

# The church and apartheid in south africa religion essay



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What started as an antecedent social forms grounded in colonial history resulted with the outcome of Apartheid which in turn affected the South African Church and its history. Apartheid is the state which jeopardize the social edifice of the Church as it brought much segregation, which led to many critics of apartheid blaming the Church for its existence, they have claimed that racial oppression in South Africa is the fruit of Christianity according to Hexham in his work journal: *The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*

This subject although has for a very long time been seen as ethical challenge to Christian theology, one cannot ignore it but can be used a case study which will ventures us to reflect what it mean to be one in Jesus Christ within our South African Christian Theology context. It is for this reason that in this assignment I endeavour to highlight some of the s

#### Beginning of National Party

Acceding to power in 1948, the National Party has kept a tight grip on the reins of government ever since till the reign was taken by ANC in 1994.

According to Dr Verkuyl, the National Party had desired to develop a racial caste system in which each non-white is granted limited freedom of movement - but only on the basis of a white monopoly of power and subordinated to the interests of the whites.

It was in this period that race relations remained the key issue, there was increase in various measure of racial segregation and it was in this time that black consciousness and active protest became a starker reality. Therefore it

was through this Party that the ideology of apartheid became the blueprint for South African society.

## **World Council of Churches**

It was an amazement that the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 at Amsterdam led to new phase in the ecumenical relations not only in South Africa but also globally. This raised high hope that any divisions in the Church of Christ would be healed and there would be restoration in relations of the church.

South African churches welcome this phase and most of churches in South Africa joined WCC and were spontaneous and cordial in their participation. These churches included the Anglicans; Presbyterians; Methodists; the NG Churches of Cape Town and the Transvaal, and the Nederduits Hervomde Kerk in Afrika.

South African delegates were sent to WCC Amsterdam in 1948 and again in 1954 to Evanston. Alan Paton of Anglican Church and Ben Marais of NG Church served in the fourteen-man commission on Church and race. These men had to conduct a study and submit a report at Evanston Conference. Marais, being one of the selected speakers in the session to represent the submission of this major report at the conference.

Several South African church leaders like CB Brink, Bishop Ambrose Reeves and WA Landman play crucial roles and were actively involved in the activities of WCC. CB Brink also served in the Central committee of WCC along with other South African church leaders. The ecumenical contact built on these years had a great effects in South African and various conferences <https://assignbuster.com/the-church-and-apartheid-in-south-africa-religion-essay/>

and talks between local church leaders were arranged to discuss matters of mutual concern. Many South African students received bursaries from WCC to study in America and Europe.

However, it was after the discussion of race relations and decision taken at the Evanston that uncertainties grew especially from the Afrikaans member churches.

### **Cottesloe Consultation**

In 1960 the Church engaged itself in Cottesloe talks. It was through Cottesloe consultation that delegates were brought together from the World Council of Churches' member churches in South Africa and outside the country and ecumenical institution as start of start of the partners fighting the church struggle in South Africa. In these talks, the race issue and Church's role were put under the spotlight.

After many days of these talks, decisions were taken which all member churches agreed to, except the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika which stood in disagreement with these decisions. The Cottesloe findings brought so much tension and emotions since the churches were now thrust into the midst of political stresses of the country and media had these talks as their headlines zooming more on the churches reactions.

This led in some churches resigning from WCC, especially the Afrikaans Reformed churches, while the English speaking churches retained the membership in support of freedom fighters. Churches which resigned from the WCC opened Christian Institute in August 1963 in order to continue their dialogue with churches overseas. This institute provided a useful channel for <https://assignbuster.com/the-church-and-apartheid-in-south-africa-religion-essay/>

communication involving people from different race and denominations.

However this institute became a victim of political target and thereby lost most of its supporters.

### **Publication: “ Message to the people of South Africa”**

This publication was formulated in 1968. It focused on South African Council of Churches as spotlight and was the result of significant conference of the WCC held in Geneva in 1966 on the subject: “ Church and Society”.

Theological committee was appointed so they can consider what obedience to God requires of the Church in her witness to her unity in Christ in South Africa. This committee had to issue the message to the Country.

The purpose of the document was to demonstrate the basic incompatibility of apartheid with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This document also appealed to Christians in South Africa to give their obedience and their loyalty to Jesus Christ. The document was sent to every minister in the country of which 600 showed the positive response and support and all the member churches of SACC subscribed to it. This led SACC being a target for attacks from different sides.

### **SPROCAS**

The Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS) was established in mid-1969 by the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute of Southern Africa. This document was founded after the chasm between the South African Council of Churches and Afrikaans-speaking churches grew wider, the South African Council of churches being attacked on every side.

