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**The Church as Alternative Community:  
A South African Perspective**

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**Introduction**

In 1994, South Africa emerged from a state of legislated racial separation known as apartheid into a democratic state when the African National Congress was elected into power by the true majority. During the apartheid era, the church adopted this system either explicitly or implicitly by adopting a “policy of no comment.” However, there were some sporadic voices from within the church: Allan Boesak, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Naude and David Bosch

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opposed this heretical system and called for an alternative community. The alternative community had to confront this oppressive system that dehumanised the majority. The alternative community, more so for Bosch, had to be confrontational and liberative; she would not recuse herself to personal piety but to gospel performance. This type of movement had to be revolutionary in its engagement, but not violent. Pillay (2015) said,

in South Africa under apartheid the human community was separated and destroyed by racial and economic oppression. The task of the church is to rebuild this human community. Some 20 years after the establishment of a democratic South Africa it is questionable whether we are succeeding in the endeavour of building such a community.

This paper suggests that the church in this present dispensation should see herself as an alternative community in order to address through prophetic utterance and creative action the challenging issues that impinge upon the imago Dei and dignity of being human. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines alternative “as something that is different from something else, especially from what is usual” and community as “people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interest, background or nationality.” For the church in South Africa to become alternative in this new dispensation she must call herself to address the human needs in response to and in light of “the active presence of God for the life of the world” (Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, 2002:18). The church as an alternative community forms practices that are communal, yet unique, by demonstrating through her enactments that she is God’s redemptive movement within society. The church becomes the embodiment of the living presence of God that is revealed through her actions because of grace and a continuing relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Volf (2002:255) indicates this most clearly: “human beings are made participants in divine activity and therefore are inspired, empowered and obliged to imitate it (Grace).”

John Swinton (2006:83) describes Christian engagement as the “resonance of grace” that occurs in response to the human experience of divine grace. Such practices are designed to sustain faith and hope in a context that often appears hopeless and less than grace-filled. The practices of the alternative community thus forms the constituent

element in a way that life becomes incarnational when the church lives in the light of and in response to God's gift of abundant life. The key to success is practice. It is not enough just to know what to do, but to do it. By consistently doing, practice becomes a habit, and moreover, Christian practice is not something we do but rather who we are—a people of reconciliation, compassion, and love. We become a people who are dependent on God because we know God. Before we engage the practice of an alternative community attention is drawn to the existence of early Judaic alternative communities.

#### **A. Early Judaic Alternative Communities & the Church**

During the times of the earthly ministry of Jesus, the Jewish nation was under the control of the Roman Empire (30 B.C. to A.D. 70). Before the Roman control of Israel, the Jews were under the governance of the Greeks (330-30 B.C.). During this time alternative communities developed within common Judaism like the Sadducees who helped with the Hellenization and the Pharisees who maintained a legalistic religiosity that prevented Hellenistic spirituality from contaminating their religion. The Essenes isolated themselves from all public life by becoming ascetic, and the Jewish Zealots rebelled against the Greco-Roman empires and took up arms.

Within common Judaism, another community developed around A.D. 30 called the church—*ekklesia*, “those called out” as from their homes to a specific place, occurring 111 times in the N.T. The word for church has at least two backgrounds, the classical Greek and the Old Testament. Millard Erickson (1999:1041) states in classical Greek the word finds its expression in *ekklesia* and is found as early as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Euripides. It refers to a *polis* (city). In the secular sense, the word refers to a political gathering, an assembly of persons, or those called together by a herald: a meeting of people. The Greco-Roman usage of the term *ekklesia* refers to a political gathering. Thus, the Christian usage of the term *ekklesia* is radically different from how the Roman-Greco world used and understood it.

From the O.T., the etymology of the resonates more with the Hebrew word *kahal* that is employed in the Septuagint to infer those gathered by God. Hans Kung, 1986:82 states, “By taking over the term *ekklesia*, the early Christian community made its claim to be the true congregation of God, the true community of God, and the true

eschatological people of God. Related to *ekklesia*, two times in the N.T. the word *kurisakos* used for those “belonging to the Lord.”

