

THE BARKLY WEST DECLARATION

The participants to the Awareness Workshop of the Baptist Convention of Southern Africa (principally the black Baptists of South Africa), held at Barkly West, from 31 May to 3 June 1990, adopt the following declaration:

Being aware of our history and context, and based upon our understanding and the authority of the Word of God, we have sought empowerment, education and a vision for our future. This vision includes the recognition of the dignity and equal participation of all persons, without regard to race, sex, or personal status within the Baptist and wider community.

Consistent then with this vision we make known the following.

MINISTRY AND MISSION

We understand that Mission and Ministry is the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. That it is both indivisible from and related to the total South African context in which we live and worship.

We recognise the privilege of individuals to discover the truth of their experience and history, the good news of the Gospel and to participate fully within the community of believers and the wider society.

The status of women in the church is of concern. We realise that the church has uncritically taken over oppressive traditions. We therefore call for the empowerment of women, and encourage them to exercise and develop the gifts God has given to them.

The participation by the youth in the life of the church is too limited and they are being denied the opportunities to exercise their gifts. We call for the full involvement of youth, who are church members, in all levels of our denomination.

We acknowledge the privilege and right of children to develop their abilities to the full within, and without the community of believers. To be reared in homes that are conducive to and which cultivate their skills, their sense of family and community. We support their right to exercise their culture and to discover their history and faith.

CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

We recognise the Church Universal and rejoice in our common Mission, which is the bringing of the message of Jesus Christ to the world.

As Baptists, in our current divided context, we note the continuous need for repentance, restitution and reconciliation in the spirit of humility and dignity.

We affirm the need to establish a united Baptist witness in South Africa, but recognise the present priority of the Baptist Convention to continue to consolidate and build up its own identity.

We encourage the present and developing local and international participation of persons and communities in Mission with us. These relationships must be realised without domination and are to remain consistent with mutually agreed interests.

SOCIO-POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

We understand ourselves to be created by God in whose sight all persons have equal status, dignity, and full human rights. Further, we understand ourselves called to be a community of people participating fully in the struggle for justice, peace and the common good.

Where in justice, conflict, domination, and exploitation exists, we as individuals, as a community of believers and citizens of South Africa, are compelled to expose, resist and reject those practices.

We will continue to expose, resist and reject the practice and ideology of Apartheid, or any other oppressive system that denies the inviolable human rights of persons as it

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may be applied to, or affects us as individuals, as a community of believers or within society as a whole.

At this point we therefore draw attention to the following:

- * *In relation to the exiles and political prisoners we call upon the Convention, together with other churches of the SACC, to prepare and organise themselves to receive and support those returnees and their families.*
- * *In relation to conscientious objectors, we call upon the Convention to work for the provision of non-punitive, non-combatant, and equal alternative service for those refusing military service.*
- * *In relation to the education crises, we call upon the Convention to address the backlog that exists in education, and to work towards the institution of a single, non-racial system in South Africa.*
- * *In relation to the pursuit of a peaceful settlement to the country-wide political conflict, we urge the Convention to work towards the institution of a just and peaceful society. Should the option of negotiation be exercised, then a conducive atmosphere should be created. This would include such fundamental changes as the unconditional release of political prisoners, the end to structural violence, the cessation of political trials, the settlement of the land issue and the removal of unjust laws from the statute books.*

On 2 February 1990 President F. W. de Klerk spoke to the South African Parliament: for millions in South Africa and many more millions throughout the world, hope was rekindled. The hope was that the carnage and oppression in that country would come to an end. This was the promise of a man of whom a leading anti-apartheid activist said, 'He had not been known to break a promise'. Where that commitment is leading the President and the battles which he is facing we hear of daily through the international news. The question still remains: 'Is the dismantling of apartheid irreversible?' A deputation of church people, however, in an interview with the President, asked him why he did not repent of all the suffering and evil brought to his country by apartheid. He replied, 'I have repented'.

