

THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE:
THE "ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY"

von August William Habelgaarn, Lansdowne

The purpose of my paper is not so much to present a focus upon the history of Christianity as a source for social justice, but to try and show the church, here and now, as an alternative reality for change. It is the aim of this paper to make it self-evident that the committed christian community has the responsibility and ability, when reviewing their status in society, to see it not as a simple meaningless decree of fate, but as their own opportunity for meaningful witness and ministry.

Let us first of all look at the local Church as an "alternative community" Perhaps it will be helpful to seek an understanding of what this "alternative community" is, by looking at the biblical word "ecclesia" usually translated as congregation or church. With "ecclesia" we are simply reminded of the fact that the church is not an institution or a building but people. People who have been called out of the world to be citizens of the Kingdom of God. As the people of God they have in Him their beginning and end, and are fully committed to Him.

The congregation or local Church is the gathered people of God, all called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to faith, obedience and complete devotion in love. As a people of God they are all equal (Gal. 3 v 28: So there is no difference between Jews and gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women, all are one in union with Christ Jesus).

As a people of God called by Himself into being it can never merely be a free association of like-minded religious people. God calls people from every race, tribe, nation and language to serve Him, witness to Him, glorify Him, but also giving loving service to the neighbour. Everyone belongs to the people of God through God's call, and there should be no attempt to make the Church private and exclusive. The Church as such a community, is, therefore, not meant to be seen just as an eschatological reality, but as the "alternative community" now already.

What I am trying to say is, that the local Church should reveal the gospel message of Jesus Christ as people baptised in the death of this Christ, united in the sharing of His suffering and death at the celebration of Holy Communion, but also, by the experience with Christ, are directed into daily life with the object to witness and service.

In as much as this "alternative community" is in this world, even if it is not of this world, it cannot escape the pains and suffering of man. The Church is continuously challenged to present it's credentials, to state whom it is representing in this world. It should be clear that this "alternative community", therefore, cannot be negative towards socio-economic and political questions. The people of God cannot "pass by on the other side" like the priest

and Levite of the parable, while a neighbour is wounded, and is bleeding to death. That the Church of Jesus Christ has had an effective influence towards change on a society is even recorded in the book of Acts where we read: "These men have turned the world upside down." This they have done by having discussions with the people, quoting and explaining the scriptures and proving from them that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and saying that Jesus is the Christ. This simple witness caused trouble everywhere. This brought the accusation that they were breaking the laws of Caesar and they were consequently prosecuted.

But also the Church in South Africa has from earliest times been involved in the affairs of Society. The call for the first missionary to South Africa, for example, came from two missionaries of the Danish-Halle Mission, viz. Ziegenbalg and Plütschau, on their way in 1706 to India. They were greatly struck by the degraded and neglected condition of the indigenous people (hottentots) whom they saw at the Cape. They directed a letter to the authorities in Europe, drawing their attention to the deplorable condition of the heathen at the Cape, and praying for an ambassador of the cross who would proclaim the Gospel. It is rather significant that these missionaries who came from a very pietistic background were moved to action because of a necessity to change the social conditions and the life of a people.

Just as much one is struck by the actions of the pioneer missionary, Georg Schmidt, being the natural consequences of his witness and service. There are two things that I wish to mention here. The first is the priority he placed on education not only as a means to read and write, but as a way to become selfdependent in every respect including leadership and economic selfsupport. The second is how he demonstrated the change brought about in the daily relationship between him and the indigenous people after their baptism. Schmidt instructed them no longer to address him as "Heer", Master, but brother. Through baptism they were incorporated into the one family called into being by Christ under the cross, and this must be understood not only in a spiritual way, but should become real and practical in personal relationships. We have in this attitude of Georg Schmidt certainly an attempt to visibly put up a sign of the alternative community, called into being not by an organisation or institution of man, but by God through the death and resurrection of His Son. The importance of this happening might become more significant if it is remembered that Georg Schmidt did not come to establish a denominational Church at the Cape, but with the instruction to gather souls for the lamb.

Perhaps we should also at this point draw attention to the fact that this harmless witness and service to a people who were found in a degraded neglected condition led to the banishment of this pioneer by the Government of the day, after representation of a sister church, as early as 1744.

But because of this experience it is, therefore, very interesting that the Dutch Reformed Church, after so many of its members during the thirties moved to the cities found it necessary to appoint a Commission with terms of reference that required from the Commission to collect facts in regard to the socioeconomic conditions of its members in the cities, and to interpret these facts in such a way that the programme of action by the church for the

future could be established. I need not say that the report was that of the conditions of a deplorable, degraded, oppressed "Afrikaner" people struggling to free themselves from the crushing heel of British imperialism. The Church, however, could not turn a blind eye to the conditions and leave this item from the Church's Agenda and programme of action.

