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A Call to Action: Using Theological Language Against Apartheid Rule in the 1985 *Kairos*

Document

In 1985, a group of South African Christian theologians, many of whom were black ministers working in the townships of Johannesburg, found that their nation had come to a “moment of truth.” Not only was the nation divided by the oppressive system of apartheid, which enacted and enforced brutal policies of racial segregation, but the Christian population was also split into a “White Church” and a “Black Church,” and both the oppressor and the oppressed professed loyalty to the same faith while being turned against each other. Naming themselves “the Kairos Theologians,” after the Greek word for “a time of judgment...a moment of truth, a crisis” (Kairos Theologians 77), these ministers came together to write a document in response to their unique situation in history. In this document, known as *The Kairos Document*, the Kairos Theologians identify three theologies (i.e. systems of belief related to the study and interpretation of the Bible) employed in the struggle with apartheid, each providing interpretations in support of its respective stance in the conflict. These theologies are the pro-apartheid “State Theology,” the over-spiritualized “Church Theology,” and the context-focused “Prophetic Theology,” the last of which being the one the Kairos Theologians use to support their argument by comparing the context of Scripture to their own context. The Kairos Theologians proceed to argue against the first two theologies—against State Theology for its efforts to justify the actions of the apartheid regime, and against Church Theology for its failure to adequately resist the regime—

and make a call to action for others to resist oppression by practicing Prophetic Theology. By founding its arguments on theological rhetoric, *The Kairos Document* articulates an ideological position that empowers oppressed Christians to dismantle regimes, call bystanders out of inaction and inspire others to take up the cause of liberation.

Before discussing the content of *The Kairos Document*, it is important to understand the historical and cultural background in which it was formed. The first European settlement in South Africa was established in April 1652 on behalf of the Dutch *Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie*, and as the Dutch colonizers extended their reach into the land, they began to see themselves as independent “white Africans,” or “Afrikaners” (Henriksson 39-40). It was through these settlers that Christianity was introduced to South Africa in the form of the Dutch Reformed Church. Initially, little effort was made by the Dutch Reformed Church to minister to foreign people due to a belief in an inherent difference between Christians and “Heathens;” at the end of the eighteenth century, however, foreign missionaries did come in to preach to the native population (44-46). Amongst Afrikaners, the Dutch Reformed tradition remained a dominant part of their cultural identity, such that it was “integrated into a much larger program of national reconstruction” and became a contributing factor to the rise to power of Afrikanerdom in the 20th century (Spykman 278). Thus, it was towards a Dutch Reformed Protestant background that the Kairos Theologians, who themselves were of diverse denominational affiliations, addressed their document when writing to the Afrikaner community.

Over time, the Afrikaners developed a sentiment of nationalist pride that would influence their desire to establish “separate cultural development.” Gordon J. Spykman identifies two major values that were cherished by the Afrikaners. The first was freedom, seen in the 19th and 20th centuries as they fought to “achieve liberation from the stranglehold of English domination

and other opposing forces.” The second value was identity, which manifested as a “corporate sense of belonging” that “touches all aspects of reality and every walk of life” (Spykman 275). In wanting to preserve both values, Afrikaners sought to gain influence in their nation, which would allow them to both assert their own culture and keep other cultures from “threatening” them. This was accomplished with the 1948 general election, in which the Afrikaner-led National Party won a majority of parliamentary seats; from then on, the Afrikaners began to enact explicitly racist segregation policies (Deegan 20). Over time, people began to protest against this system of unjust laws that came to be known as apartheid; at first the protests were non-violent, but after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, in which 69 protestors were killed, resistance became more militant with the establishment of guerrilla resistance forces such as the Umkhonto we Sizwe (31-32). Conditions worsened in 1976 when more protestors, this time in Soweto, were suppressed by the authorities, causing tension to rise to the point that by the mid-1980s the government had to declare a state of emergency (46, 62). It was within this context of racism, chaos and violence that the Kairos Theologians ministered to the people of Johannesburg, and within which they believed that a “moment of truth” had come.

