

## 5 AN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I am going to discuss three ecumenical<sup>1</sup> documents, the first of which stems from 1960. I am therefore making a marked jump in time from the end of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century. It is necessary to say something about this gap.

There are various reasons for this decision. In the Introduction I stated that I acknowledge the fragmentary character of my survey. Though fragmentary, it is however not completely arbitrary. I have chosen six pioneers to illustrate the foundations on which the South African church are built and have to be evaluated today. My choice of these ecumenical documents is meant to illustrate what happened to those foundations - in what way are they reflected in the present-day church; have they been utilised at all, or have they been neglected, forgotten or ignored? I am therefore attempting to draw the lines from the pioneers to the present time by analysing these documents. I have chosen the documents (Cottesloe, the Message to the People, Kairos) exactly because they are ecumenical, and furthermore because all three of them were formulated in times of existential crisis, when the South African church was forced to reflect very honestly and very thoroughly on its life and being in South African society. This explains my choice of documents. Something still needs to be said about the intervening years.

My discussion of the last pioneer, Nehemiah Tile, brought us to the end of the nineteenth century. Two events of very great importance for the future of South Africa took place towards the end of that century.

---

1 As I pointed out in chapter 1, I understand the term *ecumenical* to mean the striving for the organic, visible unity and renewal of the Christian churches. I view these documents as ecumenical because all three of them, in my opinion, were born out of this striving.

They were the two wars of independence fought between the Boers and the British. It was especially the second of these wars, that from 1899 to 1902, which was to have a lasting influence on South African history. I wish to point out especially two effects which had such a lasting influence. The first is the reinforcement of the antagonism between Boer and Brit in South Africa - an antagonism which played a very important role for decades, and is still alive in certain Afrikaans circles today. This antagonism had its roots in the period of the British occupation of the Cape Colony as well as in the resentment the Dutch-Afrikaans colonists felt towards British missionaries such as John Philip. As such it was directly responsible for a great amount of the mistrust and misunderstanding between the Afrikaans and so-called English churches. So, for example, much of the lack of ecumenical communication, for instance in the Christian Council (which was the precursor of the South African Council of Churches), can ultimately be traced back to feelings rooted in this war and in the suspicion between Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans. A second result of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 was the very close link between Afrikaans Reformed churches (especially the Dutch Reformed Church) and Afrikaner nationalism. The churches went to war with the Afrikaner people and identified fully with the nationalistic ideal of the Afrikaners.

The next important historical event of which we should take note is the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. This event clearly showed Black South Africans that they were going to be excluded from the political development of South Africa, for the racial policy decided upon was not the relatively 'enlightened' policy of the Cape Colony, but the more explicitly racist policy of Natal and the two Boer Republics of the Free State and the Transvaal. In this event we find one of the causes of the founding of the African National Congress in 1912. It is well known that church people played a very important role in the first years of the ANC. So, for example, I have already pointed out the link between the Ntsikana Memorial Association and the ANC. There also arose therefore a close link between African Christians and the expression of African nationalism - as in the case of the Afrikaners.<sup>2</sup>

---

2 This remark must not be understood as saying that Black Theology is simply the flip side of the coin of White Apartheid Theology, and that Black liberation will therefore simply mean White repression. There are clear differences in the basic approaches of

At this stage Black people were excluded from political as well as ecclesiastical power, so that the link with African nationalism could not be so clearly expressed in the 'mainline' established churches.

During the next two or three decades the established churches (both Afrikaans and English) existed very comfortably as basically White-dominated institutions. Although the membership was increasingly Black, the leadership was completely White, and the churches therefore operated according to a White agenda. During these years the churches became more and more 'Servants of power' (Cochrane 1987), 'trapped in apartheid' (Villa-Vicencio 1988). As a result especially of the great depression of the early thirties, the Afrikaans churches became increasingly involved in the social, economic and political sphere on behalf of the Afrikaner people, who felt themselves at that stage excluded from economic and political power. Themes such as White poverty, workers' rights, etc., were therefore increasingly addressed by the Afrikaans churches. Some of the resolutions of that time sound very revolutionary. So, for example, a DRC commission of the early 1940s reported:

City life is conditioned by capitalist exploitation. The powerful press, current public opinion, even social legislation, mostly side with capital; the labourer constantly has the worst of it. He needs a champion, a patron ... The church should be his father, his advocate; it should stand up for the rights of the oppressed; it should proclaim social justice ... the labourer is painfully aware of the obstacles put in his way by the establishment. He is no longer a human being; he is a digit, a cog in the big machine; his life, his views, his interests count for nothing; all that counts are his labour and his sweat. And then it appears to him as if law and order are always on the side of the propertied classes; he seeks in vain for justice and protection (quoted in Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1985:67).

The tragedy of course is that the labourer spoken of here is only the *Afrikaans* labourer, and the oppressor only the *English* oppressor. Yet the close identification between Afrikaans church and Afrikaans social, political and economic aspirations is quite clear. Afrikaner nationalism became therefore in this period a Christian nationalist ideology, with

---

these theologies (e.g. Black Theology is socialistic, White Theology capitalistic; Black Theology is liberatory, White Theology is more narrowly nationalistic, etc.). What I am saying is therefore that the Christian churches played an important (but not the same) role in the growth of political nationalism in South Africa.

close identification between faith and politics. This led in the 1940s and 1950s to a series of decisions in which the DRC requested the state to introduce apartheid legislation. So, for example, the Federal Missions Council of the DRC decided in 1950 that:

There exists an inevitable link between one's own residential area, one's own language, national characteristics ['volksaard'] and tradition on the one hand, and a sense of vocation or religious destiny on the other ... We are also children of the Covenant and possess our own confession of faith, and these things are implicated (or prejudiced) if our cultural heritage or racial purity is threatened (quoted in Shenk 1983:139).

