

Language as a Dividing Factor amongst the Reformed Churches in South Africa: A Case Study of the Soutpansberg Synod¹

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ABSTRACT

One of the pressing issues in present-day South Africa is reconciliation and unification of South Africans across the divides along racial lines that were created during apartheid. Although apartheid was abolished more than twenty years ago, ethnic divisions are still evident in many corners of our country. The recent uprisings and demonstrations by Venda and Tsonga people, who demanded a new municipality to replace the Thulamela municipality, is testimony amongst other things to the fact that no matter how people may try to evade it, tribalism is still at work in the minds of some people. It is even more disturbing to observe that it is alongside these divisions that the church wants to witness to the world. A case study of the Soutpansberg Synod, in which the interactions between the Venda and Tsonga people were observable, will be the focus of this study. However, it is important not to isolate the church from the area in which it becomes a light, and so a brief look at the area in which the church is operating will be helpful in providing the context of this study.

Introduction

On 20 February 2015 the radio talk show “Africa wa vulavula” (meaning “Africa Speaks”), broadcast by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) between 12:00 and 13:00, was devoted to the topic of how certain languages dominate or undermine others in South Africa. One of the guest speakers was Mr Mushwana Arnold, lecturer in Xitsonga and Research Supervision at the University of Venda, who confirmed that in South Africa certain languages are indeed being undermined by others. He reminded listeners of the popular

1 This article is a reworking of a paper delivered at the Church History Society of Southern Africa conference held on 13 and 14 August 2015 at North-West University.

Radio Munghana Lonene advertisement derived from the Parliamentary debates following President Zuma's delivery of the State of the Nation address earlier in the year. The advertisement made reference to an incident in which a Xitsonga speaker asked the Speaker to point at him (in other words, to recognise him) so that he could offer assistance during the debacle that resulted in members of the Economic Freedom Fighters being removed from the National Assembly. The speaker was a certain Mr Mtileni from Malamulele, who asked: "*Manana speaker ndzi languteni ndzi ta mi pfuna*", meaning "Madam Speaker, look (point) at me so that I may help". This generated some discussion on social media platforms, as people were asking what language was being spoken. Although this incident is generally regarded as a joke, it highlights the fact that certain languages, like Xitsonga, continue to be marginalised in this country. This led me to reflect on the role of the church, particularly the Reformed Church in Limpopo, in perpetuating language disparity between Venda and Tsonga.

John Calvin, recognised as the founder of the Reformed Church, was an advocate of the use of the vernacular, believing that the use of local languages in churches would help to foster unity. His quest for church unity could not be limited even by the boundaries that can be created by language – in fact, he was said to have been willing to cross ten seas for the sake of unity.²

As a minister of the Reformed Church, I remember feeling uncomfortable about the way in which language was used to deepen the rift between the Xitsonga-speaking and Tshivenda-speaking churches in the Soutpansberg Synod. For example, until 2008 the minutes of this synod were available only in Tshivenda,³ with no translation into any of the other languages spoken by members of the synod. These members were therefore expected to read and consider decisions without being able to participate fully in decisions that affected their spiritual life.

Members felt that language was being used to promote the interests of certain groupings, while others were prevented by language constraints from arguing or putting forward their views. As a result, the Xitsonga-speaking delegates lost interest in attending meetings. The Synod appeared to acknowledge this, stating: "*Arali zwo itea uri hu dzieliwe lun'we luambo fhasi ro vha ro khakha.*" The last phrase, *ro vha ro khakha* (meaning "we were wrong") is an admission by the Synod that they had not been correct in their actions. Introspection and correcting the wrongs of the past are commendable, but if the wrong has affected someone else, it is important to also acknowledge this to the affected party – this is why

2 J.H. Van Wyk, "To Cross Ten Seas: Calvin on the Unity of the Church – A Contribution to a More Responsible Ecclesiology", *Die Skriflig* 44, no. 2 (2010), 301–316.

3 M.E. Baloyi, "Church Unity and Justice in the Gereformeerde Kerke in South Africa: Perspectives from the Soutpansberg Synod between 2003 and 2008", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* xxxvii, no. 1 (May 2011), 7.

Baloyi⁴ insisted that the admission should have been made to those affected by the action. This constitutes sufficient basis to argue that the problem of one language dominating others is a reality within the Reformed churches within the Soutpansberg Synod in the province of Limpopo.

Problem Statement, and Relevance and Focus of the Study

South Africa today is characterised by language and ethnic diversity that appears to fuel hatred and condescension, not only in the secular world, but also in some churches. However, the disunity within the Reformed Church Soutpansberg Synod is at odds with Reformed theology, which supports the use of the vernacular so as to accommodate local people.

