

Compassionate Acts as Missional Theosis: A Call to the Evangelical Church of Southern Africa (ECSA)

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Abstract

The Church is God's agency to bring about well-being in the world (Harold, 2018a). This bringing out of well-being to humanity call for an understanding of justice and compassion through a missional reading of the Bible and its intersection with "actions" of the Evangelical Church in post-apartheid South Africa. The aim of this article is two-fold, the first, is to examine the praxis of the Evangelical Church and its relevance to the marginalised in South Africa critically, and the second, is to help the ECSA understand that a missional reading or a missional hermeneutic through theosis brings about a correct understanding (*orthodoxy*) of compassion, justice and *the Missio Dei* leading to the right action (*orthopraxis*). Using literature, this article will explore and recommend ways the ECSA can act prophetically by speaking to and on behalf of the voiceless in South Africa. The researcher then employs the notion of *Theosis* to show that by acting compassionately, the Church reflects the very nature of God.

Keywords: Evangelical, Compassion, Missional, *Missio Dei*, Church, *Theosis*.

Introduction

The Evangelical Church in South Africa, hereafter referred to ECSA as observed by Hack (1993:302-304) "has, by and large, stayed away from social action against the South African government. It has endeavoured to take a neutral stand on political matters. At times individuals within the denomination have expressed themselves about politics, but their ideas have not been mutually shared or advocated by most of the members or leaders within the ECSA. He further states that it is also true to say that the ECSA is not known for its social service. This is an area where improvements need to be made". This practice may be due to a traditionally held evangelical notion that social actions have a political agenda rather than a spiritual one. In an interview (17/05/2022) with Rev S. Isaac, a senior minister within the ECSA, he states that this was the reason for the ECSA noting joining the South African Council of Churches because they saw this ecumenical movement as liberal with a political commitment to communism, and therefore not spiritual. This pietistic attitude to life within the ECSA compartmentalised the individual into a social and spiritual being. This compartmentalisation or dualism led to very few social upliftment ministries within its context because of a theology that teaches saving the soul is more important than speaking to social injustices that diminishes the *Imago Dei* in human beings.

The History of Evangelical Church in South Africa

The first missional attempt to penetrate the greater Indian community with the gospel was in 1882 when Dr Andrew Murray, a missionary from the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, speaking at a Keswick, invited Willian Spencer Walton to South Africa. This

collaboration with Dr Andrew Murray and Mr Spencer Walton in 1882 gave rise to the Cape General Mission, with Mr Walton becoming its first Director and Dr Andrew its first President.

During this time, another Mission was organised in Natal called the Southeast Africa Evangelistic Mission, with its headquarters in Durban. In 1884, The Cape General Mission and the Southeast Evangelistic Mission amalgamated, forming the South African General Mission hereafter (SAGM). In 1896, Spencer Walton took up residence in Durban to work among the Indians. Mahatma Gandhi spoke affectionately of Spencer Walton "When I was in Durban, Mr Walton the head of the SAGM, found me out, I almost became a member of his family...this friendship kept alive my interest in religion" (Engles & Mc Lewin, 1970).

Two women, Miss M. Day and Miss E. Hargreaves, who commenced studying the Tamil language in Durban on Sunday mornings, would hold meetings in the barracks where Indians lived. Initially, much of their gospel communication was done through interpretation (Engles & Mc Lewin, 1970).

In 1898 these females found an opening to communicate the gospel on a sugar estate near Phoenix in modern day Kwazulu Natal Province. A house and a chapel were made available to them, giving rise to the Hope Mission Station. They soon commenced a school and had over 50 pupils. In 1901, the SAGM began its work among the Telegu-speaking Baptists. The meetings were in the Africa boating Company, Point Road, Durban barracks. The same year a young man of about 24 years walked into the mission office in Durban with a letter addressed to Dr Andrew Murray. He was Nelson Tomlinson from Australia. During his interview with Spencer Walton, Walton discovered that Tomlinson was born in India and could speak the Telegu language well and that he seemed to be the perfect answer to prayer for a missionary to work amongst the Indians. However, Nelson Tomlinson felt called to work amongst the Africans, so for a short time, he took a secular job. In the meantime, Mr J. S. Young, a SAGM missionary who worked mainly among the soldiers and sailors in Durban invited Nelson Tomlinson to go with him to the Telegu quarters of the Point Barracks and interpret for him. The reception which they received from the Indian people was very heartening, especially when the Indians realised that a white man could speak their language so well. In 1902, Nelson married his fiancée, also from Australia in Durban. In 1904, the Tomlinsons became missionaries to the Indians until their retirement in 1949. Initially, they were stationed in Phoenix to start a school for Indian Children (Engles & Mc Lewin, 1970).