Since 1948 the DRC could of course address their petitions to a sympathetic government, for in that year the (Afrikaner) Nationalist Party had assumed power explicitly on an apartheid platform. Although one has to point out again that apartheid had its roots in the colonial era and therefore existed long before the Nationalists came to power, it is true that they made it into a specific and ordered policy which they aimed to enforce through legislation. The growing corpus of apartheid legislation sparked increased Black resistance, while the English churches (with the exception of some remarkable individuals) mainly made ineffectual noises against apartheid. This growing Black resistance was channelled by the ANC and PAC into non-violent campaigns, which led eventually to the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960 which galvanised world opinion, also the worldwide Christian community, into a new awareness of what was happening in South Africa. This was indeed a crisis of conscience for all Christians, and the WCC called for a consultation of all its member churches in South Africa. At that stage the DRC synods of the Cape and Transvaal were still members of the WCC, as well as the synod of the smaller Nederduitsche Hervormde Kerk. This consultation, which was attended by a small number of WCC office bearers, took place at Cottesloe in December 1960.

Before we turn to an evaluation of the Cottesloe report, I want to say something about the African Independent Churches. Since their beginning with the Thembu Church of Nehemiah Tile, these churches grew rapidly. The established churches took very little note of them, except to warn people against them, as they were mainly considered to be syncretistic sects which were to a greater or a lesser degree enemies of the gospel. The government regarded them with great suspicion be-

cause of the absence of White control in these churches. Suspicion turned into violent confrontation at Bulhoek (near Queenstown) in 1921, when troops were sent to evict the followers of Enoch Mgijima from land which they were 'illegally' occupying. For the Independent church members (as for Africans generally) the issue of the ownership of land was of paramount importance (I have dwelt on this in detail in chapter 2). It is important to point out again that for the Africans ownership of land had specific religious overtones. We have here therefore a classic case of failure in communication between White and Black. Whereas the government saw the issue only in terms of a certain law which was being wilfully transgressed by rebellious Blacks, for the Independent church members it was intimately interwoven with their culture and faith. When the military forces moved in to evict Mgijima's followers, a massacre ensued in which more than a hundred Black people were killed. This incident deepened the mutual suspicion between Independent churches on the one hand and the established churches and the government on the other. It also confirmed the lack of understanding and communication between the established churches and the Independent churches. Despite the obstacles in their way, however, the Independent churches kept growing rapidly, not only numerically, but also in their theology and self-understanding (cf. Sundkler 1961). By 1960 there were more than 2 000 of these churches with millions of members. Yet they were still at that stage not recognised as partners in the theological debate in South Africa, so that very little about them was generally known.

That was the situation when the shootings at Sharpeville led to the coming together of the churches for the Cottesloe consultation.

## **5.2 COTTESLOE 1960**

I have already said something about the origins and background of the Cottesloe consultation above. Let me expand on that a bit. On 21 March 1960 a large group of Black people assembled around the police station at Sharpeville, one of the big Black townships on the Witwatersrand, near Vereeniging. This was the consequence of a defiance campaign organised by the PAC, and which was aimed specifically at a rejection of the pass system, in terms of which every adult Black person was required to carry a pass at all times. This crowd of Black

people had come to offer themselves for arrest, as they refused to bear passes. Inside the police station was a fairly small contingent of police. Accounts of how the shooting started, differ. What was established subsequently, though, was that more than sixty Black people were shot dead, mainly while they were running away from the police station. This event caused an immediate outcry overseas, while within South Africa a state of emergency was declared. The terrible consequences of South Africa's racial policies were brought very urgently to the world's attention, so that some reaction also by the worldwide Christian community became imperative. After long negotiations, the WCC convened a consultation of its member churches in South Africa to consider the whole situation. At that stage all the mainline English churches (apart from the Catholic Church) were members of the WCC, as well as the DRC synods of the Cape and Transvaal, and the Nederduitsche Hervormde Kerk (NHK). This consultation, the first of its kind in South Africa, took place at Cottesloe in Johannesburg.

The agenda for the consultation was set after long and serious negotiations between the South African churches and the WCC. The mistrust, especially between the Anglican Church and the DRC, caused great problems, and at times the consultation itself was in the balance. However, the obstacles were overcome and the consultation went ahead. The overarching theme of the agenda was the socio-political responsibility of the Christian churches in an apartheid society. The theme was addressed in various committees, and all the churches were asked to prepare memoranda beforehand for the consultation.

Durand (1961b:147-148) points out that mission was the pivotal issue at Cottesloe. More than any other ecclesiastical dimension, mission was *the* central dimension, especially because race problems find their focal point in the mission of the church. Cottesloe would therefore have far-reaching implications for mission. It would determine in what way and to what degree the church really exists as a *mission* church. In the light of this comment, it is necessary to ask what concept of mission operated at the consultation. In this respect, one of the committees defined mission thus:

The Missionary Church is the Church sent to proclaim that Christ is Lord of all life, and to do this to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. In this mission, the

Church in every land is in the front line of action; and resources from every member of the World Church should be available for the church in any land. The mission of the Church is exercised, not only through proclamation, but through its own life of fellowship, and through practical service. In this way, the Church will make known the Lordship of Christ in every realm of national, social and personal life (Hewson 1961:71).

This definition reflects the general definition of mission current in the ecumenical movement at that time, especially the influence of the great Dutch Missiologist Hoekendijk, as well as the influence of the Theology of the Apostolate (of which he was the most important proponent). The political mission of the church is seen in terms of social service and the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ. Unity in mission is implied, but not spelled out. There was really nothing revolutionary in Cottesloe's definition of the mission of the church. Neither was the definition contextual in today's terms; theologians were still operating with a concept of a 'universal theology'. Furthermore, this definition of mission should have been quite acceptable to Reformed (in other words mainly Afrikaans) Christians. To mention just one reason why it should have been quite acceptable: to say that the goal of mission is to 'proclaim that Christ is Lord of all life' is typically Reformed (Calvinist) language. It is hard to imagine therefore that the rejection of Cottesloe by the Afrikaans churches could have been caused by this definition of mission; the reason probably lay elsewhere.

With regard to the socio-political responsibility of the church, the final statement of the consultation read:

It [the Church] is called to minister to human need in whatever circumstances and forms it appears, and to insist that all be done with justice. In its social witness the Church must take cognisance of all attitudes, forces, policies and laws which affect the life of a people; but the Church must proclaim that the final criterion of all social and political action is the principles of Scripture regarding the realisation of all men of a life worthy of their God-given vocation (Hewson 1961:73-74).