Steyn and Masango⁵ agree with Gerkins⁶ in stating that if practical theology is to become more than just praxis, pastors and pastoral caregivers must meet people at the level of their own experience and problems. Browning⁷ adds that peoples' actual problems and concerns should form the basis of practical theological methodologies. However, theology has been widely criticised for not dealing with issues that affect people in their immediate contemporary situation. Dreyer and Van der Ven⁸ are of the view that suffering is a theological issue that creates both tensions and solidarity, and Cone⁹ argues that theology that does not help people overcome the difficulties they experience is irrelevant. Tshaka and Makofane¹⁰ in fact claim that such a theology should cease to exist. It is for this reason that I would like to state that practical theology cannot continue to turn a blind eye in a context like this. Any form of discrimination, or domination and subjugation of one person or group by another is a serious concern for practical theology. It is therefore my contention that from a liberative point of view, practical theology can and must make a contribution towards eliminating the domination of either an individual or a group by another.

4 Baloyi, "Church Unity", 66.

5 T.H. Steyn and M.J. Masango, "The Theology and Praxis of Practical Theology in the Context of the Faculty of Theology", *HTS Theological Studies* 67, no. 2 (2011), 7 pages. doi: 10.4102/hts.v67i2.956

6 C.V. Gerkins, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1986).

7 D.S. Browning, "Practical Theology and Political Theology", *Theology Today* (1985), 15-33, 42.

8 J.S. Dreyer and J.A. Van der Ven, eds., *Divine Justice–Human Justice* (Unisa, Pretoria: Institute for Theology and Religion, 2002).

9 J.H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1970).

10 R.S. Tshaka and M.K. Makofane, "The Continued Relevance of Black Liberation Theology for Democratic South Africa Today", *International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* (2010), 105.

In this article I examine how the use of language in the Soutpansberg Synod promotes ethnic divides instead of fostering unity. The focus will be on the language relations between two ethnic groups in the Reformed Church context. I will also take a brief look at the area in which the synod is operating, since the church and community influence each other in many ways. For this reason the recent conflict between Venda and Tsonga in the Thulamela municipality will form part of the discussion, although the main focus is the church.

Background

One of the most evident impacts of apartheid is that it succeeded in dividing black people up into various ethnic groups. This was done through forced removals, which were instrumental in the formation of the homelands.¹¹ The borders between the ethnic groups were created in many ways – some along rivers, others along railway lines, and so forth. For many years people lived within the confines of these groupings. Apartheid used the strategy of capitalizing on the differences between the ethnic groups, inflating these differences in order to control people, as was done in the times of slavery in the USA.¹² Ashimolowo¹³ further contends that colonial education ensured that the black ethnic groups undermined and subjugated one another. Racial and ethnic divides continue to haunt our nation, as Boahen¹⁴ notes when stating that African societies became not only divided, but also rival factions.

One of the first tasks of the democratic government was to abolish the powers of the homelands. Meier and Hartell¹⁵ acknowledge that in the two decades since South Africa became a democracy, much has been done to desegregate our society and promote diversity.¹⁶ During the apartheid regime and even before that, language was used not only as an instrument of expression, but also as an instrument of subjugation. The use of Afrikaans as the main language of instruction at schools was one of the key reasons for the Soweto youth uprisings of 1976.

11 S.T. Kgatla, "Forced Removals and Migration: A Theology of Resistance and Liberation in South Africa", *Southern African Journal of Missiology* 41, no. 2 (2013), 120–132.

12 R.S. Tshaka, "Do Our Theological Methodologies Help Us to Deal with Situations of Violence in Black Communities, Specifically Afrophobia?" GBFE Jahrbuch, Franke, (2013), 139.

13 A. Ashimolowo, *What is Wrong with Being Black. Celebrating Our Heritage, Confronting Our Challenges* (Shippensburg, Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2007), 271.

14 A.A. Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

15 C. Meier and C. Hartell, "Handling Cultural Diversity in Education in South Africa", *SA-Educ Journal* 6, no. 2 (2009), 180–192.

16 C. Meier and C. Hartell, "Cultural Diversity", 180.

Language also played a role in the demarcation of the former homelands during the apartheid era.