Included in this document were the six commissions and a diverse set of over 140 commissioners and consultants, which had its focus on the need for change in South Africa, examining economics, education, law, politics, sociology and the Church. The project not only played a critical role in thinking within the South African churches about how to overcome apartheid but also marks a critical stage in the birth of the Black Consciousness Movement.

The project's publications had to be submitted to South Africa's Publication Control Board for censorship. Plans had to be adjusted when several of the writers, including Biko, Desmond, and Turner, were issued with banning orders prohibiting them from being quoted in any publication. Despite such difficulties the project had significant impact on political developments leading up to the Soweto student uprising in 1976.

## **Soweto Uprising**

The strained situation acquired a fresh dimension with Soweto riots in 1976, when the black youth stood their ground against the state's educational policy and the existence of certain laws which had broken up homes, families and the ordinary life. The youth were dissatisfied, and they were not willing to accept these situations which they found themselves in. It was through this stand that Soweto gradually became the national symbol of a new generation of nationally and politically black people awareness in our country.

## **Black Churches**

Each of these departures from Christianity, the Ethiopian and the Zionist, dates from the beginning of previous century. The foundation of Ethiopian churches was the less drastic, as they content to break the shackles of white dominance while retaining the form of organization, mode of worship and denominational identity of the parent body, for example ' African Methodist' and ' African Congregational'. Nonetheless, it stemmed directly from the practice of an undeclared apartheid where it was least expected, from an insistence on segregation and white superiority on the part of missionaries. These churches were African replicas of Christian denominations and were an explicit response to racial inequality.

## **Reformation Day Witness**

In 1980 October 31, the Reformation Day Witness was published. It consisted eight eminent NG theologians. This publication dealt with , according to Pillay & Hoymeyer(1994: 296) the Church's inability to fulfil the mission of reconciliation and to prevent polarisation and to provide the authorities with an unambiguous witness. The witness was published during the period of rapid changes in South Africa where transition led to new social and political dispensation. The witness contributed in bringing the greater willingness and openness towards the continuing dialogue and it rose the prophetic voice of NG Church so loud and clear.

In the same year in November, the appeared collections of essays entitled Stomkompas, which was composed by NG theologians which had their views. This Stomkompas had dominating the widely accepted traditional Afrikaner

view on relations between people, which was biblically justified since the forties.

Broederiking was also another group emerged from NG church. It was a group of young NG churches. They aimed at working towards greater unity among the NG churches at a local level, to render younger churches less financial dependency on the mother church and to give moral support to these churches.

In 1982, Belhar announced a status of confessions on apartheid condemning it as a heresy. This was regarded as a protest by the church against a political dispensation as it proclaimed the threat brought by apartheid to the church's creed. It during this time that the Church in SA were arranged by committee of every theological society in SA.

Tension rose between the government and certain churches in the 80's

## **Kairos Document**

The Kairos Document (KD) is a statement within the background of theology issued in 1985 by a group of black South African theologians based predominantly in the black community of Soweto. The statement challenged the churches' response to what the authors saw as the vicious policies of the Apartheid state under the state of emergency declared on 21 July 1985. In July 1985 the iron fist of the first state of emergency came down hard upon the people of South Africa's townships. Many were killed, injured, maimed for life or locked up in detention. The KD evoked strong reactions and furious debates not only in South Africa, but world-wide.



The KD was compiled in five chapters: The Moment of Truth; Critique of ' State Theology; Critique of Church Theology Towards a Prophetic Theology; Challenge to Action; and a short conclusion. The document was addressed to the divided churches; divided, that is, due to the roles that Christians within the churches play in the conflict between the racist minority government and the black majority population. The KD document contended against apartheid system using the comparison from the book of Romans, Revelation and even Acts; it presented this system as unjustly and not lawful. In time where discord was in place, this document really served as a challenge to many ministers and church members of different churches to reflect once again where they stand.

The period of 1990 onwards

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela has been in prison for over a quarter of a century - since August 5, 1962 - for leadership of his people in the struggle against racist oppression and for a non-racial democratic society.

Prison bars could not prevent him from continuing to inspire his people to struggle and sacrifice for their liberation. Public opinion polls have again and again shown that he is the most popular leader in the country. He has, indeed, grown in stature. As the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group observed in 1986, he has become " a living legend", galvanising the resistance in the country. The London Times described him as " the colossus of African nationalism in South Africa."

It was in after the 1990 that there seem to be a break of segregation, and thank to all the church who participated in the struggle of this liberation. In 1994 was the beginning of new things for the nation of South Africa.

### Conclusion

The story of the Christian Churches in South Africa, like the story of South African society in general is the story of many tribes, whose histories are on the one hand interwoven and interconnected and helps us not make the same mistake as the church of segregation, it help us to strive to a bridge gap to any discord, instead of being a wall standing in the gap for God to move in our country. With such richful history, we are collaped to higher height, even teaching the future theologian of way forward because eventually we had conquered APARTHED.