According to this statement, Cottesloe preferred to see the political task (or mission) of the churches in terms of social service, and then especially as the responsibility to see to the application by government of overarching principles (such as love, justice, etc.). These principles are to be applied in the group context ('a people') - a formulation which reflects especially the group thinking of the Afrikaans churches,

rather than the thinking centred on the rights of the individual, which was more characteristic of the English (liberal) churches. In this regard it is interesting to note that Cottesloe singled out 'Black intelligentsia' as a special group which had to be addressed by the churches in their socio-political responsibility. This can probably be ascribed to the growing disillusionment among Black intelligentsia with regard to the church, especially because of its failure to stem the rising tide of apartheid. It may also have been inspired by the desire, which was articulated much more clearly twenty years later, of the ruling class to create and co-opt a Black middle class as an ally in its struggle to retain power. There was only one instance in which Cottesloe went further than simply articulating broad principles and made explicit political recommendations. That was in the recommendation of the joint statement that there could be no objection in principle to the direct representation of Coloureds in parliament, and to the granting of some political rights to urban Blacks (Hewson 1961:75-76). In the light of the great discussion, even upheaval just a few years previously, when the Coloured people were removed from the common voters' role, this can indeed be considered a bold and explicit political statement. As I have indicated earlier, though, it was the exception.

Cottesloe was an ecumenical consultation, in other words the striving of at least some South African churches for unity and renewal was an important incentive for the consultation. On reading the report, it does indeed seem as if Cottesloe had fruitful results as far as church unity is concerned. The report states:

... a reconciliation between estranged members of different Christian churches [took place]. We met for consultation in goodwill, with a mind to reach agreements for a greater good of the whole; we found that in these conditions we were led to break down barriers and reach a new understanding of each other, a new vision of the task to which God is calling us as Christians for our country and our people in our time. Having seen this take place, we affirm anew our faith in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life (Hewson 1961:58).

Addressing explicitly the issue of Christian unity across the colour line, the report stated:

No-one who believes in Jesus Christ may be excluded from any church on the grounds of his colour or race. The spiritual unity among all men who are in Christ must find visible expression in acts of common worship and witness, and in fellowship and consultation on matters of common concern (Hewson 1961:74).

This formulation places spiritual unity in the primary place and is vague and generalising about visible, organic unity. This was probably to be expected, as the exclusion of Blacks on the basis of their race was at that time still the general practice, especially (but not exclusively) in the Afrikaans Reformed churches.

The greater unity the report mentioned did not last very long. Indeed, Cottesloe eventually led to greater disunity and alienation among the South African churches (especially the Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking churches). The underlying disunity came to light in the separate statements issued by the DRC and the NHK after the Cottesloe decisions had been reported in the press. The consultation had decided that where a church feels bound to criticise another church or church leader, it should take the initiative in seeking prior consultation before making any public statement. Widespread disquiet in Afrikaans church circles, especially with those decisions regarding race relations, compelled the NHK to make public their rejection of these decisions (rejection which they had clearly expressed at the consultation), which again induced some DRC delegates also to explain their reasons for giving qualified support to these decisions. This caused alienation, not only from the English churches, but also between the two Afrikaans churches. The debate about who should be held responsible for this break in communication is fairly irrelevant. Very soon the South African Prime Minister, Dr Verwoerd, joined the debate and his clear rejection of Cottesloe signalled the end of any significant support for the decisions in Afrikaner circles (cf. Lückhoff 1978; Steenkamp 1987:470-497). It seems fair to conclude therefore that Cottesloe eventually did not succeed in bringing the major South African churches any closer together. Indeed, they drifted further apart, not so much because of theological differences (there was actually a great degree of theological concurrence at Cottesloe), but primarily because of socio-political factors. The one clear ray of hope which came out of Cottesloe was the birth of the ideal of a Christian council of South African churches - an ideal which was first mentioned, interestingly enough, in the memorandum of the Transvaal synod of the DRC (Lückhoff 1978:65). The tragedy is that when this council was eventually formed, no synod of the DRC saw its way open to joining it.

How does one evaluate Cottesloe then from the perspective of the *missio politica oecumenica*? What should certainly be clear already from what I have said so far is that the conclusions reached at the consultation were in no way revolutionary either theologically or politically. Indeed, if one considers the political context, most of its decisions would probably have seemed weak and vacillating to Black Christians. It is also necessary to point out that most of the conclusions were based on the memoranda of the two DRC synods - which probably explains the innate conservatism, but also makes the eventual DRC rejection of Cottesloe that much more difficult to understand. Yet Cottesloe was eventually completely rejected by the Afrikaans churches as prescribing revolutionary solutions to South African society under the undue influence of 'liberal foreigners' (the WCC delegation). How is that to be explained?

One of the reasons may be the reaction of the Afrikaners to the crisis caused by Sharpeville. In the face of sharp and damning criticism from the whole world community, the Afrikaners retreated into the laager. In such a situation there is no room for dissenters - as the church leaders represented at Cottesloe were portrayed. When the Prime Minister, Dr Verwoerd, added his implicit condemnation of Cottesloe by stating that Cottesloe did not represent the real voice of the Afrikaans churches, its doom was sealed. The synods of all the Afrikaans churches rejected Cottesloe and a process of vilification started against those members of the DRC delegation (like, for instance, Beyers Naudé) who refused to reject the decisions reached by the consultation. For a generation to come the ghost of Cottesloe was always raised as soon as a DRC member or theologian proposed any change which could in any way be termed vaguely 'political' (in the sense of critical of the status quo). The historical mistrust between Afrikaans and English churches was strengthened, and official ecumenical contacts petered out. The DRC was confirmed in its role as guardian of the apartheidstatus quo, and in the very crucial years which lay ahead, it would make no innovative contribution to the theological debate about the *missio politica oecumenica* of the church in South Africa. The English churches did not really fare much better. They seemed to be impotent in the face of determined resistance to change in the White community. The failure of Cottesloe seemed to

confirm the accusation that they made ineffective noises about the serious socio-political situation in South Africa, but did nothing concrete to bring about change. Another serious flaw in the English churches shown up by Cottesloe was the fact that although the membership of these churches was mainly Black, nearly all positions of leadership were still in White hands. These churches could therefore not serve as effective mouthpieces to voice the real concern of Blacks about the worsening situation in the country. The only real ray of hope to come out of Cottesloe was the formation of the Christian Institute under the directorship of Beyers Naudé. This Institute would bring together White and Black Christians, and initiate original and innovative theological debate about political alternatives for the country. (A detailed account of the history and contribution of the CI can be found in Walshe 1983.)