The Christian church is that community of people called into being by the life and resurrection of Jesus (Hans Kung, 1981:75). James Cone (1986: 115) argues “the identity of the church found in Jesus. To ask ‘What is the church’ is also to ask ‘Who is Jesus’ for without Jesus the church has no identity.” Thus, without the raising of Jesus from the dead the church has no meaning. With the affirmation of faith that Jesus is what he claimed to be, the Messiah, a new alternative community was born—the church. At the center of the church’s teaching, stands Jesus, the Messiah, Man, resurrected Lord and Saviour. True God and true man, the Lord of the cosmos. Thus, the New Testament teaching was that Christians should now live the way of Jesus (Matt. 16:24). Christians are called to model Jesus everywhere, privately and in the public square. Therefore, understanding the gospel Jesus proclaimed underlines the practice of the church. The gospel makes it clear, that the gospel is the “gospel of the kingdom.” This gospel calls all people, and those who “enter do so by sheer grace” (Sider 2007:171).

This new alternative community that Jesus formed requires of his followers to live by a new radical ethic to minister to the oppressed and marginalized, to challenge the privileged or wealthy, and to reject the way of violence and to love our enemies. Those who become part of this community do so by responding in faith to Jesus Christ and his message, bringing them into salvation. Thus, this new way of life in Jesus Christ includes a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and a new economic relationship with others (Lk 19:9) as demonstrated when Zacchaeus responded to the message of Jesus. This new community also has a new social order, where racial and social hostility is overcome by the power of the resurrected Christ (Gal. 3:28). Sider (2007:173) states that the church is visible, public and in some very real sense a political reality. The economic sharing and rejection of ethnic division was so visible that it drew non-Christians to embrace Christ.

## **B. The Present South African Context**

The present South African context is one of a burgeoning democracy that is fast becoming one of the most unequal countries in which to live. In South Africa, 26 million out of the 55 million

citizens are now living below the poverty index of 2 dollars a day. T. Shabala, CEO of Standard Bank, brought this out most clearly,

Most black South Africans — and most Africans in particular — remain severely disadvantaged compared to white South Africans. 4% of adult Africans have a tertiary qualification; 25% of white South Africans do. Throughout the South African economy, 70% of top managers and 59% of senior managers are white. The unemployment rate among Africans is 28.8%; among white people, it is 5.9%. 61% of white South Africans live in households that spend more than R10 000 a month; only 8% of Africans can spend that much. 16% of Africans live in extreme poverty and regularly suffer hunger; 99.9% of white South Africans are better off than that.

Over the last few months, South Africans have witnessed a rise in protestation. The year 2016 began with a flurry of racist comments on social media, and the majority of South African youth are becoming disillusioned with the present ANC-led government. While most South Africans want to live in harmony with each other, this desire is being frustrated by the legacy of apartheid leading to hatred.

To this tension the church must respond, not in living an “ascetic” life by disconnecting herself and becoming otherworldly but by immersing and identifying herself with the struggles of the majority in post-apartheid South Africa. To become the voice of the voiceless and marginalised by becoming the prophetic conscience of government and to those who hear the message of this community. The church as an alternative community in post-Apartheid South Africa is to be the catalyst for the flourishing of others, thus requiring her to affirm the bonds of common humanity. This calls for the active caring for justice and the common good, flowing from identification with the needs and rights of other. Thus, “solidarity is not a state of affair or goal, but a virtue that impels the church into action” (Cochran, 2007:5).