On seeing opportunities to witness in Durban, Tomlinson returned to Durban. While working in Durban, Tomlinson, saw many indentured labourers were allocated to sugarcane plantations on the South Coast of Kwazulu- Natal. While attending a conference in Port Shepstone, Tomlinson discovered that some Indian have been in South Africa for over forty years and never heard the gospel. Mr Tomlinson had a vision of Indian churches like lighthouses along the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. In 1910 Tomlinson moved to Umzinto 50km South of Durban. In 1910, the first Indian Church of the South African General Mission was planted. In 1913, another church at Beneva was planted. The same year, a group of Christians in Illovo was praying for someone to come and help them, and in 1915 a church was also built at Illovo. The Indian ministry under Tomlinson grew, with other churches planted along the coast, like Port Shepstone, Park Rynie, Sezela. Alongside these churches, mission schools were also introduced to educate the community's children from Christian and Hindu families (Engles & Mc Lewin, 1970).

Due to the work of Evangelists like M. Timothy, P Daniel, T.P Stephen, P David and V. Peter, despite the persecution that came their way, by Indians of the Hindu belief. These men were resilient in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Within 11 years of planting the first Church, in 1921, the Indian Church of SAGM held its first conference. By 1924,

churches became financially independent, thus choosing Mr T. Stephen to be its first treasurer and H. Samuel to be its secretary (Hack, 1993).

It did not take long for the Indian congregations to take financial accountability for each of their own churches. In 1951, the missionaries ceased to serve as officers of the denomination and, in May 1966 gave complete autonomy to the Indian Church, thus constituting the Evangelical Church in South Africa (ECSA), with Andrew Kodi becoming its first president. (Engles & Mc Lewin, 1970).

Today there are 30 self-administrated churches within the ECSA along the South Coast of Kwazulu-Natal with full-time trained theological practitioners.

The understanding of social engagement within ECSA

The influence of Western missionaries on the theology of the Evangelical Church in South Africa is still prominent today with an understanding that the social engagement of “doing justice” is inextricably linked to the loss of sound doctrine, spiritual dynamism, and a watering down of the gospel. Therefore, within Evangelicalism, correct doctrine takes precedence over right action. Bebbington (2006:21) explains that, Evangelicals emphasise the atoning work of Christ on the cross (crucicentrism); the need for personal faith through conversion (conversions), the supreme value of the Bible (biblicism), and the binding obligation to missions (activism) formed the “during priorities of the evangelical movement throughout the English-speaking world”. This focus created a dysfunctional understanding of the world and how one engages it. From 1987-1989, while doing my undergraduate theological training at a conservative Evangelical Bible College in KZN, I asked my Systematic Theology lecturer: “What should be the response of the church to Apartheid? The answer he gave startled me “We are called to be obedient to the government of the land”. During the rule of the oppressive apartheid government, the Evangelical Church took a “policy of no comment” remaining silent while people of colour were seen to be second-class citizens (Harold, 2018).

De Gruchy (1986:33) protested against the Church's complicity with the apartheid government. What could have led most *Evangelical* churches to turn a blind eye to the murder and dehumanisation of the masses in South Africa (*emphasis mine*)? He concludes that it is the unbiblical privatisation of piety which separated prayer and the struggle for justice. Evangelicalism had become dangerously individualistic and “otherworldly” spiritual. This silence advanced the social legislation and engineering of the past government to dehumanise the masses within the South African population.