At the beginning of 2015 residents of Malamulele in Limpopo staged a five-week uprising to demand their own municipality. Many reporters and commentators, including the president of the country, identified tribalism as a major cause of the uprising. This was corroborated by the findings of the Malamulele task team appointed to investigate the events. However, this view was not shared by all, with both Ndhuma Makamu¹⁷ and Floyd Shivambu¹⁸ stating that the matter was more complex and that the people's demands could not be attributed simply to tribalism. Nevertheless, there is evidence that some Xitsonga-speaking motorists were barred by Tshivenda speakers from crossing the Levubu River to enter Thohoyandou. According to an SABC news report of 6 February 2015, residents were stopping and interrogating motorists who were travelling between Thohoyandou and Malamulele, and if they happened to speak Xitsonga, they were directed back to Malamulele.¹⁹ It was also reported that residents were patrolling the area between the Budeli and Mutoti villages, which are in Venda, just across from the river which used to be the border between the former Gazankulu and Venda. It is reasonable to infer that these monitors, carrying knobkerries and pangas, were Tshivenda-speaking people, turning the Xitsonga-speaking people back to their violence-ridden town. In other words, these people were monitoring and re-instituting the old border between the former homelands, which had been abolished more than twenty years previously.

The kind of practice mentioned in the previous paragraph is indicative of a promotion of the inequalities that have instilled divides amongst the black people of this country. In certain cases, these divides are based on language. A good example of this is the Soutpansberg Synod, which covers much of Venda and became a standalone synod after the demise of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. This synod is predominantly Venda, and until 2009 its meetings and gatherings were held in the Venda language only. Xitsonga-speaking people make up less than 20% of its population, and are situated mainly around the areas of Malamulele and Giyani (the former Gazankulu areas).

The Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika (GKSA) can trace their origins back to the Reformational endeavours of John Calvin against the Roman Catholic Church. They have been separated from the Soutpansberg Synod, the

17 N. Makamu, "Malamulele Municipality: Tribalism or Administrative Justice?", *News 24* (09 February 2015), blog post, accessed on 17 February 2015.

18 F. Shivambu, "The Troubles in Malamulele: An Analysis", statement posted on *Politicsweb* (21 January 2015), www.politicsweb.co.za, accessed on 17 February 2015.

19 SABC News, Munghana Lonene FM talk show "Africa wa vulavula", broadcast between 12:00 and 13:00, 20 February 2015. SABC 1 NEWS, Truth Commission, 06 Feb 2015, 07:25.

predominantly Venda synod which originated from the missionary works of the Christian Reformed churches of Holland. The smaller part of this synod consisted of churches that were formed by missionary activities of the Reformed churches around Gauteng, particularly Pretoria. In 1994, efforts to unify these synods resulted in an agreement to merge their three racially divided theological schools into one, based at Potchefstroom University (PU) (now North-West University). However, the two synods started drifting apart just after 2002 as a result of a disagreement over capacity-building posts, when the Soutpansberg Synod claimed that PU had disregarded their candidates in favour of their own. The Synod then started its own theological school at the University of Pretoria, and stopped sending students to North-West University (NWU). This was another blow to the unity of the church.

Language as a Barrier

According to Baloyi²⁰ there is no doubt that the Soutpansberg Synod promotes one language above other(s). The small Xitsonga-speaking congregation wrote a letter in 2002 asking the Synod to address the issue. It stated:

We the above mentioned church council complain about your language (Venda). In some of your correspondence (letters) or conference at Iyani people loose [sic] interest in attending some of these good services because of more Venda using than Tsonga. We humbly request you to meet halfway with this problem because we need your important messages. Try to use English in most of your letters and services like conference or synod.²¹

There was no formal response to this letter, or even any mention of it in any official minutes, since the Synod claimed that they did not want to entertain the matter because it promoted “ethnicism”. The Xitsonga-speaking churches under this synod have been marginalized, and even when the churches that fall within the synod are listed, the Tsonga church is usually forgotten. The Xitsonga-speaking churches were even left out of the list of churches within the Soutpansberg Synod given to Christian Reformed Churches in Holland in the document entitled “Venda²² (South Africa)”.

As a result, after a few more years of continued and unattended concern and frustration, the Xitsonga-speaking congregation decided to leave the Synod, stating:

²⁰ Baloyi, “Church Unity”, 66.

²¹ Agenda ya mivhiko ya Tshinodo Tsha Soutpansberg, (2000), 52-53 (52).

²² CRCN: Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (undated) blog post, www.cgk.nl, accessed on 13 May 2015.

