

The Activist Church

Martin Luther King, Jr, the great American civil rights activist and Christian minister, is quoted as saying:

“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority”.

History remembers Martin Luther King, Jr precisely because he stood out, spoke out, and rallied others against racial oppression and against a system intent on defending what former president, Thabo Mbeki, called *the indefensible* in his “I Am An African” speech.

The true Gospel is intended to benefit the poor and the vulnerable of society. James 1:27 teaches that the church must have a culture of visiting the orphans and widows in their times of trouble. Or what about Jesus’ own description of His purpose *“to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives... to set at liberty those who are oppressed”*?

It seems that the Church Jesus envisioned is one active in the community, part of the community and which has an outward focus rather than an inward “us-and-them” outlook.

The early church in Jerusalem became so internally focussed that God allowed persecution to scatter the believers. This led to a growing church, and many other parts of the world receiving the gospel. While the national lockdown in South Africa has come as a shock to our system, God used it to not only forcefully reposition the church, but to cause us to understand that we can function outside of a building.

The economic hardship brought on by the lockdown has placed a bigger, more urgent demand on the church to step out and help.

But the relevance and prophetic mandate of the church is not only social. It includes justice and governance. And this is where, I believe, we lose the support of many believers. Allow me to draw your attention to the over-used passage in Romans 13 that teaches that *we should all be subject to the governing authorities*. To be subject to governmental authority is to be law-abiding citizens. But our laws allow for public participation in the legislative process and we are permitted to vote for government. We have legal and social recourse to address corruption in government or dereliction of duty by government officials. Holding those in government accountable in terms of the law is being subject, actively so, to the constitutionally mandated government of our land.

We see an example of this subject-activism when Paul used his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar, rejecting Jewish judgment and refuting their accusations against him. The apostle did not humbly submit to a malicious legal process that he believed to be biased against him, but used the laws of the day to fight his cause as a Christian minister. This happened in public, for all to see.

The testimony, message, relevance and authority of the church depends on our active and public insistence on accountable and transparent government. Perhaps a lot more pastors should challenge our comfort zones by addressing social and governmental ills through the Bible and from our pulpits. And being a pastor, I know how we try to maintain an exclusive spiritual and biblical narrative behind our pulpits.

But social justice and government accountability are biblical mandates of the church! Perhaps through an activist church we can produce model Christian citizens who are socially active and politically competent.

Our first and foremost passion must be to pray for all people and for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-4). We must strive to pray within the chambers of government. But prayer has never been God's final responsibility for the church. The biblical concept of God's blessing has always demanded the recipients' responsibility and work. When God promised Israel a land flowing with milk and honey, they understood that they had to find ways to extract honey from honeycombs, learn to farm bees in order to ensure sustainability of the honey industry and they had to milk and breed the cows to ensure availability and sustainability of milk produce.

When we have activated God's power through prayer to bless our nation, we must then step out of our comfort zones and start attending public participation or consultation sessions with government or submit written inputs to either enact or resist various proposed legislation. We must resolve to ensure God's blessing in government by getting up and standing in the long queues to vote for a more accountable and transparent government. We must write and publish articles and open letters to condemn mismanagement of public funds and the blatant looting of the fiscus and the destruction of public institutions.

The blessing of the Lord for our nation and government flows through our hands and the work we do toward that blessing. Scientists had identified a natural phenomenon called *entropy*, which means that anything left unattended naturally tends toward disorder or destruction. It is time for us to use our platforms and constitutional liberties to attend to our country, government and the social ills plaguing our communities.

Let us champion the cause of righteous government and design community programmes to address violence against women and children and do more to protect the elderly and to help the poor. And for the sake of all that's good, let us engage our disenfranchised communities to find a better way to protest rather than rioting, looting and the destruction of property. This is the kind of church South Africa needs and Jesus intended.

This is a church that takes its voice back and that becomes a social institution that actually matters in the bigger scheme of things.

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