In this context the Baptist Convention of South Africa declared 1990 as the Year of Baptist Awareness. They make it plain that visions do not just happen. They are the result of disciplined hours of work, reflection and prayers. Behind this campaign and behind the Declaration can be seen much dedicated work and prayer.

The Declaration is itself partly the work entered for the Workshops which met in the small rural town of West Barkly in Northern Cape Province and attended by three hundred people from all over South Africa; it is partly the crystallisation into words of the papers and discussions held there from 1 June 1990 till Sunday, 3 June. The Declaration is to enable churches, and in particular the churches of the Baptist Convention, to reassess their history, reassess their theology, and reassess the practice of church life.

The booklet, which sets out the addresses given and a summary of the discussions, proves that history is not the exact science which some suppose. South African history itself is based on an ideology which compels its recorders to select certain incidents and present them as though they were determinative of the truth. The Revd Dr Frank Chikane in the opening address notes that wrong questions bring wrong answers. The Workshops were to ask the right questions. And to base those questions on the reality of the Word of God. As they began to struggle to answer those questions, they acknowledged what a prison house their history had become. They realised the need to be liberated in the long and painful struggle into which so many white churches have not yet even entered.

History is not the only oppressor. Theology is oppressive. That which is intended

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to set women and men free so that the people of God can more clearly see the action of God in His world becomes the tool of oppression. Theology is the theology of dominance. The teaching of the Scriptures has been so distorted that the whites would have the blacks believe that they are of lesser degree of humanness than the whites. The very words that are used expose this belief. They talk of 'non-whites' as though blacks have no existence apart from their relationship to the whites.

The Declaration calls for a whole new way of doing theology. It is to be 'contextualised', made real for the people of South Africa and not just some philosophy imported by European and North American advocates. But it is in the practice that the real heresy of apartheid is starkly revealed. One chapter deals with the training of pastors. At every point the black pastors have been indoctrinated to accept an imposed inferiority. In one training centre of eleven lecturers only one is black and he himself was educated in the same institution. Thereafter differentials are reinforced by lower salaries and pensions for black pastors and by the control exercised by white superintendents.

In order fully to understand why there is an autonomous Baptist Convention as well as a Baptist Union we must look at the state of South Africa. There are two worlds in South Africa. One is a minority (18%), is white, rich, powerful, and oppressive. The other world is black, poor, and out of power. It is perfectly possible to visit South Africa, indeed to live in rich South Africa, and not to know the other world exists. South African visitors to Britain discover here what is happening in their own country: a personal friend had completed his national service, compulsory for whites, before he heard the word Soweto. The separation in miles is but few, yet the separation in affluence, in living conditions, and in personal expectation is enormous. This explains the reason for a Union and a Convention. When talk of a merger between the Union and the Convention was prepared, the terms were laid down by the whites without discussion.

The Convention is committed to an African Non-Racial Movement, to proclaiming an Holistic Gospel which challenges the privatized interpretation so beloved of the whites. The Barkly West Declaration is to enable churches to work for the empowerment of the blacks, using to the full the gifts of both women and men. It enables blacks to reach out to their own identity through the healing which comes from true repentance.

It was therefore on 26 December 1987 that the Convention resolved that it would become an independent, autonomous body. In January 1988 the Convention was received into the membership of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship as a full member. In the following July, at the BWA Council Meeting in the Bahamas, the Convention was accepted into membership - the Proposal being seconded by the General Secretary of the South Africa Baptist Union. The delegates had hardly got home from that Council Meeting when the same General Secretary had sent a letter to all Convention Churches, encouraging them to leave the Convention and join the Union - not a friendly act. The Convention sponsored the Workshop and what has now become known as the Barkly West Declaration.

I have only one criticism. In a paper on strategy for empowerment, itself a very powerful one, the writers make an appeal 'to older western churches to come to our assistance'. No, my brother, this is not your struggle in which you need our assistance. It is our joint struggle together for liberation. We are not apart from you. We are there though removed by 8000 miles. Your loss is our loss. Your freedom is our freedom. Together we must work for the implementation of the Declaration or we deny our common calling in Christ.

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