We decided to terminate our membership from the synod due to several reasons, including the fact that one language continues to dominate the synod to an extent that we do not participate equally in the synod.²³

It was only after the departure of this church that the Soutpansberg Synod acknowledged the allegations by saying: “*Arali zwo itea uri fhano sinodoni ri dzhieie fhasi lun 'we luambo ro vha ro khakha.*” (Translated literally, this means “If it happened that we undermined another language in this synod, we were wrong.”) In a later statement, however, the Synod argued: “*Na hone a si luambo lune lwa shumiswaTshinodoni, hu a shumiswavho na English.*” (It is not the Venda language alone that is used in this synod, but English as well).²⁴ Initially, the Synod therefore acknowledged that it was wrong to undermine another language, but in 2008 they argued that this was not a problem because English was also used. This statement shows up the inconsistencies in the Synod’s response to the allegations that one language was used to dominate the other.

An incident that occurred in 2008 offers additional evidence for the preference given to one language in this Synod. A Xitsonga-speaking proponent who gave his examination sermon in Xitsonga received the comment: “*Hu tutuwedzwa uri vhafunzi vha gude dzin 'we nyambo.*” (Ministers are encouraged to learn other languages as well).²⁵ This statement may be interpreted to mean that ministers should be conversant in different languages (which is not a bad idea), but given the context it can also be interpreted as an injunction to the Xitsonga-speaking proponent to learn Tshivenda in order for Venda listeners to understand him. This kind of advice was never given when the Venda preachers gave their sermons just before the Tsonga one.

Mutavhatsindi and Meiring²⁶ report that the Soutpansberg Synod has established churches in Gauteng under the banner of the Reformed Church Tshiawelo, where services are held in Tshivenda only, with no attempt to translate them or accommodate people who do not understand that language. The province of Gauteng, and in particular the cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg, are multilingual, and it is hard to imagine a church operating in one African language only. It is very clear that a church that does this is appealing only to people who understand that language, which means that those who do not are not welcome. It is language, more than anything else, that determines who should become members of such churches.

23 Maambiwa. Minutes of Synod Soutpansberg. Iyani Bible School, Sibasa (2006), 6&67.

24 Maambiwa, Minutes of Synod Soutpansberg. Iyani Bible School, Sibasa (2008), 33.

25 Maambiwa, 2008. Minutes, 93.

26 M.A. Mutavhatsindi and G.J. Meiring, “Church Planting in South Africa: The Role of the Reformed Church Tshiawelo”, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 1 (2014) <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.424>

The Way Forward: A Liberative Practical Theological Paradigm

Practical theology must seek ways to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor. The liberative kind of practical theology should through its pastoral wing engage in the process of seeking healing for those wounded by language oppression. Since language plays a significant part in a person's identity, the subjugation of his or her language reduces self-esteem and causes anxiety. Those affected by language oppression need to be helped to accept who they are. Pastoral caregivers and counsellors can use church preaching, pastoral care and counselling sessions or other community gatherings to teach people to embrace their own identity and reject subjugation. The *imago Dei* teaching can assist in helping those who have been wounded to accept themselves as images of God without being compared with those oppressing them. Both Fowler²⁷ and Moltmann²⁸ make a good point in stating that the starting point of an individual lies in knowing that the dignity of humankind is rooted in every human being as an image of God. This means that pastoral theology must not only focus on those broken by oppression, but must also seek ways to address the oppressor. The message from pulpit to local indaba should be that it is barbaric and inhuman for one group to oppress another on the basis of language.

Reconciling South Africa after Apartheid Still a Challenge

Evading the issues of race and inequality is not solving the problems currently being faced in South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission project that was established in 1995, headed by Desmond Tutu, had the aim of investigating and uncovering the human rights violations that were perpetrated under apartheid, and a very painful past was discovered.²⁹ Although I believe that this process worked and was of help in specific sectors and institutions, the people at grassroots level (e.g. in rural villages) who were also affected by those injustices did not benefit much from the project. According to Fullard, the Commission aimed to operate on a number of levels, namely the political, community and individual level; however, ordinary people continue to ask where they belong in this society.³⁰

27 S. Fowler, *A Christian Voice amongst Students and Scholars* (Potchefstroom: IRS, 1991).

28 J. Moltmann, *On Human Dignity* (Great Britain, SCM Press, 1984).

29 "The Exhibit, Apartheid to Democracy: 20 years of Transition", blog post, www.sites.library.northwestern.edu, accessed on 10 November 2015.

30 M. Fullard, "Displacing Race: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Interpretations of Violence", *Race and Citizenship in Transition Series* (2004), www.csvr.org.za, last accessed on 11 November 2015.

Posel and Simpson³¹ confirm the interconnectedness of racism and other divides in South African society.