Evangelicalism came to be identified as a world-transformative faith. However, Evangelicals see the “social gospel” as the ‘Trojan horse’ of liberalism that turns away from a biblical form of mission that concentrates solely on personal salvation and church planting. Evangelicals seem to agree with Hauerwas (1991:45), who sees the current emphasis on justice and rights as the primary norm guiding the social witness of the Christian is, in fact, a mistake. He goes on to explain (1993:103) that the primary task of the church “is not to make the world the kingdom, but to be faithful to the kingdom by showing the world what it means to be a community of peace” This type of thinking discourages justice-based principles that enable praxis. Hauerwas (1997:190-195) does not see social justice as a response to the gospel, but rather as a reaction to the Enlightenment project thus making the Church complicit with the hegemonic liberalism of the world. While we cannot ignore the positive impact that Evangelicalism has on the growth of Christianity, the absence of social/public theology within Evangelicalism often left the Church voiceless in the context in which injustices needed to be challenged.

The Evangelical Church can only regain its voice through a proper understanding of compassion as part of the mission of God that calls us to act upon the socio-economic and

socio-political structures and systems that are causing injustice and pain in society, more so in South Africa. The gospel itself calls followers of Christ to social responsibility. Evangelicals should embrace the witness of the whole Bible, as it shows God's desire both for systemic economic justice and for personal compassion, respect and generosity towards the poor and needy, as reflected in The Cape Town Commitment of the Third Lausanne Congress held in Cape Town 2010:

Such love for the poor demands that we not only love mercy and deeds of compassion, but also that we do justice through exposing and opposing all that oppresses and exploits the poor. 'We must not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.'[30] We confess with shame that on this matter we fail to share God's passion, fail to embody God's love, fail to reflect God's character and fail to do God's will. We give ourselves afresh to promoting justice, including solidarity and advocacy on behalf of the marginalised and oppressed. We recognise such struggle against evil as a dimension of spiritual warfare that can only be waged through the victory of the cross and resurrection, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and with constant prayer

(<https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>).

For the Church is called to be an audible public presence of God, and retreats into invisibility only by betraying her calling, to be on mission with God, she loses her most important purpose and reason for her existence (*raison d'être*). In the words of de Gruchy (2005: 360) "the mission of the Church, thus draws it inexorably into the task of development, which consciously seeks to enhance the self-identified livelihoods of the poor. This is not an optional extra for the Church, but is at the very heart of what it means to be the people of God, seeking to be faithful to the *missio Dei* as manifest in Jesus Christ". The point of being missional is to share the love of God in word and deed as aptly reminded by the Apostle James (James 2:17) "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (NIV).

The Missio Dei

While there are many recent theological engagements within Evangelicalism on the Mission of God, namely the works of Christopher Wright , *Mission of God and The Mission Of God: Unlocking the Bible Grand Narrative*; on the Gospel and social responsibility, namely the works of Jamie Grant and Dewi A Huges (eds.) *Transforming the World?*, T. Keller's *Generous Justice* and O. Davies's work *The Theology of Compassion*, are indeed necessary works within Evangelicalism. Their works in some way reflect the false dichotomies of binary divisions between Christian tradition and human experience or theology and practice. Theology and the lived situation cannot be separated. Most of these works deal with the theology or the doctrine of God's Mission, Compassion and Poverty, but these works do not demonstrate how these doctrines/theologies can become the action or praxis within the Evangelical Church. Over the years, however, the kingdom of God and its significance to the mission of God have been brought into focus. Two differing opinions exist within evangelicalism. First, there is cooperate salvation now, but it is only limited to a conscious confession of Christ (Harold, 2018).

Furthermore, the leading advocate of this position was John Stott, the architect of the Lausanne Covenant and Ron Sider. Both Stott and Sider (1977:23) insist that "the kingdom of God in the New Testament is fundamentally a Christological concept and such may exist only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged as Lord" They (1977:23) further state that this righteous kingdom, however influences and impacts the society it engages. Therefore, political liberation is not salvation.