The "alternative community" has no other rule than the Gospel of Jesus Christ and containing within it the ethical request of the sermon on the Mount. It is the message of this Gospel: that it is God's will that there shall be a new world, a new society, but not one built on ideas, on theories, on ideologies, but on reality. In order to come to reality the christian should not escape from society, or even use prayer (as I have recently heard someone saying) "as a religious escape from life", or listen to the Sunday sermon merely as a lullaby for rocking one to sleep, if not literally than figuratively, into a dreamworld of selfsatisfaction and selfrighteousness.

Prof. Gollwitzer said of Prof. K. Barth: "On Sundays as during the week one matter was of importance to the latter: the gospel, the concern about God, the concern about being a christian. Theology and National Economy, Sermon and Politics belong unsolvable together; politics interprets the sermon and the sermon interprets the politics". When I asked a black politically active but church-active woman in America what do you expect from a Sermon in respect of change in society, she replied: I expect no political address, but expect from the sermon that which will help me to meet the challenges during the week at the Market Place.

The "alternative community" is not foreign to society but is living in the continuous tension of being in and not of this world. A community which has as its basic requirements: Witness, Service and Unity.

The local church will certainly fulfill these requirements if the church is what it is called to be: light and yeast and salt. The local Church must continually have its presence felt in the midst of society experiences. If the church is worth its salt it should be the place where the gospel is proclaimed, where the divine Word reconciles man with God and man with his neighbour. Peter Schulzer a Swiss Journalist in his book "Schwarze Intelligenz" comes to the conclusion that a solution to the South African problems is in the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is present on both sides of the colour line. I am inclined to agree with him if the church on both sides of the line is what it is called to be and the places where they meet are houses of prayers and not dens of robbers.

We are living in a changing world, and changes in society mean new tasks for the local congregation or church, but these changes should not threaten its identity. It is there to bring the whole gospel to the whole world until the end of the world.

Kirsten E. Skydsgaard of the University of Copenhagen in an essay wrote this sentence: "It is necessary to keep two statements together: 'the church continues forever' and 'the church must always be reformed'. Both sentences must be understood in a radical way: the church is God's, it is his people which cannot perish, chosen for the sake of the world, the beginning of the

Kingdom of God. At the same time it is always tempted to emancipate itself from God, to become its own Lord, to follow the anti-christ". No doubt internal and external forces will always be at work to turn the church aside from its testimony and its mission. Since the church so easily becomes guilty because "mankind's eternal demons - money, power, the flesh - bent on being adored, will ravage the church itself, seeking to devour those who stand up against them and hold them at bay", it should be repeatedly reminded: 'Do not be conformed to this world' (Rom. 12 v 2). It is a call to examine critically in order to preserve what is proved to be the will of God, what is good and perfect, but also to recognise the structures and elements that exercise a power of authority and destruction. The church needs, to sum it all up, constant rethinking, penitence, radical recognition and corresponding action.

In South Africa we are facing a rejection of the Church by the younger generation especially. As far as they are concerned, to use the words of Pierre Bigo, "the church has yielded to the temptation in the desert by bowing down before worldly prestige, more preoccupied with its own development than with confronting the obvious iniquities of power and wealth". The church is to them not that Christ founded light of the world and salt of the earth community which is present to help and show direction in a world so secularised that it has lost a sense of christian values, but one that keeps silent instead of testifying, or seek alliances and resorts to compromises when confronted by the powerful.

But the Church has the flame "in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4 v 7-9). In the midst of a world where injustice and the lust for power triumph a "little remnant of christians", as someone said, "who live their faith, confront the powerful of this world, and are the bearers of a new society". The "alternative community" is a community on the march undismayed and not afraid because it is not alone.

The story is told of a Jew who had previously refused to be baptised and was ready after repeated visits to a church to become a christian. He explained it to a christian friend, who had expected a different outcome of the visits, in the following way: although the minister and his assistants, inspite of their best efforts had not managed to destroy the christian religion, it must evidently be upheld by other powers.

I submit the powers are the living reality of an ever present Christ and indwelling Holy Spirit. These are the powers that must operate not only through the church's office bearers but in every member of the alternative community. It is the community living as one in fellowship with Christ and having discovered the gifts God has given them, that should act not as an anti-society unit, but simply revealing a way of life in obedience to the One who has called them, clergy and laity, to His service and mission.

When a deputation of the Christian Council of S.A. once interviewed a minister of State about a draft Bill to which the churches had strong principled objection, the minister at one stage remarked: Why do you always want to do

things differently. Whereupon the late Rev. Basil Brown the General Secretary at that time immediately responded: No, Mr. Minister, we are not wanting to be different, we have always done things this way. The alternative community is not one to move into the orbit of the State, but it could be the practices of the state obstruct the community progressing on their way to stand face to face with the coming Lord of the world.