Apartheid and racial inequality are issues that still need attention under the democratic dispensation. Even United States of America, which abolished racial segregation a long time ago, continues to be haunted by racial problems in 2015. This can be seen in the Charleston shootings, which were reported as racial by Alhuraimi, Zeffler and Farzaneh.³² Events such as this suggest that the impact of our racial past will take some time to overcome. Without taking anything away from the improved relationships between black and white people in South Africa, it would be inaccurate to suggest that each group's views about the other have been addressed adequately.³³ It is equally dangerous to assume that ethnic and racial separations can be resolved in roughly twenty-one years – and that is why some people still uphold the Tsonga–Venda border along the Levubu River that was created by the apartheid regime.

True reconciliation in South Africa is a necessity, although it is an expensive project. Lederach in his book “Building Peace” provides some important background that can help people from fragmented or separated societies to unite. For Lederach,³⁴ reconciliation should be a meeting point between truth, mercy, peace and justice. People need the space in which to express their anger, pain, trauma, loss and grief and the opportunity to do so, as this will help them reconcile with past injustices. The pretence that the official abolition of apartheid means that its effects have been swept away is a pathology that needs to be arrested. The wrongfulness of the past reading of the scriptures, which orchestrated inequalities, must be reversed by the correct ethics of reading the very same scriptures.³⁵ From my theological point of view, the story of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 32–36) and their desire for reconciliation is relevant here. They both left their spaces and approached each other in order for reconciliation to take place. Weis³⁶ argues

31 D. Posel and G. Simpson, eds., *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Johannesburg; Witwatersrand University Press, 2002).

32 N. Alhuraimi, M. Zeffler and S. Farzaneh, “Charleston Reverend: Racial Attacks ‘Modern Day Lynchings’”, a blog posted on 21 June 2015 and accessed on 07 March 2016 on www.right.is.com. (2015), 1.

33 R.S. Tshaka, “The Black Church as the Womb of Black Liberation Theology? Why the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) is Not a Genuine Black Church?”, *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015), 6.

34 J.P. Lederach, *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1998), 30.

35 G. Snyman, “David and Shimei: Innocent Victim and Perpetrator? The Ethics of Reading the Bible”, *Missionale Theologie* (2009), 227.

36 L. Weis, “Repairing Past Wrongs or Smoothing Out the Rough Edges”, *Reform Judaism* (1998), blog post, www.reformjudaism.org, accessed on 11 November 2015.

that whether the intention of the two brothers in embracing each other was good or bad is not important; the fact that they met and embraced each other means that the tension had been broken.³⁷ According to Roth,³⁸ the life of Onesimus would be unimaginable without the reconciliatory mediation of Paul. Weaver³⁹ argues that it took Keller to mediate and bring healing between the Reformed Church of Switzerland and the Anabaptists, whom they had persecuted and banished for almost 200 years. There is an important link between forgiveness and reconciliation, which is essential for the black and white Reformed congregation members in South Africa.

The Tower of Babel and Language Diversity

The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 recounts how God caused confusion among the descendants of Noah by preventing them from understanding one another. As a result, the people dispersed and abandoned the building of the tower.⁴⁰ The very same language people used to unite themselves was used by God to scatter them around the globe. This story can be interpreted as part of God's plan to spread his faith across the world, and ensure the survival and diversity of the human race. It would be a reductionist notion to think that God's intention was simply to scatter the people, but Oaks argues that He intended to confound the languages as well.⁴¹ Gerts has this to say: "The narrative's conclusion focuses on the real issue at hand: God's dissolution of humanity's linguistic unity."⁴² The emphasis here is on the fact that language diversity had been with the human race for a long time and it was in line with the perfect plan of God, who not only allowed it, but also ensured that it should exist.

According to Kumar, Mahatma Ghandi⁴³ once said that no culture can survive if it attempts to be exclusive. Although the relationship between language and

37 L. Heller, "The Meeting of Jacob and Esau: The Healing of the Open Wound", *Reform Judaism* (1998), blog post, www.reformjudaism.org, accessed on 11 November 2015.

38 M. Roth, "Reconciliation in Christ", *Christ Light Publications*, Lesson 13 (August 27, 2000), www.anabaptist.org, accessed on 17 August 2015.

39 J.D. Weaver, "Forgiveness After 500 Years", *Sunday News* (2003), 1, blog post, www.jdweaver.com, accessed on 17 August 2015

40 "The Tower of Babel", *Emerging Truths*, undated blog post, www.emergingtruths.com, accessed on 15 February 2015.

41 D.D. Oaks, "The Tower of Babel Account: A Linguistic Consideration", *Science Religion and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2015), 42–60.