In focusing upon the Kingdom of God, speaking of salvation means a new life, a new community, and a new world. The new community is the Church, and the new world is spoken of only regarding the future. Sider and Parker (1985:105) argues that the salvation language as such cannot be used to refer to the imperfect emergence of justice and peace in society at large before the return of Christ, similarly to which Sider (1985:104) agrees that no New Testament claim speaks of the kingdom of God apart from the conscious confession of Christ. Thus salvation is personal and only refers to a personal confession of Jesus Christ to receive the salvation that Christ offers, thus enabling a person to live out the radical demand of this new kingdom. This understanding equates God's kingdom to the Church. Thus, like most Evangelical literature, prominence is given to belief rather than praxis.

A Call to the Evangelical Church in South Africa

Hampshire (1982:95) states, "Is it possible that a person might not be doing what he/she honestly say he/she will be doing, without being true that what he/she is not doing is what he or she is intended to do?" Wolf (2011) calls it "busy idleness." Like most Evangelical churches, the ECSA believes the only purpose of the Church is evangelisation. This is underpinned even more due to its premillennial pretribulation eschatological view. However, I argue that the mission of the Church is both evangelisation and development [human flourishing] (Conradie, 2005). An argument is therefore made for missional hermeneutic in reading the Bible, thus bringing into exploration the statement articulated by Wright (2006) that it is not much the case that God has a mission for his Church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the Church; Church was made for a mission- God's mission. Conradie (2005) elaborates this even further: "to speak of God's mission is to realise that mission is not primarily the work of the Church but the work of God. God's project is to establish the reign of God, not the church" Moltmann (1977: 64) writes, "It is not the Church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the Church".

Thus, missional hermeneutics is defined by Fensham (2011:43) as "To speak of missional hermeneutics then, is to talk of a hermeneutic in which the self-giving love of the community of God is the norm. The impulse for the marginalised comes not from 'above' but rather from the transcendent which is also immanent." This understanding of compassion calls for a radical decentring of self, and putting at risk the self, in the free re-enactment of the dispossessed state of those who suffer (Davies, 2001), for human action is a moral action. De Beer (2002:33) rightfully argues: "When we understand that God will's salvation, development and progress of all his creation, it gives us the impetus to look at any context in need of God's redemptive presence not because we are scared or in need security, but because God will it"

Understanding Compassion

Davies (2001:17) observes that in acknowledging God's image veiled in the presence of the other, we then come to understand our selfhood. Nouwen, McNeil and Morrison (1982:3-4) state that the word compassion means to "suffer with". Compassion requires us to enter spaces where we identify with the weak, vulnerable and powerless. Compassion, therefore, means full immersion in the condition of being human. Therefore, compassion is not "simple pity" but finds it is the purest expression unfolding in the incarnation of God. God's compassion becomes our compassion (Harold, 2022).

This principle of self-denying ("kenotic love") touches all levels of human experience and tries to make social harmony possible. This radical manifestation calls then for very reflection of personhood. Thus, the Church, as the alternative community, seeks to see the image of God in all persons in society (Harold, 2022). This calls for a radical shift, from theology to ministry, Stone (1996:43) elaborates that "ministry has a three-fold character: it is a

response to grace, it is participation in grace, and it is an offer of grace." Through the ministry of the Church, the work of restoration of the image of God in us is extended to the rest of the world. This calls for a very intentional entering into the suffering of 'the other' and working on behalf of their liberation from all types of oppressions.

Formulating revised forms of authentic and faithful practice.

While any practice should take the human need and experience seriously, that in itself is not the goal or purpose of the Church's action. The Church, therefore, should be concerned with the doing of the truth in action as reflected in Scripture. As Thiselton (2007:27) postulates that believing "is *action-orientated, situation-related*, and embedded in *the particularities and contingencies* of everyday living". In understanding our purposes, this approach will ensure and encourage that all our social engagement find faithful participation in the continuing gospel narrative, thus enabling faithful presence and action.