As a result of Cottesloe a reductionist view of mission among South African Christians was confirmed. Mission was basically the evangelisation of the unreached, and was therefore mainly something which White missionaries (subject) did to Black 'non-Christians' (object). Furthermore, mission was supposed to deal with 'spiritual' matters only - socio-political and economic matters had to be left to the politicians. In this regard one can say that the Andrew Murray tradition had triumphed over the legacy of John Philip and especially of Bishop Colenso. The Black Christian voice was still very much obscured at Cottesloe; the heritage of Ntsikana, Tile and Soga was often kept alive rather parallel to, even outside, the church structures, especially the mission church structures, although it was alive in some Independent churches. Great contemporary Black Christian leaders such as Prof. Z. K. Matthews and Chief Albert Luthuli were prophets not yet honoured in the White-dominated South African churches. They had to make use of educational, political and other channels to make their voices heard. As mission was supposed to deal with 'spiritual' matters only (as I stated above), their involvement was deemed to fall outside the ambit of the church.

Partly as a result of this view of mission, the South African churches were woefully unprepared to deal with the difficult problems which were to face them in the next two decades. One of the serious shortcomings, which was confirmed by Cottesloe, was the disunity

among South African churches. Even the careful steps in the direction of greater socio-political involvement by the whole Christian community, even the careful drawing together of Christians to face together the challenges of South Africa, were unacceptable to nearly all White Afrikaans Christians and to many White English-speaking Christians. Whatever value one gives to the decisions taken by the delegates, the final result of the consultation was therefore negative when viewed from the perspective of the political and ecumenical mission of the church.

### 5.3 THE MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE, 1968

After Sharpeville, Black resistance to the apartheid system grew, and as the resistance grew, so did government measures to suppress it. South Africa began living under strict security legislation, especially detention without trial. Apart from the thousands of people who were detained for shorter or longer periods, the most prominent leaders of the liberation movements who were still in the country were arrested and brought to trial in 1963 (the so-called Rivonia trial). Most of them received life sentences. As both the ANC and the PAC had been banned already in 1960, the liberation movements were increasingly driven underground and also started a campaign of armed resistance against the state. At the same time the government introduced further apartheid legislation to implement their blueprint. Apartheid was therefore forced onto the Black population by way of these new apartheid laws as well as through the strict security legislation. Alienation between Black and White, also between Black and White Christians, therefore increased. It is against this background that the Message to the People is to be evaluated.

I referred above to the founding of the Christian Institute (CI) as a result of Cottesloe. In 1968 the Christian Council of South Africa changed its name to the South African Council of Churches (SACC). These two organisations were to be instrumental in drawing up the Message. The Message had its roots in the Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966. Both Beyers Naudé (director of the CI) and Bill Burnett (secretary of the SACC) attended this conference. When they returned to South Africa, they organised regional conferences all over the country to consider the meaning of Geneva for

South Africa. As a result, a National Consultation on Church and Society was held in Johannesburg in February 1968. Here it was decided to appoint an ecumenical committee 'to provide a systematically formulated and theological critique of apartheid that would be irrefutable on biblical grounds. The Christian Institute co-operated with the Theological Commission of the South African Council of Churches ... in formulating "A Message to the People of South Africa"' (Balia 1988:51-52).

One of the important theological concepts utilised by the Message is that of reconciliation. In summing up and commenting on the Message, the drafters stated that 'for Christians the target must be reconciliation' (De Gruchy & De Villiers 1968:16). It seems therefore as if the drafters of the Message were of the opinion that the political problem of separation and injustice could be overcome by a Christian ideal of reconciliation. It must be said, though, that the Message did not have in mind reconciliation at any price. It stated clearly that this reconciliation 'must find social expression in justice' (De Gruchy & De Villiers 1968:17). How this must take place, though, and the problems inherent in calling for reconciliation in the divisive and unequal South African society, was not addressed (I will return to this problem in more detail when I discuss the Kairos Document). It seems indeed as if the Message also still operates with the idea that the socio-political dimension of the mission of the church existed in laying out a set of general ethical principles, and that it was up to the politicians to decide how these were to be practically implemented. The Message did get to grips more clearly than Cottesloe with practical political programmes, though. One of the drafters, Bishop Burnett, stated that the clear aim of the Message was to plan for the future 'on a basis of responsible, orderly and increased integration' - a clear practical political ideal (in De Gruchy & De Villiers 1968:19). How this was to be done, and how this related to the mission of the church, was however not addressed. The main impression left by the Message was thus again that of a general statement of opposition with very little emphasis on practical consequences and implications. I do not wish to give an overwhelmingly negative impression about the Message though. Clearly it was the product of privileged, mainly White theologians who did not as yet understand 'the Gospel as a call for the underprivileged and poor to take

their futures into their own hands ... Nevertheless the Message did delineate the social challenge to Christians at the basic level of Gospel insights' (Walshe 1983:62). I therefore agree with Walshe (*ibid.*) that the Message represents the first faint stirrings of a South African political and even liberatory theology. In this respect the Message was of great importance as it aided the process of conscientisation among a minority of Whites and some Blacks, and therefore laid foundations on which they could build and develop their theology in the turbulent years ahead.

The subject of the unity of the church was also discussed in the Message. As could be expected in the governing socio-political climate of that time, unity was treated especially in the context of racial separation keeping Christians apart. So, for example, it was stated that

... one of the signs that this [the new life in Christ] has happened is that we love the brethren. But, according to the Christian Gospel, our 'brethren' are not merely the members of our own race-group, nor are they the people with whom we may choose to associate. Our brother is the person whom God gives to us. To dissociate from our brother on the grounds of natural distinction is to despise God's gift and to reject Christ (in Thomas 1979:110).