The first thing that the Kairos Theologians do in *The Kairos Document*, before putting their own stance into words, is work to dismantle the rhetoric of their opposition—that is, of the State. This theological rhetoric is defined by the Kairos Theologians as “something more than the ‘Apartheid Theology’ of the White Dutch Reformed Churches,” rather being something that “justifies all the activities of the State in its attempts to hold on to power” (Kairos Theologians 78). This “State Theology” achieves its goals not only by misinterpreting Scripture, but also by twisting Biblical concepts to its own advantage. Examples of this include abusing the idea of “law and order” to control people, using Communism as a symbol of evil to demonize opponents

of the State, and deliberately using the name of God in its speech to justify itself (49). By choosing to address this brand of theology first, the authors of *The Kairos Document* make it clear that their intention is to eradicate the old, corrupt patterns of thought so they can introduce their own ideas later.

To do this, the authors not only expose the faults in the State Theology's rhetoric but also employ rhetoric of their own. For example, when criticizing the State's usage of the phrase "law and order," the Kairos Theologians say, "this *law* is the unjust and discriminatory laws of apartheid and this *order* is the organised and institutionalised disorder of oppression" (Kairos Theologians 51). They thus expose the truth behind the euphemism to show how the State attempts to make people feel guilty for breaking the "law" of their oppressive system; at the same time, they use words like "unjust" and "oppression" to create a negative perception of the apartheid administration as a way of reinforcing their own argument.

The same effect of refuting State rhetoric with new rhetoric is seen when the authors refute the State Theology's usage of the Scriptural text Romans 13:1-7 as justification for the rule of the government. By studying the context of the passage, the Kairos Theologians dispel the assumption that the text is a general statement on the rule of the State and claim that Paul, the author of Romans, is "simply not addressing the issue of a just or unjust State or the need to change one government for another," but rather is speaking of a State that is "*there to serve God for your benefit,*" as the text itself says (Kairos Theologians 51). Commentators such as Gabriel Ndhlovu have delved further into the text for its original Greek meaning, and have found that the word for "servant" used in Romans 13:4, "diakonos," has been used elsewhere in Scripture by Jesus, specifically in Matthew 20:25-26, in direct contrast to rulers who "exercise lordship over" people. Ndhlovu makes the point from this that according to Scripture, the kind of ruling from

the State that “exercises lordship” is a “manner of governance that is unacceptable,” whereas the servant kind of ruling is “the acceptable and godly alternative” (Ndhlovu 87). The argument goes, therefore, that an authority that fails to serve the people and begins asserting lordship over the people is an unacceptable authority. the Kairos Theologians extend this argument by connecting such an authority with the beast of Revelation 13, a servant of the devil (Kairos Theologians 51). In this way, the Kairos Theologians not only dissolve the basis for the apartheid regime’s legitimacy, but also accuse it of being evil in nature due to its domineering ruling structure.

Having exposed the evils of the State Theology, *The Kairos Document* moves to Church Theology, arguing that Church Theology’s neutral approach to criticizing the apartheid regime is inadequate for resisting oppression. Throughout their critique, the Kairos Theologians illustrate a very clear dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed as a key theme for refuting the neutral, on-the-fence stance of “English-speaking” church leaders. For instance, when addressing Church Theology’s generalized appeal for “reconciliation,” the Kairos Theologians assert that “nowhere in the Bible or in Christian tradition has it ever been suggested that we ought to try to reconcile good and evil, God and the devil. We are supposed to do away with evil, injustice oppression and sin—not come to terms with it” (Kairos Theologians 56). The claim is thus made that the apartheid regime is inherently evil and therefore irreconcilable; in fact, the Kairos Theologians go so far as to say, “No reconciliation is possible in South Africa *without justice*, without the total dismantling of apartheid” (56). *The Kairos Document* thus leaves proponents of Church Theology with no alternative but to choose a side between oppressor and oppressed.

