“‘**AWAKE**! **AWAKE**! **PUT ON STRENGTH!’ WAKE IT UP! YOU’RE SLEEPY CHRISTIANS!” (PART 3)\***

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***\*This is the last of a three-part series. Part 1 and part 2 are available here.***

**Enter the Winter School**

The theme for this year’s Winter School was, *Justice, Reconciliation and Unity: Rediscovering the Power of the Gospel.* The number of people in attendance at this year’s School, relative to my experience in previous years, underscores the importance and relevance of this theme.

If any of the attendants at the Winter School were in doubt over the finality that South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought to the task of racial and ethnic healing in the country, the message of the Winter School will have removed all doubt and substituted it with the certainty that South Africans still have a long way to go.

As I sat through the daily devotions, keynote addresses and my chosen parallel sessions, I felt more and more like I, together with fellow Christians in attendance, were doing Church rather than attending ‘School’ per se. The Winter School was a component of what I believe Church should look like – a component that I believe must find greater presence and expression within and among local congregations of the South African Church. This component encourages and allows for biblically based dialogue on challenging issues of social justice.

The inclusion of such a component in church practice will be necessary if Christians sincerely wish to develop a greater understanding of the challenges facing South African society, and if Christians sincerely wish to practice the Gospel in a manner that has the impact that I believe Jesus intended. The inclusion of such a component in church practice will be necessary if Christians have a sincere care for those in need; a sincere care for the kind of racial reconciliation necessary in South Africa – a reconciliation that can only grow from the holistic preaching and exercising of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Participants of the Winter School and particularly those who attended as members of the South African Church, therefore have a significant responsibility to take back to their local congregations the life-giving messages presented during the School.

Below are some of my observations of each of the three keynote addresses presented over three days, in addition to my views on each of the parallel sessions that I attended.

**Keynote # 1: Eleanor Du Plooy, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) – “A Generation Seeking Justice”**

In her message, Mrs. Du Plooy explained that reconciliation has come under fire and been met with suspicion in the recent past, where the underprivileged communities, disadvantaged along racial lines, have come to interpret it as ‘assimilation’, ‘appeasement’, ‘passive acceptance of the status quo’, and ‘unity without cost’. In communities of privilege, where social justice involves cost rather than gain, members of these communities have generally delinked social justice and reconciliation, when in fact they cannot be mutually exclusive.

The cost paid by Christ on the cross, as a means by which to reconcile people to God, serves as the strongest possible argument for, and example of, the inseparability of justice and reconciliation. Many of South Africa’s privileged whites who benefited from apartheid and who are part of the Church still need to ask themselves, before God, and in consultation with their black brothers and sisters, whether justice has been done in a post-1994 South Africa.

If South Africa is to achieve real reconciliation, more of us privileged whites need to give of ourselves in seeking justice for the victims of injustice. What exactly it means to give more of ourselves must be determined in the sacred spaces of conversation that I am advocating for in this article.

Where the South African Church has failed to create these spaces, it has abdicated its responsibility, allowing politicians to capitalise on and exploit the consequential void. The creation and facilitation of the sacred conversation cannot depend on any inherently political institution – be it the state, a government, a political party or any politician.

In her address, Mrs. Du Plooy asked the following question: “Who in our nation is offering an appealing vision of the future?” If we as Christians believe our God to be a sovereign creator, it follows that His chosen body, where there is “neither Jew nor Gentile”, must take responsibility for offering such a vision, not just in word, but also in deed.

**Parallel session: Walter Philander, Minister at United Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) Piketberg Congregation – “Justice and Decolonisation: A Search for Healing”**

In his presentation, Pastor Philander asked what decolonisation means in the South African context and how we ought to handle it. He defined decolonisation as “freeing ourselves from a foreign mindset”.

How do we distinguish between the ‘foreign mindset’ resulting from colonialism and ‘foreign knowledge’ that results in a more holistic and richer view of the world? Why is such a distinction important? What constitutes ‘the foreign’?

