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The Kairos Document, Church(es), Christianity and the Liberation Struggle in South Africa During the 1980s: A Reappraisal

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Abstract: This article offers a critical reappraisal of the Kairos Document (1985) within the broader context of Christianity and the liberation struggle in South Africa during the 1980s. The 1980s in South Africa was a decade of intense political repression, during which theological involvement in the struggle also took centre stage. Thus, the Kairos Document (KD) represented a radical theological intervention that challenged both the moral legitimacy of apartheid and the complicity of mainstream church structures. It drew its strength from liberation and contextual theology. As shown in this article, the KD distinguished between 'State Theology', 'Church Theology', and 'Prophetic Theology'. This approach urged Christian communities in the black townships across the country to adopt a praxis-oriented stance in solidarity with the oppressed. It is within this context that the article revisits the historical genesis of the KD, its theological underpinnings, and its reception among various ecclesial bodies, including ecumenical and denominational responses. Furthermore, it highlights tensions between the apartheid-institutionalised religious dogmas and anti-apartheid grassroots activism. The enduring legacy of the KD in post-apartheid theological discourse is also scrutinised. The article contributes to a more complex understanding of the intersection by placing the text within both its immediate socio-political environment of the 1980s and its enduring theological influence regarding faith, justice, and resistance in the country's struggle for liberation. The article employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interrogate the discursive strategies and ideological constructions embedded within the KD.

Keywords: Kairos document, radical theology, state theology, liberation struggle, contextual theology, Christianity.

1. Introduction

Liberation historiography in Southern Africa has traditionally been dominated by narratives of the political and military strategies employed by liberation movements to dismantle colonial and apartheid regimes across the region. However, this article foregrounds a less-examined but equally critical dimension, namely, the theological resistance articulated through the Kairos Document (KD) and its affiliated publications by Black liberation theologians. The year 2025 marks 40 years since the launch of the KD and its emergence as a significant text that informed discussions on justice, moral leadership, and the Church's involvement in the liberation struggle. The KD's contribution to the liberation struggle in South Africa is interrogated through a close textual analysis of its discourse, revealing how it mobilised theological language to inspire and embolden Black Christian communities within township contexts during the volatile 1980s. The article examines the theological debates represented in the KD texts, revealing its role as both a spiritual and political catalyst in the broader anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Kairos Theologians, 1985).

To understand the relevance of the KD, as argued in this article, it is important to provide a brief synopsis of its foundations. The concept of Kairos comes from the Greek, meaning 'the moment of truth or a given opportunity'. Thus, Kairos refers to the truth that should be delivered by the gospel.

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In the South African context, emphasis was placed on the positive delivery of messages from the Bible. Following Mark 1:15, the concept means 'the appointed time in the purpose of God'. This suggested that Kairos would be fulfilled when the Kingdom of God was at hand. When the KD was launched in 1985, it focused on interpreting scripture in the context of the prevailing circumstances of injustice and oppression in South Africa. Theoretically and theologically, it interrogated the dominance of the regime's interpretation of God and the Bible. Thus, the KD became a tool for those supporting Christianity in challenging what was referred to as 'fighting the forces of evil and darkness,' claiming to have 'God on our side' (Le Bruyns, 2015, pp. 460-77). In this article, we concur with Van Kessel (2000, p. 6) that the KD was significant in relation to the 'spiritual warfare' of the oppressed masses.

Providing insight into the above, Van Aarde (2016, p. 1) observes that "Black theology in South Africa confronted the imbalances of power and abusive power structures through an affirmation of human dignity and the uniqueness of the identity of black people." To substantiate this point, he likens the experience of black South Africans enduring the impact of State Theology to the biblical Exodus narrative. He recounts the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land following their liberation from Egyptian bondage. This motif, as interpreted through Van Aarde's lens, underscores the theological conviction that divine grace is manifest in God's liberative action. Therefore, we argue in this article that it is within this Exodus narrative that the apartheid regime could also be defeated. The narrative served both as a theological anchor for the oppressed black majority and as a mobilising force for liberation.

Adding another dimension to the discussion, Ngcokovane (1987) observes that black people were confronted with pressing challenges of social disorder and the structural control of theological discourse by the white minority. He remarks that in a society deeply marked by systemic racial and class-based inequalities, theological frameworks often fail to resonate with the lived realities of the oppressed. In the case of South Africa, this disconnection arises from the fact that theological narratives are largely constructed and disseminated by those outside the marginalized communities, rendering such theology insufficiently representative.