That the search for unity is actually a dimension of our Christian mission was clearly not yet realised. The Message *did* clearly link our accepting Christ to our unity with our fellow believers, though - an insight which is quite revolutionary in a society where churches divided along racial lines were not only the norm, but where racial discrimination was actually theologically justified.

It seems clear to me that on specific points the Message went further than Cottesloe. It was, of course, a bit easier for the drafters of the Message, as they were articulating the views of a more homogeneous group than Cottesloe. The deeper implications of the Message for the structuring of South African society did not go unnoticed. There was quite a great reaction in the press and on the radio (TV did not yet exist in South Africa). Perhaps the clearest indication that people recognised some of the political implications of the Message can be deduced from the reaction of the South African Prime Minister at the time, Mr John Vorster. As Thomas (1979:9) describes it:

In a speech he [Mr Vorster] issued a stern warning to clerics who wanted 'to do the kind of thing here in South Africa that Martin Luther King did in America ... to cut it out, cut it out I tell you ... for the cloak you carry will not protect you if you try to do this in South Africa'.

Even though one can perhaps characterise the socio-political dimensions of the Message as hesitant and not clear, it was certainly a step forward if one has to judge by this kind of reaction. I want to identify at least two areas in which I think the Message was indeed a step forward on previous attempts. Firstly, I want to point out that the Message described apartheid as a 'false offer of salvation'. This implies that apartheid is a religious heresy. Fourteen years before the WARC assembly at Ottawa did it, therefore, the Message already identified apartheid not simply as a political policy gone wrong, but as essentially a heresy. Secondly, I consider it a step forward and an important political statement that the Message was addressed not to the churches or to the government, but to the *people* of South Africa. Although one can argue that it was still primarily the *White* people that the drafters had in mind, the Message still differs from previous ecclesiastical statements in this regard. Addressing the document to the *people*, does, in my mind, recognise an important political principle, one that would be much more explicitly addressed by Kairos.

Eventually one has to say that the Message was still essentially a White initiative, but, as I have pointed out above, it did have a better grasp of the issues at stake. A direct consequence of the Message, which was indeed to have important practical and theoretical consequences for South African Christians, was the fact that the Message led to the initiation of the Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society (Sprocas), 'a determined if still White-orchestrated effort to describe the South African situation in depth, analyse it and offer alternative policies to apartheid' (Walshe 1983:62 - cf. also Randall 1985:165-166). Sprocas resulted in the publication of more than twenty substantial reports and other books, various other papers, dossiers and study aids. As the programme developed, it also reflected more and more the concerns of Black Christians. In this respect it had a strong influence in turning the CI towards a stronger political praxis, and was also influential in the growth of Black Consciousness, both in the churches and in society at large. (The full story of Sprocas can be found in

Randall 1973: *A taste of power: the final Sprocas report.*) With the development of Sprocas, South African Christians achieved a much better integration of the political and ecumenical dimensions into their concepts of mission, although few people would probably have formulated it explicitly in mission terms. Still, these positive consequences of the Message for the *missio politica oecumenica* in South Africa have to be acknowledged. The greatest negative factor at this stage was probably the fact that this new awareness and praxis was limited to a small number of Black and White Christians. White Christians in general (Afrikaans as well as English-speaking) were living their lives of comfort and privilege and tended to view theologians and church leaders who articulated these views as troublesome 'political priests'. Black Christians were struggling because of disrupted organisations, and had not yet found their voice in organs such as the SACC - although especially young Black Christians were beginning to articulate their faith in organisations such as the University Christian Movement (UCM), the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), and through Black Theology. The inheritors of the Black pioneers had therefore not yet assumed their rightful place in the South African church. Even when all these factors are taken into account, the Message to the People must in my view still be regarded as a faint ray of hope for the future development of the political and ecumenical mission of the South African church.

#### 5.4 THE KAIROS DOCUMENT, 1985

The years between 1968 and 1985 were turbulent and eventful. The first event to create a crisis for the South African churches was the institution of the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) by the WCC in 1969. The first grants to organisations fighting racism were made in 1970. South African liberation movements (such as the ANC and the PAC) also received grants from the special fund. This created a great outcry in South Africa, especially in the White media. It was suggested that the church had now decided to support violence and 'terrorism' and the South African member churches of the WCC were pressed to explain their point of view in relation to this matter. Even the Prime Minister (Mr Vorster) entered the debate, basically suggesting that the South African churches should resign from the WCC in protest. The churches found themselves in a very difficult position, as most of their

White members basically agreed with at least some of the vituperation heaped upon the WCC. On the other hand their Black members still could not make themselves heard in the power structures of the churches, although it would seem as if they generally supported the PCR grants. Eventually the South African member churches decided to withhold their financial contributions to the WCC temporarily. This event placed the political stance of the churches, especially their stance in relation to violence and conscientious objection, firmly on the agenda. Decisions about political matters, especially the liberation struggle in South Africa, were no longer innocuous theoretical questions, but were very immediate practical matters, matters of rands and cents, of flesh and blood - as many of the Black South African Christians had relatives in the liberation movements. The whole question about the socio-political dimension of the mission of the church therefore presented itself with great urgency.

It was developments within Black South Africa in particular, though, which were to influence events decisively. Black youth, especially Black university students, took the lead in these events. In 1969 an all-Black students' organisation was formed, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) under the leadership of Steve Biko and several other prominent Black youth leaders. Together with the University Christian Movement (UCM) it was responsible for the development of Black Consciousness which was destined to play a leading role in Black resistance to White power during the seventies. One of South Africa's leading Black Theologians, Allan Boesak, has defined Black Consciousness thus:

*Black Consciousness* may be described as the awareness of black people that their humanity is constituted by their blackness. It means that black people are no longer ashamed that they are black, that they have a black history and a black culture distinct from the history and culture of white people. It means that blacks are determined to be judged no longer by, and to adhere no longer to white values. It is an attitude, a way of life. Viewed thus, Black Consciousness is an integral part of Black Power. But *Black Power* is also a clear critique of and a force for fundamental change in systems and patterns in society which oppress or which give rise to the oppression of black people. *Black Theology* is the reflection of black Christians on the situation in which they live and on their struggle for liberation (in De Gruchy 1986: 153).