42 J.C. Gerts, "The Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9)", *Bible Odyssey*. www.bibleodyssey.org, accessed on 11 November 2015.

43 R. Kumar, "An Embodiment of Indian Cultural Heritage", *Scoop Independent News*, 17 September 2007 at 8:33pm, blog post, www.scoop.co.nz, accessed on 19 August 2015.

culture is not the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge the presence of this relationship. While Leveridge states that language is used to maintain and convey culture,⁴⁴ Brooks sees language as a way to express ourselves in our culture.⁴⁵ With the original language destroyed, as recounted in the story of the Tower of Babel, each tribe was able to develop its own distinct language, and that diversity continues to exist.⁴⁶

The New Testament and Language Diversity

The disciples of Jesus Christ were instructed to stay in Jerusalem after His Ascension until the day of Pentecost. On that day the Jerusalem-bound disciples were released to go into the world once the Holy Spirit had empowered them to speak in different languages. The important thing is that those sent out were expected not only to accept or accommodate other languages, but to speak them as well. Paul in Galatians 3:28 dismissed the tribalism of his day by saying: “There is neither a Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This verse indicates that Christians are all alike, no matter what their race, status, sex or any other characteristic.

This is one of the biblical grounds for church unity, regardless of background, language and ethnicity. This should be a basis from which we should respond to those churches that use either language or ethnic grouping to dominate and oppress others. Our different ethnic groups have something to offer one another, and this can be communicated through language. This relates to the issue of reconciliation, because the moment people start striving to understand one another’s language, the more easily they are able to move closer to one another. One of the most significant reasons why transformation and reconciliation are very slow in South Africa is because of language resistance. It was important for this small church to be multilingual in order to expand its membership. And just as it was important for this church to be multilingual, it is important that the Xitsonga- and Tshivenda-speaking people within the Soutpansberg Synod should learn to understand one another, besides learning one another’s language per se. In my opinion, such understanding will not only help the unity of the church, but can also heal the

44 A.N. Leveridge, “The Relationship between Language and Culture in the Implications for Language Teaching”, *Tefl.net* (2008), blog post, www.edition.telf.net, accessed on 11 November 2015.

45 L. Brooks, “The Relationship between Language and Culture”, *Spoken First* (29 July 2010), blog post, www.falmouthinstitute.com/language/2010/07/the-relationship-between-language-and-culture/, accessed on 11 November 2015.

46 P. Holter, “Re: Tower of Babel, Confusion of Tongues, and History”, *Catholic Answers Forum* (15 February 2007), blog post, www.forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?p=7526344, accessed on 26 February 2015.

wounds that divided the community under the Thulamela Municipality. For there to be reconciliation among divided South Africans, there must be people who are ready to learn other people's languages and to try to mediate and close up the gaps that divide them.⁴⁷ Without the gift of speaking in different languages it would be impossible to spread God's word.⁴⁸ Roberts⁴⁹ emphasises that it was necessary for the people of those times to hear the Gospel in their own mother tongue. It is unfortunate that certain churches today are unwilling to allow the use of certain languages, and instead expect their congregations to listen to a language they do not understand. Cicero⁵⁰ was correct in saying that the attitude of those who teach can often be an obstacle to those who want to learn. It is ironic that these churches are going against the ethos of Christ's disciples, who were willing to speak and teach in languages other than their own. Instead of expanding the church, they are closing it to those who do not speak a particular language.

Language During the Reformation

It is imperative to include here the topic of language during the Reformation, because the church under discussion claims kinship with those churches which emanated from the Reformation. As Bouchard⁵¹ notes, before the Reformation, the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages began in the tenth century amongst the Slavic Orthodox Christian community. The attempt to make the Bible available in people's mother tongue had therefore been on the agenda even before the beginning of the Reformation. Since the churches under discussion grew from the Reformation movement of John Calvin and others, it is relevant to examine how this movement viewed issues of language, particularly in the church context. According to Van der Merwe,⁵² the Reformation was characterised by a flourishing of interest in a variety of vernacular languages. This was despite the

47 C.S. Keener and G. Ursy, *Defending the Black Faith. Answers to Tough Questions about African-American Christianity* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

48 W. Jackson, "The Significance of the Day of Pentecost", *Christian Courier*, undated blog, www.christiancourier.com, accessed on 05 February 2015.

49 M.D. Roberts, "What is the Significance of Pentecost? How Can Pentecost Make a Difference in Your Relationship with God?", *Patheos Evangelical Channel*, (2011), blog post, www.patheos.com, accessed on 05 February 2015.