The church of Jesus Christ is a liberated and separated people, whose faith in Christ is a life lived in the presence of the Creator. This critical awareness of God’s presence manifested through the Church calls for ethical responsibility: a responsibility to ask what should be done to restore the dignity of the once oppressed majority. The words of Emil Brunner (1937:164) are apropos:

the true being of man, therefore, can mean nothing else than standing in the love of God, being drawn into his love for man. This means living life as a

community which derives its source in God through Christ which is directed towards other human beings and the interest of others”

In other words, this understanding sees “being” as a gift of the Creator God, who has revealed himself through Jesus Christ, which also is a recognition that the end of humanity is an active discipleship of love for God and neighbour. Thus, the church becomes a model which a wounded country can follow. While the church lives in a secular culture, it does not in any sense transcend the culture around them; quite to the contrary, the church challenge injustices, thereby becoming a hopeful and hope-filled alternative.

### **C. The Expression of the Church as Alternative Community in South Africa**

Here we deal with the features that must be demonstrated in the life of the church if she wants to live as an alternative community in post-apartheid South Africa. The expression of the church must be undergirded by our understanding of Scripture that calls us to love one another. Immanuel Kant (1947:7) put it very clearly:

For love as an inclination, cannot be commanded. However, kindness done from duty, also when no inclination impels it, and even when it is opposed by a natural and unconquerable aversion, is practical love, not pathological love. It resides in the will and not in feeling, in the principle action and not in tender sympathy; and it alone can be commanded.

This love has its first expression in the action of Jesus on the cross, which gives birth to the *Missio Dei* that finds expression through the actions or praxis of the church in faithful communion with the God, the One who acts. Andrew Root (2014:81) states that in *participato Christi* the church participates in God through Jesus Christ. It affirms our cooperation with the divine life that our life is hidden with Christ in God. Thus, God’s being is given in God’s acts, and God’s act is the revealing of the Godself for the sake of ministry (K. Barth, 1961:85). Thus, when the church engages in ministry as the body of Christ, it reflects the being of God as a moved being. God moves towards humanity in the shape of ministry, as an invitation to take action and share in another’s being. This act of God is seen in reconciliation. Therefore, Root (2014: 94) argues that ministry as the act of God is the event of God’s being coming to humanity. This takes shape in the Christ action in what Root terms the *Christopraxis* of the church. When the church expresses compassion, it expresses the God Being.

The expression of this alternative community—the church—is thus one of engagement: in the internal (spiritual) and external (socio-political) through prophetic engagements by speaking to institutional structures that keep people separated and by acting out through creative and compassionate acts that demonstrate love at its fullest.<sup>2</sup> John Frame said, “For the Christian life is not only a matter of following rules of morality, but a dynamic experience: living in a fallen world, in fellowship with the living God” (2008: xxv). One of the tests of the authenticity of the church’s claim to transcendence or to be counter-cultural is its capacity to represent in its congregation a “socially heterogeneous” people (James Cone, 1986:119). This is a community that reflects Jesus Christ as the One who breaks down barriers that separate people.

### 1. Reconciliatory

The fundamental message of the church is one of reconciliation. B.S. McNiel (2015:22) states that “reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish.” The church becomes prophetic when it creates and sustains a reconciled and reconciling community. The task of the prophetic ministry of the church is to nurture and nourish an alternative consciousness to the dominant culture around us (Bruggeman cited in McNiel, 2015). Reconciliation with God must be demonstrated by genuine reconciliation within the church and by continuing a ministry of reconciliation to the world. M. Volf (1999) calls this the Pauline concept of social reconciliation. Such a community of reconciliation is then the alternative hoped for in South Africa to help reconcile the tension with the surrounding context and culture of separateness.

As South Africa becomes more socially and racially separated, the church should structure herself to become an alternative conscience and counter-cultural. In the place of justice and righteousness, normal society brandished violence and oppression-

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<sup>2</sup> By prophetic I mean, “a theology that is socially critical and world transformative, that is, one that explicitly relates the Word of God to the social and political context within which it is proclaimed” See J. W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology* (1990:19).



and call it justice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2005:63) encapsulated this function of the church well:

The church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. The space of the church is not there in order to fight for territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely the world that is loved and reconciled by God.