The Kairos Document also argues against the privatized nature of Church Theology’s spirituality, further diminishing the basis on which the Church seeks to maintain neutrality. As

the Kairos Theologians note, “spirituality has tended to be an other-worldly affair that has very little, if anything at all, to do with the affairs of this world...It is precisely this kind of spirituality that, when faced with the present crisis in South Africa, leaves so many Christians and Church leaders in a state of near paralysis” (61). This isolated, individualistic kind of spirituality goes against what the Kairos Theologians believe Christianity is about; to them, “a truly Biblical spirituality would penetrate into every aspect of human existence and would exclude nothing from God’s redemptive will” (61). By calling Christians to let their faith inform and motivate every part of their lives, the Kairos Theologians prompt believers to engage in politics with a Christian perspective to tackle problems in the present. Allan Aubrey Boesak describes this approach as such: “When we are seeing and contemplating ‘the things above,’ in other words, the desire of God for love, compassionate justice and peace, we cannot be content with living in this unjust world” (Boesak 74). By this logic, a Christian seeing the world with a godly perspective should see the injustice of the world with a mind for God’s “compassionate justice” and seek to resolve the problem, not distance oneself away from it. In putting forth this perspective on spirituality, then, *The Kairos Document* forces the Church to take a side—the side of the oppressed, to be exact—and leaves it with no choice otherwise.

One criticism that is shared between the Church Theology and the State Theology is the lack of social analysis, which serves as part of the foundation of Prophetic Theology. In the State Theology, this lack of social analysis is present in the failure to read Romans 13:1-7 contextually; while proponents of State Theology use it as a general justification of State rule, the Kairos Theologians point out that “Paul was writing to a particular Christian community in Rome, a community that had its own particular problems in relation to the State at that time and in those circumstances” (Kairos Theologians 50). As discussed before, these circumstances were

such that the passage, in context, cannot be applied generally. Likewise, the Church Theology's conception of "reconciliation" was also too general, as it sought to apply the principle of reconciliation to every conflict. As the Kairos Theologians explain, such is not the case; while a private quarrel may be resolved with reconciliation, "there are other conflicts in which one side is right and the other wrong. There are conflicts where one side is a fully armed and violent oppressor while the other side is defenceless and oppressed" (56). The gross generalizations made by both State Theology and Church Theology contrast sharply with the behavior of the original prophets of the Old Testament, who, according to John De Gruchy, "did not speak in balanced theological generalisations but spoke to the actuality of their situation" (De Gruchy 1). In fact, the contextualized, critical mentality exhibited by the Kairos Theologians in refuting the arguments of the State and Church Theologies, in the two passages above and throughout *The Kairos Document*, reflects this behavior from the prophets; it is indicative of the "Prophetic Theology," rooted in a "*reading of the signs of the times*" (Kairos Theologians 63), being put into practice. Therefore, by critiquing the State and Church Theologies' lack of social analysis, the Kairos Theologians display their own awareness of the times that allows them to speak against the current oppression.

By synthesizing this social awareness with Scriptural analysis in a "Prophetic" manner, *The Kairos Document* builds support for the argument that Scripture sides with the marginalized and the oppressed. It accomplishes this by associating the contemporary situation of oppression in South Africa with that of the Israelites according to Scripture, citing both the Israelites' external oppression under the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Romans and the internal oppression under Israel's corrupt kings and, later, chief priests and Pharisees (Kairos Theologians 64-66). The authors tie these events to the contemporary setting by referencing the Scriptural texts on the

Israelites lamenting their oppression, claiming that “In South Africa today, in this our KAIROS, more than ever the people of the townships can identify fully with these descriptions of suffering, oppression and tyranny” (65). To a largely Christian audience, this association with the Israelites of the Bible generates sympathy for the cause of those resisting the apartheid regime, as the regime is then labeled the oppressor on par with the ancient empires of Scripture that conquered the Israelites.