50 S. Kreis, "The History Guide: Educational Philosophy", (2000; last revised on 14 March 2012), blog post, www.historyguide.org, accessed on 19 August 2015.

51 M. Bouchard, "A Critical Reappraisal of the Concept of the 'Imagined Community' and the Presumed Sacred Languages of the Medieval Period", *National Identities* 61, no. 1 (2004), 3-24. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.

52 N.T. van der Merwe, "On the Trail of John Calvin's Philosophy of Language: A Few Notes on His Commentary on Genesis 10 and 11", *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 5 (2004), 117-137, 128.

fact that Calvin did not write much about language, since his main focus was the issue of reforming the church from Catholic papacy.

John Calvin's original church in Geneva was attended by people from different walks of life. Burger⁵³ notes that the congregation led by Calvin was made up of foreigners. The fact that people from other Scandinavian and neighbouring countries found a home in Geneva implies that besides being accommodated in the church, the city of Geneva itself had its own way of integrating people of different cultures and who spoke different languages. During Calvin's time, Geneva was a haven for refugees from France, Scandinavia and other European countries, and Baloyi⁵⁴ states that Calvin never doubted for a moment that foreigners were part of his congregation there. Although Calvin might not have been able to speak all the languages of the refugees who attended his church, it is evident that foreigners were made to feel at home.

Reformed theology was transplanted to South Africa with the advent of the Dutch Reformed Church, which was formally established in 1652 and became the first official church in South Africa in 1778. Today, language diversity is still a cause for division within one of the oldest and largest churches in the country.⁵⁵ Leonard,⁵⁶ reporting on his experience of the day black and white people worshipped together in the Dutch Reformed Church in Dullstroom, Mpumalanga, quoted a Mr Potgieter as saying: "The ideal is that we should worship together, but I don't know if the language and cultural difference would allow it. But I think it is a long journey that has still to be taken and many obstacles that will have to be overcome." Even though the focus of this paper is not on the divides between white and black South Africans, this quotation serves to indicate how significant the barrier of language is in dividing people of the same faith and belief.

Attempting Unity in Terms of Ethnic Groupings in South African Context

All citizens of this country, regardless of their beliefs, are expected to recognise the diversity of cultures and languages in South Africa, and live together without condemning or oppressing one another on the basis of language or any other characteristic. Chapter 2 of the Constitution states that everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one

53 C.W. Burger, "Calvin and the Unity of the Church: Relevance for the Reformed Churches in South Africa", *Deel 51 Supplementum. Teologie 150+ en Calvin 500* (2010), 313-320 (310).

54 Baloyi, "Church Unity", 8.

55 DRC: Dutch Reformed Church Registers (Family Search Historical Records) 1660-1970.

56 C. Leonard, "The Slow and Steady Death of the Dutch Reformed Church", *Mail and Guardian* (05 April 2012), blog post, <http://mg.co.za>, accessed on 06 February 2015.

exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with the provision of the Bill of Rights.⁵⁷ This is understandably a ground-breaking foundation from which ethnic divides can slowly be done away with. Everyone enjoys protection in using any language that exists in the country without prejudice, fear or favour.

The fact that Christian churches are mushrooming contributes to and influences this change. Statistics indicate that 68%⁵⁸ of the South African population is Christian – this suggests that the majority of people can be influenced by the church. Since this research emanated primarily from church-related challenges, it is for that reason that these churches should take heed of the particular kind of teaching that will help them influence their members to allow language diversity during their meetings and gatherings. Churches should therefore take heed of the Constitution and consider how to respect and accommodate a diverse membership, regardless of language or culture. As outlined by Meier and Hartell,⁵⁹ the common interests displayed by everyone, such as acceptance of constitutional values, love of the country and all its people, and advancement of economic, sport and cultural interests and the diversity of individuals and communities should be respected and accommodated. The spirit of ubuntu is another powerful weapon of unity which South African may make use of. This spirit encourages interaction, co-operation, empathy and compassion and reinforces concern for the community rather than for the individual.⁶⁰

Marable⁶¹ made a good suggestion which is already helping some black communities, namely that ministers should occupy the dual role of spiritual leader and secular leader. This is the strategy that the black church, including the Reformed Church, should consider using as a way to unite different groups.

Respecting One Another's Culture and Language

It is important that, as South Africans, we learn to respect one another's culture, language and traditions. Ubuntu, according to Chaplin, entails doing our best to serve other human beings and to behave with respect, honesty and trustworthiness towards other people. Ubuntu is the spirit that helps us to avoid emphasising differences and in that way to dismantle barriers, including ethnic barriers. Embracing the spirit of ubuntu also mean discouraging and doing away with all

57 *South African Constitution*, 1996, 15–16.

