

Has the Church Anything to Say?

A Case Study by Alan Neely

[NOTE: The Lutheran co-editor of this journal rises to a point of "personal privilege" as Namibian Vice-Bishop Kameeta's personal story is re-told.

Prof. Roy Enquist (Gettysburg Seminary) describes how the pietistic German missionary teachers in Namibia brought *Romans* 13 to the field, uncritically referring to the Kaiser as the divinely appointed authority and more recently to the government in Pretoria. What they failed to recognize was the possibility that the chiefs of the Namibian peoples themselves were also authorities, and quite different voices from the colonial powers.

In addition, Enquist notes how, when the seminary referred to was conveyed to indigenous control, after the events cited in the case study, the Lutheran teachers adapted Luther's doctrine of the two realms of God's rule (sometimes called "The Two Kingdoms") to discover the Church's competence to speak of social and political matters, applying the "law of God" to the South African government, insisting that the church has an obligation to serve "as an advocate for the downtrodden masses yearning for liberation as well as the conscience of the nation." For the Namibian churches, libera-

This case study was adapted from Zephania Kameeta's book *Why, O Lord?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987; Copyright © 1986 by the World Council of Churches) by Alan Neely, Professor of Missiology, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina 27587.

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tion theology stems neither from Lutheran pietism nor from that Lutheran-baptized Karl Marx, but from a fresh look at *Romans 13* with "Luther's emphasis on the Word of God as both a message of judgment, of law, as well as of forgiveness, of promise."*

Peter Fjellstedt, missionary teacher in the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambokavanga Seminary in Namibia, had just finished preparation for a lecture on the antecedents of the Protestant Reformation and was walking to the refectory to get a cup of coffee. He was approached by four students who said, "Professor, may we talk to you?" When they had gotten their coffee and sat down at a table, Zephania Kameeta, a fourth-year student who had led a two-day boycott of classes, began to explain the students' grievance. He spoke in a subdued voice but with deep emotion.

Professor, day-before-yesterday we asked permission to be excused from class so that we could listen to the broadcast. We heard the judge from Pakistan announce the World Court's verdict that overturned the 1950 ruling [by the International Court of Justice]. According to the Court, South Africa does not have a legal mandate to control Namibia. South Africa is illegally occupying our country!

When we returned to class, Professor Larsen was lecturing on *Romans 13* and went to great lengths to stress the Apostle's words: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God"

The broadcast had raised our hopes so much. And then we accidentally had the New Testament lecture. No, maybe the Lord himself asked the professor to discuss that particular passage.

"All authority has been given by God." But you know that in South Africa and Namibia this text is used as the basis to justify apartheid. We don't accept this. Apartheid is not based on a political ideology. It is based on religion! And this text is one that is being used in South Africa to

* *dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol. 26 (Spring 1987), p. 113.

justify apartheid. Those who are fighting against this, those who are saying things against it — they are called communists and Marxists. That's the attitude.

Discussing Romans 13, following the World Court decision, we started for the first time to look at the text within the context of our Southern African situation. And we asked Professor Larsen, within the context of what we had just heard on the radio a few minutes before, what he thought was the rule for the church in this kind of situation. "What about verse 3," we asked him, "which suggests that authorities are entitled to punish those who are doing wrong and reward those who are doing good?"

Our experience is that here in Namibia the South African authorities punish those who are doing good and praise those who are doing wrong. So we asked Professor Larsen: "What's the responsibility of the church in this kind of situation? Has the church anything to say? Should the church be the first-taste of the kingdom of God? Should the church keep quiet in view of the suffering of the people, in view of the injustice?"

"Do you know, Professor Peter, what he answered?"

"No, I don't," Peter replied.

"He said, 'I believe the church has something to say, but I don't know precisely what at this moment.'"

"We couldn't believe it! Several in the class became very angry, and the professor got upset. So we told him that we would give him time to think about it. And we also told him that we would boycott classes if the church didn't have anything to say."

"Professor, what is the point of our being trained to serve in a church that is silent in the face of the injustice, the oppression, and the suffering of our people?"

Peter felt that the students had a point because he knew the history of the country. He knew that Namibia was a slice of the African pie that was divided among the European powers late in the 19th century, and how South West Africa, as it was then called, had been given to Germany. He was aware that in order to colonize the country, the Germans had driven the native

black population off their ancestral lands in the most brutal fashion with massive firepower and rampant killing. The blacks resisted the encroachment as much as they could, but theirs was a lost cause. He had heard about how the Hereros of central Namibia refused to submit to colonial rule and had fiercely contested the takeover, and that in 1906 the German forces almost exterminated the Herero people.