I have used this fairly lengthy quotation in full because it so clearly illustrates why the development of Black Consciousness has everything to do with the mission of the church (understood as humanisation), and also because it spells out clearly the link between Black Consciousness and Black Theology. Black Consciousness served as a powerful impulse for the rise of a new Black self-assurance which inspired fundamental resistance to the apartheid state. It was quite clear that the government would not allow such a powerful and effective protest movement to go unchallenged. Several of the student leaders of SASO were therefore detained or placed under house arrest. Yet the Black universities in particular, which were created to further the government policy of apartheid, remained the focus of resistance to the system.

The resistance eventually spilled over also into Black schools. The standard of Black education had always been woefully low when compared to White education, and this had for a long time been a source of grievance in the Black community. The immediate cause of the unrest at the schools in the mid-seventies was, however, the decision of the government that Black students had to take certain subjects through the medium of Afrikaans. Apart from the psychological resistance to Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor, many teachers were not capable of presenting their subjects in Afrikaans. This served ultimately as the spark in the tinderbox of many other grievances, and on 16 June 1976 Soweto erupted in protest. According to student spokespersons, the protest started out as a non-violent march. However, the students were soon confronted by the police, who started shooting. As a result several students were killed. The students from their side retaliated and set fire to schools, beer-halls, actually to anything which could be regarded as symbolic of White power. The riots soon spread to other parts of South Africa, and for some weeks it seemed as if the country was sliding into chaos. Through the use of violent means, the security forces succeeded in restoring a semblance of 'order', though, and South Africa returned to an uneasy calm. Many young Blacks left the country to join the liberation movements in exile, while those who chose to remain behind organised themselves into various youth organisations to resist apartheid.

As these and other already existing organisations grew in popularity and effectiveness, the government was forced to act against them. A number of their leaders were therefore detained, among them the charismatic and influential Steve Biko. As a result of a series of bizarre 'accidents' and 'suicides' some of them died in detention. One of them was Biko. Although all kinds of tricks were employed to cover up the responsibility of the security police for his death, it soon became apparent that Biko had died as a result of torture and the refusal of adequate medical treatment. A spasm of revulsion shook the country when this became known, especially when the then Minister of Police said that Biko's death 'left him cold'. Stronger measures were obviously necessary to bring the unrest under control, and so in October 1977 seventeen organisations were banned (among them the CI and SASO) and a number of anti-apartheid activists were either detained or placed under house arrest. Again the government succeeded in restoring some semblance of 'control' over the situation, but it was like screwing down the lid on a boiling pot - the pressure was guaranteed to rise.

At the beginning of the eighties, the government unveiled its 'reform' programme. The centrepiece of this programme was a tricameral parliament with limited representation for Coloureds and Indians in their own separate chambers of parliament. Black Africans were left out in the cold - they would have to be satisfied with their ineffective 'urban councils' and the homelands. In 1983 the government received a 'yes' vote of 66 per cent from the White electorate in a referendum (the feeling of the Coloureds and Indians was not tested). Black leaders warned that the imposition of these sham 'reforms' would lead to strong Black opposition, and indeed the mass-based United Democratic Front (UDF) was launched as main internal organ of resistance to the government. The government went ahead, though, and introduced the tricameral parliament in 1984. As was predicted, Black resistance erupted, centring on the townships in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging (PWV) area. The government countered with a limited state of emergency in 1985. Amidst the brutalities and repression taking place nearly every day, a group of pastors and theologians in Soweto came together to reflect on the Christian ministry in such a situation. Through a process of discussion and consultation

with an ever widening group of Christians (both Black and White) a document took shape which was issued on 25 September 1985 as the *Kairos Document*. It elicited overwhelming reaction both inside and outside South Africa as a timely word of prophecy in the contemporary situation. It was of course also condemned by government and conservative Christians as a call to violence and labelled a Marxist, not a Christian document. In the light of the overwhelming reaction, and as a response to the worsening security situation in the country, the group of drafters and signatories (by now called the Kairos theologians) revised the document and published a second edition in September 1986. It is this second edition which I will discuss in this section. Before turning to the document itself, I consider it necessary to point out again the absolute situation of crisis in which it was conceived. It was born in a South Africa torn apart by violence and brutality, under a state of emergency, which made the dissemination of reliable information nearly impossible, with White soldiers in Black townships basically fighting a low-intensity civil war. Without taking into account this tumultuous background, Kairos cannot be properly evaluated.

Kairos basically consists of a critique of what it calls 'state theology' and 'church theology', and a chapter on a proposed prophetic theology for South Africa. In the section on state theology one comes across some of the arguments which have been used before by South African as well as foreign theologians to expose apartheid as a heresy. In at least two instances, though, Kairos goes further than other statements. In the first place it identifies the god of the South African state as an idol. After analysing the theological statement about God in the preamble to the South African constitution, Kairos concludes,

This god is an idol. It is as mischievous, sinister and evil as any of the idols that the prophets of Israel had to contend with. Here we have a god who is historically on the side of the white settlers, who dispossesses black people of their land and who gives the major part of the land to his 'chosen people' (Kairos Document 1986:8).

This can be seen primarily as a theological statement, but it has a very important political dimension, for it is basically their worship of this god which enables the South African government to maintain an inhuman and oppressive political system. This statement therefore also serves to point out to what extent apartheid politics and apartheid theology are intertwined - they are servants of the same false god.

The second instance where Kairos goes further than earlier documents is in identifying the South African regime as tyrannical because it is an enemy to the common good of the populace. Because it is tyrannical, the regime is therefore illegitimate (Kairos Document 1986:22-24). It seems to me that Miguez Bonino is correct therefore in stating that Kairos goes further than most 'critical' and 'political' theologies of the West. It does so exactly because it is willing to assume an explicit political (ideological) commitment. Previous (Western) documents have been willing to criticise apartheid quite sharply, even to the extent of calling it a heresy,

But then they seem to think that a political decision belongs to another discipline, possibly that of 'political ethics'. The implication of our Document is that such distinction is questionable both from a theological and from a pastoral point of view. Theologically, it seems to introduce between faith and obedience a wedge hardly justifiable in biblical terms. Pastorally, it leaves the 'believer' in the air, an easy prey to despair, indifference or passivity (Miguez Bonino in WCC-PCR 1985:56).