58 "Africa Religious Population in 2014", *Religious Population* (2014), blog post, www.religiouspopulation.com, accessed on 11 November 2015.

59 Meier and Hartel, "Cultural Diversity", 181.

60 K. Chaplin, "The Ubuntu Spirit in African Communities", (2006).

61 M. Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

forms of separatism.⁶² Tolerating and embracing one another is very important in the journey to reconciliation after the long time spent walking our separate paths during apartheid. It is no use today to continue blaming apartheid for what it has done to our people. It is more important to look to the future and find ways to live together as a nation without racial or ethnic divides. When we celebrate the life of the late President Nelson Mandela we need to remember his zeal in striving for unity in our country.

Le Cornu⁶³ observes that Afrikaans-speaking people were willing to accommodate diversity by employing technology to help them communicate with people speaking other languages during the 'Black and White United in One Synod' held in Potchefstroom from 5 to 16 January 2009. They ensured that translation facilities were in place so that every delegate in the synod could participate equally in the discussions. If Afrikaans speakers, who could be regarded as stubborn on issues of language, went out of their way to accommodate other languages in their synod meeting, why would the Soutpansberg Synod, which is home to less than a quarter of the South African Christian population, resist accommodating other languages? There is no doubt that the spirit of separatism, which Vischer⁶⁴ calls "an intolerable danger," is ruling the church. It is worth mentioning that the churches which decided to move away from the Soutpansberg Synod were among those that participated in the unified synod meeting held in Potchefstroom, as mentioned above. Clearly, they preferred unity rather than division. The Soutpansberg Synod could learn from this lesson and endeavour to reach out to everyone through the use of his or her own language.

Conclusion

Although South Africa has been a democratic country or nation for over two decades now, the ramifications of apartheid can still be felt, particularly along tribal lines. This continues to direct and shape the lives of many South Africans. It is a pity that the church, which many expect to work toward finding solutions to these challenges, continues to uphold the injustices and inequalities of the past. The Reformed churches, particularly within the Soutpansberg Synod, remain among the many churches that are failing to address the issue of language diversity in

62 K. Chaplin, "The Ubuntu Spirit in African Communities", *South African Government Gazette* (02/02/1996).

63 S. Le Cornu, "The National Synod of the Reformed Churches of South Africa", (01 February 2001), Report, <http://christianobserver.org> (2009), accessed on 06 February 2015.

64 L. Vischer, ed., *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

South Africa. This a serious problem, especially in the context of a democratic nation tasked to unite South Africans of all ethnicities and language groups. Even though African languages are commonly viewed as unsuitable as a medium of instruction because they lack a comprehensive scientific and technological vocabulary, churches should be committed to promoting language diversity and investing resources in developing these languages.⁶⁵ In conclusion, I would like to echo Martin Luther's statement that we either learn to live together as people or perish together as fools. Twenty years into our democracy, we must continue striving to unite all South Africans regardless of race, gender and language.

65 Meier and Hartel, "Cultural Diversity", 190.

A Theology of Development Based on Transformational Authority: The Case of the SACBC Development Ministries

Stuart C. Bate OMI

ABSTRACT

Pope John Paul II has stressed the need for theology in all human life: "The theological dimension is needed both for interpreting and for solving present day problems in human society."¹ In a complex globalising world, theologians have a responsibility to take seriously the complexity of these problems. The focus of this article is the construction of a theology of development starting from the context of Southern African Catholic Development agencies and the writings of some Church leaders.

Introduction

The construction of systematic theological models to inform ministry is a major concern. The distinction in the academy between the disciplines of systematic theology and pastoral theology, whilst helpful in some cases, can obscure the fact that effective research in all fields of the humanities demands the construction of systematic theoretical models. These must respect the context within which the

1 The quote is from no. 15 of the document *Centesimus Annus* written in 1991 by Pope John Paul II. Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html, accessed October 2012. *Centesimus Annus* is a *Papal Encyclical*. Encyclicals (English: letters) are written to specific audiences indicated at the beginning of the document and deal with a specific theme indicated immediately after the title. This document is written to his "venerable brother bishops in the episcopate, the priests and deacons, families of men and women religious, all the Christian faithful and to all men and women of good will". It is written on the theme of "the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*". This is another encyclical letter (translation: On New Things) of Pope Leo XIII in 1891. Its theme is "On Capital and Labour". It is considered the foundation document of modern Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html. Accessed October 2015.



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