The Kairos Document makes an even bolder claim by arguing that God is on the side of the oppressed, and therefore against the apartheid regime; in doing so, it further justifies its own cause by directly associating itself with God. The association is a clear inversion of the State’s use of the name of God as described in the section on State Theology, since God is shown to support the oppressed rather than the oppressor. The claim to allegiance with God is also made in tandem with the previous connection of suffering, as it is argued that “Jesus associated himself with the poor and the oppressed and as the suffering (or oppressed) servant of Yahweh he suffered and died for us” (66). Thus, Jesus is shown to have suffered alongside the oppressed, and is suggested to continue to suffer alongside the oppressed South Africans; however, the argument goes still farther to show that God is the liberator of the South Africans as well. In fact, the Kairos Theologians argue that “a regime that has made itself the enemy of the people has also made itself the enemy of God,” for “people are made in the image and likeness of God and whatever we do to the least of them we do to God” (69). This attitude towards oppressors reflects what Boesak describes as a “kairos consciousness,” which “understands injustice and injury inflicted upon God’s children as wounds inflicted *upon God*” (Boesak 12). By claiming not only that God suffers alongside the oppressed, but also that the oppressors have actively made

themselves His enemy, *The Kairos Document* not only justifies its position but also threatens the deliverance of justice upon the apartheid regime.

Consequently, having found a basis in contextualized Scriptural analysis for opposing the present government, *The Kairos Document* empowers its denouncement of the apartheid regime as an illegitimate authority with the true authority of Scripture. Having observed the ties between Biblical oppression and the contemporary situation, the authors of *The Kairos Document* come to the conclusion of renouncing the apartheid regime based on the principle that if a ruler becomes tyrannical—an “enemy of the common good”—it forfeits its “moral right to govern” (68). They argue that because the apartheid regime “tries to rule in the exclusive interests of whites and not in the interests of all, it ends up ruling in a way that is not even in the interests of those whites” (69), thus being “hostile to the common good *in principle*” (68) and therefore incapable of governing. *The Kairos Document* was not alone in its time in condemning the moral legitimacy of apartheid; at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) Ottawa General Council in 1982, the WARC declared a *Status Confessionis*—a term that Lennart Henriksson defines as “literally a situation of confessing” and a question that “has to do with the heart of the gospel” (Henriksson 165-166)—in which “apartheid thereby was declared a sin and the theological justification of it a theological heresy” (162). In classifying apartheid as a sin, it stood to reason that the government that practiced apartheid had lost its moral legitimacy. Thus, by this logic, the authors of *The Kairos Document* provide their own justification for opposing the apartheid regime.

By arguing that the apartheid regime has no moral legitimacy, the authors of *The Kairos Document* also open up the argument that civil disobedience against the regime, albeit the sort checked by the moral guidance of the church, is in fact necessary. This is argued on the grounds

that “*the Church cannot collaborate with tyranny*” (Kairos Theologians 74) and also on the words of Acts 5:29, quoted as ““We must obey God rather than man (human beings)”” (52). The Kairos Theologians thus base their argument not only on personal conscience, but also on the higher law detailed in Scripture. The Prophetic exercise of searching the Word of God “for a message that is relevant to what we are experiencing in South Africa today” (63), having led the Kairos Theologians to an awareness of Biblical themes of oppression in the contemporary setting, brings them also to resist the State and its “Court Theology” as the original prophets did. This approach has also been the basis for other forms of theological resistance, such as the Black Theology of liberation; Vuyani S. Vellem describes this form of liberation as a theology that “challenges forms of power, such as racism, patriarchy, sexism and economic exclusion, which perpetuate the oppression of the poor” (Vellem 3). Thus, the use of Prophetic Theology and similar theologies becomes a tool of resistance against oppression.

The Kairos Document’s effect as a call to action was not only felt in South Africa, but also in the world abroad. The call was first responded to by the Concerned Evangelicals, who wrote the *Evangelical Witness in South Africa* as a self-critique of the Evangelical churches resembling *The Kairos Document*’s statements about Church Theology; this document was followed by *A Relevant Pentecostal Witness*, which provided a similar critique from the Pentecostal denomination. Then the effects of *The Kairos Document* took on a global scale as a “kairos movement” was formed, with regions such as Central America, Europe, and other African nations drafting their own Kairos Documents (Leonard, *passim*). These documents were not merely responses to the South African situation, but to each region’s own struggles with problems such as oppression, colonial influence, inequality, and other forms of injustice. Thus, by arguing against the injustices present in its own situation, *The Kairos Document* not only

succeeded in resisting the apartheid regime but also set the moral and rhetorical standard by which others found the strength to resist.

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