Furthermore, it was common knowledge that during World War I, South Africa — having long coveted Namibia's rich mineral deposits of diamonds, uranium, and copper — saw their chance to gain control of the territory. He had heard the older people talk about how the South African army invaded Namibia in 1915, easily routed the dispirited Germans, and then waited for their de facto control over the country to be legitimized. They did not have to wait long, Peter knew, for in 1920 the League of Nations mandated Namibia to South Africa, and in 1950 this decision had been ratified by the International Court of Justice. But on June 21, 1971, the World Court reversed these rulings and declared in a verdict (that took ninety minutes to read) that Namibia should be given immediately its full and unconditional independence. It was this verdict that Zephania and his fellow students had heard on the radio.

It was now June 23, two days after the World Court's decision. The students were boycotting classes. Feelings were very high, and the rector of the Seminary was threatening to close the school if the students refused to return to class. Peter Fjellstedt looked into the eyes of Zephania and his three classmates. He knew that he had to say something, maybe even do something. But he, like his faculty colleague, was unsure as to what he should say or do.

HAS THE CHURCH ANYTHING TO SAY? **— Teaching Note —**

Introduction

- (1) This is a case centering on the struggle for social, polit-

ical. and racial justice in Namibia. Material was drawn from a recent book by Zephania Kameeta, *Why, O Lord?* Kameeta is a black Lutheran pastor and leader in that land.

(2) It is seen through the eyes of a white Scandinavian missionary teacher, Peter Fjellstedt, who — during a student boycott of classes — is confronted by Zephania and three other black students.

I. CHARACTERS

1. *Peter Fjellstedt* — missionary teacher in the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambokavanga Seminary in Namibia.

2. *Zephania Kameeta* — fourth-year seminarian who has led a two-day boycott of classes after a somewhat hostile exchange with Professor Larsen, a N.T. professor.

3. *Professor Larsen* — another white missionary, professor of N.T. in the seminary.

4. *Three unidentified students.*

5. *Rector* of Seminary who is threatening to close the institution.

II. CHRONOLOGY OR TIME LINE

1. *Pre-Case History*

(1) Namibia was controlled by Germany from late in 19th century until World War I, when — in 1915 — South Africa invaded and overwhelmed the German colonists.

(2) The Germans, in order to colonize the country, had brutally driven the indigenous peoples off their ancestral lands. The *Hereros* of central Namibia refused to submit to colonial rule, fiercely contested the takeover, and were almost exterminated. Since that time, the strong black tribal people have concentrated in the northern part of the country. The *Herero(s)* and the *Ovamba(s)*, along with more than a dozen other tribal groups, represent more than 90% of the population.

(3) In 1920, the League of Nations “legitimized” the occupation and control of Namibia by “mandating” the country to South Africa.

(4) The "mandate" was ratified by the International Court of Justice in 1950.

(5) The U.N. declared the occupation illegal in 1966, and on June 21, 1971, the World Court, in a ruling that took 90 minutes to read, declared that the occupation not only was illegal, but that Namibia should be given full and immediate independence.

(6) In 1976, the U.N. Security Council unanimously approved a resolution calling for full independence and supervised elections.

2. Case Summary

(1) Zephania and others listened to the broadcast on June 21, 1971.

(2) They returned to class in N.T., and Professor Larsen was lecturing on Romans 13 — "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers . . . the powers that be are ordained of God. . . ."

(3) This text has been used in South Africa to justify apartheid and the oppression continually of the blacks by the Afrikaners. Those who resist are labeled Marxists and Communists.

(4) Students asked Larsen what the text meant in the South African-Namibian situation/context. He said he did not know. There was an angry exchange, and students walked out and began the boycott.

III. ISSUES IN THE CASE

1. Legitimacy of European division of Africa.

2. Authority of international bodies, e.g., the World Court, League of Nations, U.N.

3. When government refuses to act or is impotent to enforce its decisions, what about resistance such as SWAPO?

4. Who is right — *South Africa* in its attempts to destroy or immobilize SWAPO, its charges of bias on the part of the U.N., and that any proposal for independence is premature, its setting up of the *Democratic Turnballe Alliance* (DTA); *the U.S.*

who "officially" supports Namibian independence vs. Cuban presence in Angola; *Angola* saying it will send Cubans home when South Africa leaves Namibia vs. South Africa's linking Namibian independence to withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola.

5. White control (less than 8%) of Namibian population of more than 90% of the population.

6. Interpretation of the Bible.

IV. CASE OPENING

Zephania said to Peter, "Following the World Court decision, we started for the first time to look at the text within the context of this Southern African situation." What did he mean?

Should the Church be the first-taste of the Kingdom of God, or is the Kingdom something beyond history?