I am concluding this paper by quoting two verses from the Bible: Phil. 1 v 27 and 28: "Now, the important thing is that your way of life should be as the Gospel of Christ requires, so that I will hear that you are standing firm with one common purpose and that with only one desire you are fighting together for the faith of the Gospel. Don't be afraid of your enemies; always be courageous, and this will prove to them that they will loose and that you will win, because it is God who gives you the victory". "Vicit Agnus Noster-Eum Sequamur"!

Zusammenfassung von A. W. Habelgaarn:

Die Rolle der Ortsgemeinde im sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Wandel der Zeit:
Die alternative Gemeinschaft

Ziel des Vortrages ist es zu zeigen, daß die christliche Gemeinde dem Wandel der Zeit nicht wie einem sinnlosen Schicksal ausgeliefert ist, sondern ihn als "eigene Gelegenheit zu sinnvollem Zeugnis und Dienst" begreifen lernt. Der Begriff "alternative Gemeinschaft" besagt, daß die Kirche durch Gott aus allen Rassen, Stämmen, Völkern und Sprachen zu einer neuen Gemeinde herausgerufen ist, die mehr als ein freier Verein gleichgesinnter religiöser Menschen ist. Darum darf es aber auch keinen Versuch innerhalb oder außerhalb der Kirche geben, sie auf eine "private" oder "exklusive" Gruppe beschränken zu wollen. Die Gemeinde als "alternative Gemeinschaft" ist nicht bloß eine "eschatologische Wirklichkeit", sondern besteht als Gemeinschaft der Getauften und mit Christus Verbundenen schon jetzt in dieser Welt. Sie reagiert darum nie nur negativ auf die sozio-ökonomischen und politischen Fragen und Prozesse der Zeit, sondern hat selbst einen "wirksamen Einfluß zur Veränderung einer Gesellschaft".

Der Verfasser verdeutlicht dies an der Missionsgeschichte Südafrikas. "Die Kirche in Südafrika war von Anfang an durch Fragen der Gesellschaft herausgefordert. Der Ruf nach dem ersten Missionar in Südafrika zum Beispiel, ging von den beiden Missionaren der Dänisch-Halleschen Mission, Ziegenbalg und Plütschan, aus, die 1706 nach Indien reisten. Sie waren angesichts der niedrigen und vernachlässigten Lebensbedingungen der Eingeborenen (Hottentotten), die sie am Kap sahen, tief erschüttert. In einem Brief an die Vorgesetzten in Europa lenkten sie die Aufmerksamkeit auf den bedauernswerten Zustand der Heiden am Kap und baten um einen Boten des Kreuzes zur Verkündigung des Evangeliums. Es ist bedeutsam, daß diese Missionare mit einem sehr pietistischen Hintergrund angesichts der Notwendigkeit, die sozialen Bedingungen und die Lebensmöglichkeiten eines Volkes zu verändern, zur Aktion getrieben wurden.

Ebenso beeindruckt ist man durch das, was Georg Schmidt, der Pionier der

Brüdermission in Südafrika, in der natürlichen Konsequenz seines Zeugnisses und Dienstes tat. Ich möchte zweierlei erwähnen. Erstens legte er das Schwergewicht seiner Arbeit auf die Erziehung, die ihm nicht nur ein Mittel zum Lesen und Schreiben, sondern ein Weg zur Selbständigkeit in jeder Hinsicht einschließlich Leistungsfunktionen und wirtschaftlicher Unabhängigkeit war. Zweitens machte er den durch die Taufe herbeigeführten Lebenswandel in den alltäglichen Beziehungen zwischen ihm und den Eingeborenen sichtbar, indem er sie unterwies, ihn nicht länger als "Heer", Herr, sondern Bruder anzureden. Durch die Taufe waren sie in eine Familie, die durch Christus unter dem Kreuz gegründet ist, eingegliedert und dies darf nicht nur geistlich verstanden werden, sondern soll auch in den persönlichen Beziehungen wirklich und praktisch werden."

Die alternative Gemeinschaft steht der Gesellschaft nicht fremd gegenüber, sondern lebt in der kontinuierlichen Spannung des Seins-in-der-Welt aber nicht -von-der-Welt, gegründet auf die drei Säulen: Zeugnis, Dienst und Einigkeit.

Von hier aus erhofft Habelgaarn auch eine Lösung der gegenwärtigen Spannungen: "Der Schweizer Journalist Peter Schulzer kommt in seinem Buch "Schwarze Intelligenz" zu dem Schluß, daß eine Lösung der Südafrika-Probleme in der Tatsache besteht, daß das Evangelium von Jesus Christus auf beiden Seiten der Farbgränze wirkt und lebendig ist. Ich möchte ihm zustimmen, wenn die Kirche auf beiden Seiten der Farbgränze wirklich das ist, wozu sie gerufen ist und ihre Versammlungsräume Häuser des Gebetes und nicht Räuberhöhlen sind."