Our solidarity with fellow humans is often overlooked in asserting our individuality. Alford (ed.) *The Works of John Donne* Vol.3 (1839:574) expresses the truth of human solidarity:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the man. If the sea washes away a clod, *Africa* is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or thine own were: any person's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humanity, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells toll; it tolls for thee (*italics mine*).

Das (2016:182) asks the right question connection compassion with the *Missio Dei*:

A critical question needs to be answered at this point: Is compassion a uniquely Christian virtue that, in the mere demonstration of it, there will be recognition that compassionate people are followers of Christ?

Theosis

By emulating the just rule of God's kingdom, God, the character of God is revealed. We are to imitate Christ, *theosis* (deification, or divinization) as in "becoming like God by participating in the life of God." Furthermore, it is a highly transformative process whose aim is likeness to or full union with God. Gorman (2016:268) stated that it is imperative to note that the term and the reality it describes always maintain the creature-Creator distinction, even when a phrase like "becoming gods" is used to describe theosis, as has often been the case in the Christian tradition (due in part to the influence of Psalms 82:6; cf. John 10:34-36). *Theosis*, for the researcher, is the Church taking on certain divine attributes as a reflection of God's attributes, and she engages the world. Gorman (2016: 217) states that Maximus the Confessor illustrated theosis by comparing it to the placing of an iron sword in a fire, such that it remains an iron sword but also takes on certain properties of the fire — light and heat — by "participating" in it. He asserted that purpose of history was the Incarnation of the Son of God and then the theosis (Θέωσις) of humanity and the elevation of people due to God's grace (Juurikkala, 2020). Athanasius (1891) also indicates this when he states that Christ became man so that we might become God. Athanasius does not mean to say we get turned into God, but rather reflecting on the language used in Psalm 82, Athanasius indicates that by grace, in Christ, we are made like God the Son and conformed to His image. He is divine by nature, yet by grace, we are made 'partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). However, more famously, Irenaeus summarised the doctrine of theosis as Christ became what we are so, that we might become what he is (Gorman, 2016: 217).

Because God is compassionate, loving, and just through the Church these attributes ought to be manifested through her actions. When the ECSA acts compassionately, the holiness of God is also reflected through her actions, for in God there is no evil, calling the Church to act justly. While the identity of the Church is the bride of Christ, being made holy and blameless the Church is invited to be on mission with God (Ephesians 5:27), being sent into the world by God as the sent ones. Thus the Christian's spirituality consists of the mutual indwelling of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) and the believer. Such that the sent ones (believers) participate in the divine love and life, and therefore in the life-giving mission of God, demonstrating their likeness to God as God's children becoming more and more like God as they become like his Son through the work of the Spirit. Gorman (2018:2-8) clearly states that this "spirituality can be summarized in the phrase "abide and go," based on John 15:8". It is counter- and alter-cultural. It is missional.

Conclusion

How should ECSA respond to the injustices that exist around them? The researcher suggests it begins with an understanding of missional Theosis will motivate evangelicals to seek justice for the marginalised other through an understanding of compassion. Gruchy (2005:30) states that as a "Christian undertaking, development finds its primary theological grounding in our understanding of God. Moreover, in doing so, we recognise that God's being and acts are congruent. In other words, there is a direct relationship between who God is in God-self and how God relates to the world "through the Church" (italics added) theosis. Thus, theosis has to do with the whole economy of salvation. This article suggests that the desire of God in Christ is to save and shape a Spirit-empowered Christlike/Godlike people. God created humanity in his own image and likeness (*Imago Dei*) and Humanity is crowned with glory and honour, with all things subject to them (Ps. 8:5-6). Thus social injustices are an assault to the *Imago Dei*. The Church's engagement in actions of compassion and doing justice, for the public good, in liberating the oppressed is God's signature mark and characteristic of God's reign. *Theosis*, specifically missional *theosis*, constitutes a focus that is Christocentric and anthropocentric, that ECSA can employ in its missional focus. In this we become the gospel, becoming Christ to the world by our participation in the *missio Dei*.

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Interview

17 May 2022, telephonic interview with Rev. Samuel Isaac at 6:30pm.