Although Kairos did not address the theme of unity explicitly, a strong witness to unity in Christ underlies the whole document. It is the unity of those who struggle in the name of the new person, Jesus of Nazareth, for the full humanity of all. It is at the same time a witness to international Christian unity by stressing and calling for the 'catholic solidarity of the church' (Green 1986:55). It is for this reason that one can say that Kairos confirms that one can no longer converse about the unity of Christians without engaging the struggle for human community worldwide (Hoedemaker in WCC-PCR 1985:52). To say the same thing from the perspective of division rather than unity, Briggs (in Logan 1988:84) pointed out that 'the church in South Africa is divided today because there are diverse and opposing communities of practice within it'. Unity can therefore only be restored if there is a unity of praxis, which, according to Kairos, must be a praxis of justice and liberation.

It is interesting and illuminating to note how the Kairos theologians themselves commented on the missionary dimension of the document. In the preface to the second edition they say:

The document also had a mission dimension. Many of those who had abandoned the Church as an irrelevant institution that supports, justifies and legitimizes this cruel apartheid system began to feel that if the Church becomes the Church as ex-

pounded by the Kairos document then they would go back to the Church again. Even those who would consider themselves to be 'non-Christians' in the conventional sense began to say that if this is Christianity they could become Christians (Kairos Document 1986:ii).

What immediately strikes one is that the Kairos theologians are working here with a reductionist view of mission - mission understood only as evangelisation, mission as understood by Murray and Cottesloe. From my definition of mission, and what I have said so far about Kairos, it will be clear that I think that the Kairos theologians are either far too modest here, or they are operating with a definition of mission determined by the entanglement of mission and colonialism. Kairos has a much deeper missionary dimension. In its call for humanisation and liberation, in its witness to the unity of Christians, Kairos is addressing a serious missionary challenge to the churches in South Africa. Torrance (1986:42) puts it well when he says:

The document is significant in that it is an attempt to speak a *theological* word in the name of the Gospel - in the belief that it is God's concern to give to all their humanity in Christ. We have too often divorced evangelisation from humanisation.

Although the remark in the Preface to the 1986 edition seems to confirm this divorce, this is not what Kairos is actually saying, and this is also not how Kairos was understood, especially by young Black people. Their enthusiastic response reflects the fact that for them Kairos brought together the Good News as both evangelisation and humanisation. When seen in this wider dimension, I would indeed agree that Kairos has a strong evangelistic appeal. This is so because Kairos calls its readers to 'a conversion which is demanded by the serious socio-political situation in South Africa'. This call to conversion is directed at the *church*, because 'the responses of the church thus far have been totally inadequate'. This call can be compared to the call by the Old Testament prophets for the ongoing conversion of the people of God. 'This call for the conversion of the *church* is of utmost missiological significance, since the conversion of "outsiders" to Christian faith is severely obstructed by an unconverted and compromised church' (Kritzinger 1988b:137).

To conclude, then: Kairos must not only be understood against the background of the protests spreading from the Vaal Triangle, worsening race relations and the states of emergency. Kairos must also be un-

derstood against the background of the total failure of the South African churches, *especially* the so-called 'multi-racial' churches, to understand and accommodate Black aspirations to justice and liberty. In the words of Walshe (1983:88), the seventies made obvious

... the weakness of past Christian witness against injustice within church structures, and the churches' all too obvious unwillingness to confront the state on matters of public policy. There had been no serious efforts by the multi-racial churches to overcome the ethnic divisions of parish life, and their repeated declarations of principle [such as Cottesloe and the Message to the People] were now seen by black activists to be pathetically ineffective.

Kairos can therefore be regarded as the clearest and most forceful statement yet on the *missio politica oecumenica* of the church to come out of South Africa. It is the clearest reflection yet of the voice of Black South African Christians, addressing the issues on *their* agenda. In this regard a very important, unique aspect of Kairos has to be noted. This is the fact that for the first time members of African Independent Churches co-operated in the drawing up of an ecumenical theological statement in South Africa. The descendants of Nehemiah Tile were beginning to take their rightful place in the South African Christian community. Perhaps their voice is still very muted - yet it is there. For all these reasons Kairos is a completely contextual message, born out of the anguish of the birthpangs of a new, just and free society in South Africa, a society in which (hopefully) people would have the liberty to become what they were meant to be in Christ. But exactly because it is so specifically contextual, it is also thoroughly ecumenical - meant to address the whole body of Christ in the world. In order for Kairos not to fall victim to ideological captivity, it must be open to hear the response of Christian sisters and brothers worldwide. It is only if such an honest and open interaction takes place that the full meaning of Kairos for the mission and the unity of the church of Jesus Christ in South Africa will become clear.

With the Kairos Document, Christian history in South Africa can be said to have come full circle since the time of its introduction in the era of colonialism. For in its rejection of the god of State Theology, a god who legitimises oppressive power, in Green's words (1986:52) the god who is 'a cosmic projection of colonial will, the deification of White settler power', it finally rejects the entanglement between mission and colonialism in South Africa.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

The aim of my historical approach was to see what kind of foundations some Christian pioneers laid, and in what way the South African church made use of those foundations. Having completed the historical part, I therefore now wish to draw a few conclusions.

All three White pioneers worked within the framework of the Constantinian dispensation in the relationship between church and state, specifically as it was expressed in the entanglement between mission and colonialism. Murray, being born in South Africa, was of course not a colonial missionary in precisely the same sense as Philip and Colenso. Still, as I tried to point out, he basically held the Constantinian position. He therefore claimed neutrality in political matters and wanted all energy to be directed at evangelisation. Yet, as I pointed out, his ministry was intensely political and supportive of the status quo (the consolidation of White dominance, albeit in the form of a British authority). As I pointed out, Murray's pietism helped open the way for Afrikaner civil religion and eventually the policy of apartheid. Murray's *missio politica oecumenica* (although he would not have called it that) was therefore expressed in a closed ideology which, despite its emphasis on evangelisation and salvation, for many resulted not in humanisation, but oppression.