As is the case with culture, the mind is always and ultimately an amalgamation of knowledge that originates from across geographies and people groups. This is especially so in a globalised world where democracy is considered the norm. In this sense, every mind, in its development, will therefore have adopted an element of ‘the foreign’. The danger in equating colonisation with knowledge originating from outside the local or the indigenous, is cutting ourselves off from opportunities to learn and grow.

The meaning of “a foreign mindset”, as used by Pastor Philander, is open to debate. If freeing ourselves from a foreign mindset means adopting an African, a South African or an indigenous mindset, then the meaning of these alternatives will require conceptualisation. Is it in fact possible to adopt an entirely African mindset, assuming we even know what this is, in a globalised world and in a diverse and multi-cultural South Africa?

For me, the important question is this: To what extent is ‘the foreign’, or for that matter, ‘the indigenous’, damaging and limiting to God’s will for all of creation? To simplify things for the Christian and to remove ourselves from the complexities of the indigenous-foreign dichotomy, I would argue more specifically that decolonisation involves freeing ourselves from an ungodly mindset. This is in itself a mindset foreign to God. I acknowledge that this argument is problematic for those who maintain that Christianity is an inherently colonial and oppressive project.

However, and in order to counter this sentiment, I would argue that it is the failure of members of the South African Church to seek increasing freedom from the mindset foreign to God, that explains, in part, why colonialism and Christianity were in many ways a joint project and why apartheid persists in the so-called ‘new South Africa’.

The challenge is therefore not so much to seek freedom from the mindset of the foreigner, defined by nationality, but to seek freedom from the mindset that is foreign to God. It is in achieving the latter that damaging elements of the former, as understood in the political, social and economic sense, will become more easily discernible and extinguishable.

Pastor Philander said that, “The harm apartheid did, particularly to people of colour, is immeasurable.” This underscores the extent and depth of a problem that the South African Church must not gloss over.

Before the South African Church can conceptualise and learn how to deal with decolonisation, however, it must first have an understanding of colonialism, apartheid and the immediate and systemic impact of these institutions.

It was appropriate therefore, that Pastor Philander quoted the following from Edmund Burke: “Those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it.” In the South African context, a rephrasing of the quote in the following form may be more pertinent, however: ‘Those who don’t know history are doomed to continue it.’

Does an understanding of colonialism exist within the South African Church? Generally, I think not. This absence lends support to one side of the current debate surrounding the teaching of history in South African schools. Is the teaching of history inside the South African Church not of a greater necessity?

**Parallel session: Coenie Burger, former Director of Ekklesia and Communitas (Stellenbosch University) – “Surprised by Hope: The Three-fold Hope of the Christian Community”**

Dr. Coenie Burger presented a simple and yet profound thesis on hope, distinguishing between three levels of hope for the Christian: ‘creation hope’ (as related to the Father), ‘Christian hope’ (as related to history and the promises of Christ for the future), and the ‘living hope’ that the Holy Spirit brings.

Creation hope finds reflection in the ability of human communities and societies to overcome challenges. This ability results from the creative capacity given by the Creator to his creations.

An excerpt taken from John F. Kennedy’s *A Strategy of Peace Speech*, delivered at the commencement of the American University in 1963, serves as a good example of creation hope:

“Our problems are man made, therefore they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man’s reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable and we believe they can do it again.”

Christian hope involves the hope in Jesus Christ. Dr. Burger argued that while creation hope my fail us, we cannot say the same for the hope found in the salvation offered by Jesus Christ.

According to Dr. Burger, the Holy Spirit does two things in us to cultivate living hope. He opens our eyes to see Him, unite with Him, and helps us to put our trust and hope in Jesus alone. In doing so, He also transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ (gives us ‘the mind of Christ’) and inspires us to follow Him.

While each form of hope distinguished by Dr. Burger was relevant to the Winter School theme, I feel the third – living hope – to be of greatest importance to the mandate, which I hope to communicate through this article.

Adopting the mind of Christ, that is sanctification, is a journey with many destinations that Christians, in their different contexts, must reach. To develop in the adoption of such a mind, to become increasingly sanctified, Christians must engage the Word of God in relation to the realities that inflict fellow human beings.