While the church pursues justice and reconciliation, it defines its mandate in biblical terms and thus rejects all forms of violence, manipulation, and injustice. Liberation then is not a mere political movement and power struggle. The message of reconciliation of the church is to preach the good news about the peace Christ brings, reconciling man to God, man to man, and harmony with God's creation. This is what Ernest Conradie (2013:27) calls cosmic reconciliation. Reconciliation is thus with God, with the Church and with those who have been sinned against.

How then is reconciliation to be enacted? The church as alternative community must be agents of spiritual and racial reconciliation that is more than mere words, but a reconciliation that demands action. Vuyani Vellem (2013:111) underscores that if justice becomes subservient to reconciliation, then reconciliation is just cognitive, something that aborts the true reconciliation. Vellem said what is needed is the discovery of reconciliation through experience.

It is through restitution that I believe this is possible. In a previous article that I co-authored with Clayton Alexander (2015), I state that when the church fully understands the impact that three decades of separateness had on the masses and the degradation it caused, by making people non-persons required indeed a practical engagements or what Vellem terms "logic of experiential clarity regarding reconciliation," therefore, if reconciliation is to be fully realized, then restitution has to be made. This is where the church can challenge the government to speed up its programme of Land Reform that is seeking to turn around what happened when certain racial groupings of the church in South Africa benefited unethically from the 1913 Land Act. Reconciliation requires that restitution be made to those who suffered under an evil system by the church herself. Restitution is perhaps the most human part of the reconciliation process, and restitution requires that we give up something, which



brings us to a better understanding of the suffering that apartheid caused to the majority. When the church as the community of God leads this process, it does so from a place of compassion.

## **2. Compassion**

In Exodus 33, Moses requests Yahweh to show his glory; that request was denied because no man can see God and live. Yet, God did reveal to Moses who He is as a loving and compassionate God. The church is thus called to reveal the character of God demonstrated through her acts of compassion and love. This, therefore, requires that a definition of compassion be explored and applied to the South African context. The church in South Africa can become what all other communities aspire to be: a loving, caring and compassionate community. Davies (2006:17) states that compassion calls for the radical decentring of self, and putting at risk, in the free re-enactment of the dispossessed condition of those who suffer. Compassion, I believe, begins with the recognition of the other as created in the image of God, and because of this understanding the self assumes the burden of the other. It is here Davies (2006:17) argues that in recognizing the veiled presence of God's image in the other that we come to understand our identity. Nouwen, McNiell and Morrison state that the word compassion means to "suffer with." Compassion requires one to enter into spaces where one identifies with the weak, vulnerable and powerless. Compassion means a full immersion in the condition of being human. Therefore, compassion is not simple pity, but finds its purest expression unfolding in the incarnation of God.

God's compassion becomes our compassion. This principle of self-denying or "kenotic love" (Davies 2006:21) touches all levels of human experience and tries to make social harmony a possibility. This radical manifestation calls then for reflection of personhood. Thus, the church as the alternative community seeks to see the image of God in all persons in society. This calls for a radical shift from theology to ministry. B. Stone (1996:43) elaborates that "ministry has a three-fold character: it is a response to grace, it is participation in grace, and it is an offer of grace." Through the ministry of the church, the work of restoration of the image of God in us is extended to the rest of the world. This calls for a very intentional entering into the suffering of the other and working on behalf of their liberation. The church as an alternative community reflects their knowing of God in

two ways, namely theologically and practically. I believe the latter is a stronger demonstration of our love for God. R. M. Brown (1984:69) states this very clearly,

This notion, is so strange to us that ‘knowing God’ is a matter of deed rather than word, that one could affirm God without saying God’s name or deny God while God’s name is on our lips is not so strange to the Bible.

This is seen most clearly in Matthew 25:31-46 that distinguishes between knowing God and knowing about God. James qualifies this even further by mocking those who claim to have faith but who fail to take care of the marginalized in society: “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder” (James 2:19). Mere knowledge about God cannot replace living faith which is also living a compassionate life.