Philip accepted fully the presuppositions of the British colonial missionary enterprise, and although he criticised parts of it later on, his critique never went to the root cause: the inherent relationship between colonialism, capitalism and racism. Indeed, as I pointed out, Philip was a supporter of Adam Smith and regarded positively the missionary influence in promoting capitalism. In his criticism of the growing racism in the Cape Colony, Philip irritated both the colonial authorities as well as the Dutch-Afrikaans and English colonists. In today's terms, Philip would probably have been regarded as a troublesome 'political priest' and his actions might have called down upon him a warning like that of Prime Minister Vorster to the compilers of the Message to the People. As far as the *missio politica oecumenica* is concerned, I therefore came to an ambivalent conclusion about Philip. His struggle for racial justice was based on philanthropy rather than on a desire for humanisation. This was probably because he did not (did not want to?) realise the dehumanising nature of colonialism.

In his early days in Natal, Bishop Colenso also acted according to the presuppositions of British colonialism. In becoming more estranged from the White colonists, while at the same time discovering more fully the reality of the lives and culture of the Zulu, Colenso became increasingly aware of the harsh realities of colonial life for Black South Africans. He seemed to have concluded that the Zulu would never reattain their full humanity under colonial domination. Although he nowhere articulated a *missio politica oecumenica*, Colenso's life, his sermons and his writings point the way to a liberating, humanising Christian mission. His is therefore a tradition which can fruitfully be reclaimed and reinterpreted by South African Christians.

Ntsikana is unique, both in the history of how he became a Christian and in his ministry. Coming directly from the African Traditional Religion of his people, he simply assumed the same holism also for the Christian religion. It seems never to have occurred to him, therefore, to separate his new faith from either his culture or his politics. Obviously Ntsikana was not an infallible saint, yet it seems to me that the time has come to reclaim Ntsikana's tradition for the whole South African church, especially in its implications for the relationship with Traditional African Religion and a Christianity which was largely untouched by the colonial missionary tradition. As the credibility of Christian mission is often in doubt among Black South Africans, a redefinition of mission as *missio politica oecumenica* in the tradition of Ntsikana may be a fruitful approach.

Tiyo Soga and Nehemiah Tile can be regarded as complementary in their missionary contribution. To my mind, both contributed in a foundational manner towards the origin and growth of what later became known as Black Consciousness, which was to play an important role in African nationalism and Black politics. Their understanding of the *missio politica oecumenica*, which can be gathered from their actions rather than from their words, apparently was that political involvement was a natural and central dimension of their mission, although they chose to exercise their mission in different ecclesiological contexts. Their approach has never really been forgotten in South Africa, but it has been repressed and marginalised by White control over the mission churches (Soga) and by the disdainful ignorance of the African Independent Churches by those same mission churches. As Black

Christians articulate their own position more and more (e.g. in the Kairos Document), the continuities with early Black Christian pioneers become clearer and clearer.

The last remark brings me to the goal of this paragraph: to find out in what way the South African Christian community has developed the historical foundations. At Cottesloe, I said above, it was basically still the White tradition which was reflected, and from within that tradition it was specifically the tradition of Murray and Philip that was dominant. Mission was largely to be understood as evangelisation, and the 'political' protest which was heard was in the liberal English tradition of Philip. Mostly it addressed symptoms, while the structural causes (dispossession of land, capitalism, etc.) were not dealt with. Although Cottesloe therefore might have (and indeed did) sound revolutionary to some White South Africans, it fell far short of addressing the real issues Black South Africans were concerned about. Cottesloe was the most representative ecumenical gathering (in terms of the official participation by churches) to have taken place up till that time, but because of its bias in favour of White concerns, cannot serve as a model for our *missio politica oecumenica* in South Africa today. A few prophets such as Beyers Naudé (I am limiting myself only to the White community here), realised it and attempted to find a way outside the church structures.

The *Message to the People* was still dominated by White theological thinking, and was basically still in the (typically Reformed and Lutheran) confessional mould. Still, as I pointed out above, it did contain in my opinion some seeds of a liberatory approach. This means that it did transcend the former liberal approach here and there and was moving more in the direction of a radical prophetic approach. I consider the Message to stand more in Colenso's tradition therefore - although obviously I am not claiming that the compilers were consciously making use of Colenso's theology. The political and ecumenical concerns of Black South African Christians were heard only in mediated form, in other words, as they were articulated by White theologians and ministers. As late as 1968, therefore, more than a century after the first Black South African had been ordained a minister, the spiritual descendants of Ntsikana, Soga and Tile were not allowed a direct voice in the councils of the church in South Africa. Per-

haps it is for this reason that the Message, despite its liberatory seeds, did not make a lasting impact.

As I have already stated, with the Kairos Document the South African church can be said to have come full circle. At last the strictures of the colonial past were broken. Kairos reflects the influence of the theology of the Black pioneers, as well as the concern for humanisation, freedom and justice reflected in the mission theology of Colenso. I wish to emphasise again that I am not claiming that the compilers of Kairos *consciously* set out to develop a document reflecting the theology of Ntsikana, Soga, Tile and Colenso. What I *am* saying, is that there are certain similarities in the political and ecumenical concerns of the early pioneers mentioned, and those of Kairos.

If I claim that in the latest ecumenical documents especially the thinking of the Black pioneers and Colenso is reflected, I do not imply that the influence of Murray and Philip can be ignored. There are still many White Christians in South Africa, especially in the English-speaking churches, who share Philip's liberal Christian ideals. Andrew Murray is the spiritual father of many Christians in South Africa, both Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking, both Black and White. In line with Murray's pietism, they are fervent supporters of mission, especially mission understood as evangelisation. Mostly they claim to be apolitical, thus tacitly supporting the status quo. The thinking of all the Christian pioneers I studied is therefore reflected in the *missio politica oecumenica* of the church in South Africa. The trend in the important ecumenical documents I studied, though, seems to be more in line with the thinking of Soga, Tile, Ntsikana and Colenso.