**Keynote # 2: Wilhelm Verwoerd, Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology – “Dark ‘White Work’: Towards Deep Reconciliation”**

Dr. Verwoerd is the grandson of “the architect of apartheid”, Hendrik Verwoerd. During his keynote address, I gathered a sense of the long, challenging and personal journey that he must have travelled from being born into a racist Afrikaner family to speaking on reconciliation at the 2018 Winter School.

Being a peace builder and a facilitator of stories, Dr. Verwoerd told the Winter School audience, with reference to the South African context, that “The story-telling discipline is not going deep enough.” By this, I understood him to mean that the practice of South Africans sharing personal experiences of hurt, pain, guilt and complicity with one another is not occurring extensively enough or at the necessary depths of the heart and soul.

This discipline is a necessity for the healing of the individual within and for the healing of the spaces between individuals, that is, societal healing. Based on South Africa’s contemporary realities, and as already mentioned, based on my own experience of the local church, I am inclined to agree with Dr. Verwoerd.

I will assume that in many churches, the kind of storytelling and dialoguing that is necessary for reconciliation in South Africa is not happening. One possible reason for this is that many churches are largely, if not entirely, homogenous bodies – enclaves of ‘whiteness’ or ‘blackness’.

Part of the work of South African anti-apartheid activist, Steve Biko, through his leadership of the Black Consciousness Movement, was to help black people overcome a sense of inferiority in the context of a white dominated space.

The Church should be a space where all people come to understand more fully their value in relation to Jesus Christ. This is why colonialism and apartheid was also a sin of professing Christians – some would say, ‘A crime of Christianity’. Instead of speaking and acting against a system that degraded humanity, and by implication, the value of people in relation to Christ, sections of the South African Church sanctioned and supported it.

In a post-1994 setting, one of the roles and challenges of the South African Church, in a macro-social sense, is to help its black congregants who suffer inferiority complex, to overcome that sense of inferiority and to help its white congregants who suffer superiority complex, to overcome that sense of superiority.

This work cannot happen in a colour homogenous church setting. Such a setting falls short of the kind of sacred space for conversation that I, and many of the speakers at the Winter School, I believe, are advocating.

A profoundly symbolic and factual story that serves as a reflection of such a space is the story of an elderly Afrikaner male congregant in my local church. While travelling, he will stop his vehicle to offer hitchhikers a lift. More often than not, those who accept the offer are non-whites. While driving, this elderly man then asks the following two intentional questions: “Do you think white people are superior to black people?” and “Do you think black people are inferior to white people?” To both questions, the answer is frequently “yes”. That, which follows in the sacred space of the vehicle, is the story of Christ on the cross. This is the story of a sacrifice made for all people, created equal in value by God.

During his keynote address, Dr. Verwoerd also taught on the notion of contemplation. He reminded the audience of the value of daily contemplation. This means sitting in silence before the Holy Spirit, with nothing in mind, “to bring things within the darkness of oneself into the light”. Dr. Verwoerd quoted Martin Laird who writes, “The opposite of the contemplative life is the reactive life.” This brings me to the next parallel session that I attended.

**Parallel session: Nkosivumile Gola, activist at The Warehouse – “Decolonisation – A Demand of the Black Oppressed”**

This parallel session involved a passionate and emotionally charged demand on behalf of the black oppressed. It was a demand that, if I am to provide what I believe to be the necessary commentary, requires more sacred space than what this article can offer.

In reflecting on the link between the historical and the contemporary, Mr. Gola emphasized that, “The same boat that carried the colonial tyrant is the same boat that carried the Bible of the missionary…This agenda has to this day remained intact and has not been separated within the Church.”

For the speaker, the co-laboring between the colonialist and the missionary was a project that established white supremacy in South Africa. For him, this project persists in contemporary South Africa, in the co-labouring between white South Africans, the white Church and black “sell-outs”. It persists to such an extent that, “Even in the absence of white people, the white voice remains the most prominent voice.”

Mr. Gola’s address highlighted the racially bound, structural injustices that continue to pervade South African society. Consequentially, he argued for a disruption of the white theology that maintains the status quo and the creation of a black theology, a theology of liberation that takes into account the suffering of the poor black majority – ‘black’ as defined by Steve Biko.