Compassion is brought into focus by asking the question “What is it to be created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*)?” This “image” is given by God and is central to human dignity because the central theological issue in human dignity is the merciful, compassionate God. This understanding compels the church as an alternative community to be confrontive and transformative by speaking against institutional and economic barriers that keep people separated. The church in South Africa must assume the responsibility to see people as children of God, created in His image rather than being dictated to, and to see people through the socio-economic and political policies of the land. The church in South Africa must become a place where people who were once stripped of their humanity and dignity may find hope and restoration of that lost human dignity. The church becomes the prophetic voice that speaks out against poverty that forces people to live in situations of inferiority and bondage in relation to those to whom they remain dependent and enslaved.

Poverty is just the starting point of the attack on the image of God. The reality in South Africa is that poverty is overwhelmingly Black. Four hundred years of colonization and oppression have ravaged Blacks in our society. Being robbed of that element of freedom of movement and relationships has had considerable and crippling economic effects. The church is called to a ministry that balances itself between support and development. Development ministries equip and enable those who are poor to provide for themselves. B. Meyers (1999:14) noted that the church who

understands its true identity as children of God and who have recovered their true calling is a “faithful and productive” steward of the “gifts from God for the well-being of all.” T. Chester (2013:156) used Ezekiel 34 to affirm the need for development ministries in that God condemns the shepherds of Israel for not strengthening the weak. Chester’s point is that God does not rebuke the shepherds for failing to provide for the weak, but that they have not strengthened the weak.

The church bears the responsibility to the poor and oppressed. God’s community is called to defend the cause of the poor, the needy and those who have no social and economic power. The church works for the physical and social needs of people, not as though this was the primary needs or exclusive task, but as its testimony of a redeemed, holy and alternative society. In the end, when the church shows compassion, it demonstrates the heart of God and is concerned with sharing God’s love in words and deed.

Another aspect within the South African context that is an assault on the “image of God” and human dignity is racism. J. Grant (1992:49) writes:

Politically, racism disenfranchises; socially it ostracizes; culturally it degrades and robs the people of those characteristics that make them a people; religiously it brainwashes and indoctrinates so that the oppressed people believe not only that it is impossible for God to like them or for them to image God, but that God ordains racist oppression.

The church as an alternative society must speak out against these issues that blur the image of God in persons by creating a community of faith where these differences do not impede fellowship and love one for another. When the church is governed by this vision, the church will have adequate theological resources to resist the temptation to become accomplices in racial and socio-economic segregation (Volf, 1999:19). Thus, through the acts of compassion, the church becomes agents of reconciliation, where human flourishing takes place. St. Augustine *On the Trinity* writes, “God is the only source to be found any good thing, but especially by those which make a man good and those which will make him happy; only from him do they come into a man and attaches themselves to a man.” Human beings truly flourish in this alternative community, when love is demonstrated as God becomes the centre of our lives. A human

being ought to be loved, and the only way to properly love is to love people in God (Volf, 2011:58).

### 3. Love

Scripture calls us to love God and our neighbour (Mark 12:29-31), and God is love and loves unconditionally. The triune God provides a model for human love. The life and practice of the church in response to God's love are summarized adequately in Mark 12:29-31. Hence the term "living in love" is not something a community can achieve by their own efforts and in their own strength, but something that happens to them in faith and from God. This decisive element in this life of love is therefore always to allow ourselves to be loved by God. By being loved by God the church understands what it means to reflect the reality of God and to demonstrate the reality in all we do.

### Conclusion

When the church reverses her desire to conform to the world, and she more authentically lives out her *imago dei*, the action of the church is the movement that is not her own, but God's own being in love—and we truly love one another in actions.

The reason the church can make a difference in the world is because of Christ, who made the difference by becoming man and fulfilling the just requirements of God in reconciling humankind to God. This act of love, compassion and reconciliation demonstrated in the life of Christ, the head of the Church, leaves us an example to follow through empowerment by the Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth.

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