
The Many Voices of South Africa

by John Brunt

I went to South Africa about a year ago to teach a course at Helderberg College, near Cape Town. I am acutely aware that a few weeks in South Africa hardly makes one an expert on the complex problems in that strife-torn country. What follows is merely an account of some of the people I met in South Africa and some of their views. In recounting our conversations, I have changed only a few details to avoid violating confidences.

Black Pastors

I sat at the lunch table with two black pastors as they expressed their frustrations at the policy of apartheid. One of them told of having his family moved from the part of South Africa where they had lived for three generations because the government determined that members of their tribe should live in a "homeland" many miles away. The family was uprooted and forced to move. When he was ready to go to college he secured permission to leave

the homeland, but his wife was not granted the same privilege. After a year and a half, she finally received papers permitting her to join him while he was in college.

When his wife presented the documents to the local authorities where her husband lived, however, one man simply tore them up and told her that they had enough blacks taking jobs in that area. She must return to the homeland within 10 days or her husband would have to go back as well. In the end, the pastor's wife illegally joined him for the last two and a half years. All of that time they lived in fear, knowing that if she were caught, both of them would be sent back to the homeland and his education probably ended.

He went on to say, "The problem is that we don't belong in our own country. We have no participation, no say over our own lives. If whites would simply sit down with us and give us a way to participate and have some control over our own destiny, they would find that we are not unreasonable—but we want to belong."

His friend joined in and said, "We have been made outsiders in our own country, and if we say anything about it, we land in jail." I asked about sanctions and disinvestment. One replied that while he knew it would hurt blacks the most, he nevertheless favored disinvestment because nothing else would bring change. I asked them about the attitudes of black Adventists. One of them humorously replied, "White Adventists talk

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progressive, but they pray nationalist (the white party in power); black Adventists talk loyalty to the government, but they pray for the boys in the bush.’’

White Pastor and Layman

Next, I'd like for you to meet a white pastor. He is an Afrikaaner, one of those descended from Dutch settlers. He argues that reform is overdue, but that Americans must understand that the country is moving in the right direction. Things can't move too fast or there will be chaos. The whites have been in South Africa longer than Europeans have been in America, and if a "one person = one vote" policy is instated, they will be pushed out to the sea and their culture destroyed. There will also be war among the black tribes with untold suffering. To prevent such destruction and maintain order, he argues, some things will have to be less than ideal. Blacks must learn to trust the whites and realize that Afrikaaners have the best interests of everyone at heart.

On another occasion, a white layman expressed many of the same ideas as he told of a relative's farm in Zimbabwe. At one time it produced abundant crops, but now that the blacks have taken over the country, it sits in shambles with no fuel to run the modern equipment. He wonders why blacks can't understand that they are better off with the help of the whites. With tears in his eyes he wonders, "Why can't they understand that they need us?"

Black Pastors From Zimbabwe

Two black pastors from Zimbabwe are good friends, but as members of two different tribes, they have quite different perspectives. One is a member of the Shona tribe, which is currently in power in Zimbabwe. He tells how difficult

things were during the stormy days of the revolutionary war. When I asked him if the suffering was worth it, he smiled and said, "It is good to have our freedom."

His friend, however, is a member of the Ndbele tribe, the tribe that is not in power. He told of the persecution that has come to members of his tribe since the revolution. He has been pursued by rioters for failing to show up for rallies to shout slogans in support of the ruling government. More than once he has been afraid for his life. He goes so far as to say that life was better under Ian Smith. He hates apartheid, but he would

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rather move to South Africa, if possible, where he wouldn't have to live in the same kind of fear.

Colored Layman

Next I'd like to introduce a layman of mixed race, a very pious man who obviously loves his church and is very loyal to it. But he has a hard time understanding why there are some, even within his church, who will not worship with him. He has obvious admiration for some of the black leaders, such as Bishop Tutu, but worries about what will happen if there is a black takeover. He fears that things might be even worse for him then. Finally, he asks a very serious question. "What is the curse placed on Canaan in the book of Genesis? Is it really a curse placed on those of dark skin?" I assured him that it was no such thing. As we looked at the biblical text together, he seemed glad to know what the text actually meant, but with tears in his

eyes he wondered aloud how people could be so prejudiced against him just because of color unless perhaps there really were some kind of curse.

A Group of Students

My class of 35, all ministers, came from seven nations (South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Malawi) and spoke nine languages. They represented three racial groups—whites, blacks and those of mixed race called “coloreds” in South Africa. Their rich cultural diversity was especially apparent when our class on New Testament teachings discussed love, marriage and divorce. Some ministers said their wives had been chosen for them. Others were still making payments on the bride price. In fact, the wife of one minister had almost been repossessed by her family because the minister fell behind in his payments.

These conversations only begin to scratch the surface of the complexity of life in South Africa. One thing is clear, however. No amount of complexity can justify the oppression and discrimination that exists in South Africa. But is there hope?

I must admit that I was both discouraged and encouraged by my stay. I was most discouraged by the fact that over and over again, as I talked to people of all races in the country, I found clear portrayals of the problem of oppression. But then I always asked the same questions: “What do you think should happen? If you had it in your power to bring about a solution, what would it be?” Again and again, I heard the same response: “I don’t know. It’s too late. Things have gone too far. I don’t know what we can do now.”

What encouraged me was my students, for there I saw hope. During the quarter, I thought again and again of the passage in Revelation where John says:

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9, RSV).

During my weeks in South Africa through these students, I caught a glimpse of the fact that this text in Revelation 7 is not just a promise for the future, but a paradigm for the present. In class we discussed quite openly the issues of racism that confront their part of the world. After class we ate together around the same tables and washed our dishes together, often singing hymns as we worked. We lived together in the same dormitory basement.

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One of the most moving experiences of my life was the communion service that we held the night before I left. We were all gathered around one table. White hands washed black feet, and black hands washed white feet. There were testimonies of what this fellowship had meant. What a contrast from the powder keg around us to share these moments of genuine Christian warmth and fellowship. It convinced me that—in spite of complexity and difficulty—where Christ is lifted up, there is hope that prejudices can be overcome. Even in a place like South Africa, life can be a foretaste of that great day when people of every nation, kindred, tongue and people will gather around the throne and give glory to the Lamb.