Mr. Gola believes that, “For people to see their liberation, they need to see their God.” He bases his advocacy of a black theology upon his experience that black people are not seeing God in white Christians.

I believe there to be some truth in Mr. Gola’s experience. No matter what one may think of his demanded solutions, the extent to which white Christians fail to reflect the love of God in their relations with black people or in their failure to relate to black people at all, is the extent to which Mr. Gola’s worldview is an indictment of the same white Christians in South Africa.

**Parallel session: Ben Theron, Chief Operations Officer at OUTA – “South Africa at an Ethical and Morality Crossroads”**

Mr. Theron’s presentation focused on corruption and the misuse and abuse of tax revenue in South Africa. It presented a very gloomy picture of South Africa’s contemporary moment – a moment that Mr. Theron described as “a perfect storm”. A member of the audience, following the presentation, described it as one that “highlights all of the sickness of our society.”

The corruption that characterises the South African government, and its impact upon the increasing and tangible divide between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have notes’, serves to drive the wedge between South Africa’s colour groups even further. This is in a country that, according to Mr. Theron, “has enough money to meet the needs of all South Africans”.

In closing and with reference to the leadership that is necessary to move South Africans out of the perfect storm, Mr. Theron said that, “There is only one organization that can step up and say ‘follow me’ – the Church.”

For this to be possible, local church congregations in South Africa must open sacred spaces for storytelling and the kind of conversation that involves prayer and a reading of God’s word in relation to the challenges facing South African society.

The Church fails to achieve a fuller potential when praying and reading a transcendent Word in a manner that does not take cognizance of ungodly realities that exist both within and outside of itself.

**Parallel session: Alease Brown, PhD candidate, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University – “What Does the Lord Require of You? Decolonisation as Doing Justice in South Africa in the 21st Century”**

Ms. Brown argued that, “Colonialism involves a violence of discourse and violence of domination.” This violence persists in the contemporary period. It is this continuing violence that underscores the need for decolonisation – a process that Ms. Brown defined as “the elimination of white supremacy”. I interpret this as the elimination of ‘thinking that I am better than the other’.

This is a necessary process, not only in wider South African society, but also within the South African Church. The violence that Ms. Brown referred to, is sustained in and through the Church in as far as the just do not speak against and act upon injustice.

Ms. Brown proposed a number of necessary elements in working towards decolonisation, some of which reinforce the ideas already presented in this three part series. These included: the telling of stories – oral, written and filmed; dialogical engagement; values centred living – living with dignity, connection, courage, truth and vulnerability; including South Africa’s energetic youth in the process of decolonisation; and finally, talking about the violence being perpetrated against the violators.

In ending, Ms. Brown made a striking comparison between contemporary South Africa and Nazi Germany – one that conveyed the responsibility she believes white people carry in South Africa’s current context. She said, “For a young white person to enter university with the intention of getting a job, marrying and having a family, is like a German student to have intended and hoped for the same during the Holocaust.”

**Keynote # 3: Reggy Nel, Dean, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University – “Diverse People Unite / Unity in Diversity”**

Prof. Nel ended the school with a message on unity in diversity. “What is it that we must allow to unite us?” he asked. He highlighted, as did other speakers at the Winter School, the importance of our personal stories, shared with and among one another.

Members of the audience raised the following pertinent questions after Prof Nel’s address – questions that I believe motivate the thrust of this article: “What are we going to do in our own communities and local congregations with the stories we have heard during the Winter School?” “How can we feel encouraged if our own denominations are the pretext for division and injustice?” “How can we feel comfortable?” One answer that was given, that I believe speaks to each of these questions reads as follows: “We need safe spaces to talk”.

The sense that I feel is the culmination of the personal experience gained in my attendance of the three above-mentioned events. It is the same sense that I had at the closing of the Winter School. There was a sense in me that the South African Church must enter ‘the operating room’ where God resides as the specialist surgeon. Are we willing to enter such a sacred space?

***The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and he reserves the right to improve them whenever possible.***