Christians who aid and abet the oppressor. We believe that this is the situation in South Africa today.

The churches which have accepted Reformed confessions of faith have therefore committed themselves to live as the people of God and to show in their daily life and service what this means. This commitment requires concrete manifestation of community among races, of common witness to injustice and equality in society, and of unity at the table of the Lord. The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk, in not only accepting, but actively justifying the apartheid system by misusing the gospel and the Reformed confession, contradict in doctrine and in action the promise which they profess to believe.

Therefore, the general council declares that this situation constitutes a status confessionis for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed churches.

We declare, with black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid ("separate development") is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the word of God, a theological heresy.

1. The WARC general council affirms earlier statements on the issue of racism and apartheid ("separate development") in 1964 and 1970, and reiterates its firm conviction that apartheid ("separate development") is sinful and incompatible with the gospel on the grounds that:

1. it is based on a fundamental irreconcilability of human beings, thus rendering ineffective the reconciling and uniting power of our Lord Jesus Christ;
2. in its application through racist structures it has led to exclusive privileges for the white section of the population at the expense of the blacks; and
3. it has created a situation of injustice and oppression, large-scale deportation causing havoc to family life, and suffering to millions.

Apartheid ("separate development") ought thus to be recognized as incurring the anger and sorrow of the God in whose image all human beings are created.

1. The general council expresses its profound disappointment that despite earlier appeals by WARC general councils, and despite continued dialogue between several Reformed churches and the white Dutch Reformed churches over twenty years, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (in the Republic of South Africa) and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika have still not found the courage to realize that apartheid ("separate development") contradicts the very nature of the church and obscures the gospel from before the world; the council therefore pleads afresh with these churches to respond to the promises and demands of the gospel.
2. The general council has a special responsibility to continue to denounce the sin of racism in South Africa as expressed in apartheid ("separate development"). It is institutionalized in the laws, policies and structures of the nation; it has resulted in horrendous injustice, suffering, exploitation and degradation of millions of black Africans for whom Christ died; and it has been given moral and theological justification by the white Dutch Reformed churches in South Africa who are members of WARC and with whom we share a common theological heritage in the Reformed tradition.
3. Therefore, the general council, reluctantly and painfully, is compelled to suspend the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (in the Republic of South Africa) and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika from the privileges of membership in WARC (i.e. sending delegates to general council and holding membership in departmental committees and commissions), until such time as the WARC executive committee has determined that these two churches in their utterances and practice have given evidence of a change of heart. They will be warmly restored to the full privileges of membership when the following changes have taken place:
 1. Black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from holy communion;

2. Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer under the system of apartheid ("separate development");
3. Unequivocal synod resolutions are made which reject apartheid and commit the Church to dismantling this system in both church and politics.

The general council pays respect to those within the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (in the Republic of South Africa) and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika who have raised their voices and are fighting against apartheid; the general council further urges member churches to pray that these efforts bearing witness to Christ, who frees and unites, may prevail within their churches.

The general council asks the WARC executive committee to keep this whole issue regularly under review.

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Even as we say these things, we, delegates at the general council, confess that we are not without guilt in regard to racism. Racism is a reality everywhere and its existence calls for repentance and concerted action. And so, certain questions emerge for our churches:

1. How do we combat racism in our own societies and our own churches?
2. How do we come to understand our complicity in the racist structures of South Africa through the economic involvement of especially Western European and North American countries and churches?
3. How do we remain sensitive to the insidious way in which racism and social injustice are so often excused in the name of economic interest and national security?
4. How can we give concrete manifestation to our concern for and solidarity with the victims of racism in South Africa and elsewhere in their struggle for justice, peace, reconciliation and human liberation?
5. Churches should endeavour to develop relationship with black Reformed churches in South Africa and with churches and Christians (black and white) who are engaged in this struggle.
6. In expressing solidarity with those who struggle for justice in this situation, we also ask the churches to struggle with the painful and difficult questions of how to witness to the reconciling grace of God for those whom we see as oppressive and in error.

EDITED BY Daniel Patte