According to Du Toit (2008), liberation theologians have consistently critiqued State Theology as a mechanism of ideological co-option. He criticised the apartheid regime for sanctifying its oppressive rule through the control of religion. This form of theology was viewed as a justification of the status quo, aimed at endorsing racism, capitalism, and authoritarianism while silencing the prophetic voice of the black masses. In contrast, Liberation Theology emerged as a radical theological response, aligning itself with the oppressed and advocating for systemic transformation. During the 1980s, it became a theological cornerstone for the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which emphasised psychological liberation and the reclamation of black identity (Resane, 2021). Liberation Theology is grounded in the concept of the "God of Liberation." Through the conviction of the black masses by liberation theologians, God is revealed as the liberator of the oppressed. Furthermore, Chino (2023, p. 131) suggests that human liberation should be viewed as "derivative of the liberative work of the God who loves in freedom." This concept is boldly declared in Psalm 9:9: "The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed."

1.1 Research objectives

This article is underpinned by two objectives aimed at highlighting the role played by the KD in the country's liberation struggle, as articulated by liberation theologians during the mid-1980s and beyond:

- To identify the KD texts and the complexities involved in using them to challenge the prescripts of State Theology, which supported the apartheid regime, and to examine how the regime fiercely dealt with the liberation theologians and their supporters in order to maintain the status quo.

- To evaluate the impact and challenges of using the KD texts in practice, and to explore how this influenced the black masses against the apartheid regime.

Aligned with the first objective, the article begins by offering a critical re-evaluation of the KD and its significance 40 years later. It aims to interrogate how the document challenged dominant religious narratives, particularly State Theology. It explores how various Christian denominations and church structures responded to apartheid, either by reinforcing the status quo or by embracing the liberative vision articulated in the KD. It demonstrates how theological discourse became both a tool of resistance and a means of empowerment. The article investigates the document's impact on Black Christian communities in urban townships, focusing on how it shaped their religious identity, political awareness, and engagement in grassroots activism. The second objective evaluates the extent to which these theological interventions exposed the manipulative and ideologically driven use of scripture by the apartheid regime. Through the KD platform, liberation theologians criticised the regime's selective appropriation of biblical texts to legitimise political oppression. These objections aim to show how the KD reclaimed the Bible as a liberative text.

1.2 Underpinning suppositions

At its core, the KD presupposes that theology is not a neutral discipline but a contextual and ideological force capable of either legitimising oppression or catalysing liberation. This traditional ecclesial model, such as State Theology, is being challenged. The KD critiques the distortions of selected scriptures used by the regime to reinforce apartheid policies or divide-and-rule tactics. It advocates that the Church, as a moral, theological, and spiritual institution, bears the responsibility not only to denounce apartheid but also to participate in its dismantling through solidarity with grassroots movements. Through its many publications, the KD reappraised the role of Christianity and the Church during the 1980s. It presupposes that faith is not merely personal or spiritual but fundamentally political, demanding engagement with the realities of suffering and struggle in pursuit of justice and human dignity. By leveraging the KD's theological critique of state violence and ecclesial complicity, church leaders assumed influential positions within youth, church, and community organisations, thereby embedding religious discourse within grassroots activism. In this article, the KD is framed as a theological response to the material conditions of the black masses, appealing to them to reject any form of oppression in the name of Christianity.

2. Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the impact of the KD in raising awareness about apartheid in South Africa. As Lichtman (2013) emphasises, qualitative approaches allow researchers to interpret nuanced insights drawn from relevant sources, making them particularly suited to exploring socio-political and theological texts. Central to this methodology is the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which facilitates a deeper examination of how the KD texts, through their many publications, reinforce existing theological stereotypes advocated by the regime. With the use of CDA, not only are the meanings of the texts uncovered, but the discourse is further developed by quoting the very same scriptures to reveal the evils of apartheid. Johnson and McLean (2020) further underscore the value of CDA in revealing concealed power relations and ideological constructs, affirming its relevance in analysing texts.

The article follows both thematic and chronological methods of writing history. For this article, primary and secondary sources were consulted. For example, The Kairos Document (1985) is the centrepiece of the arguments advanced in this article. Authored by South African liberation theologians, it critiques both 'State Theology' and 'Church Theology,' which is the central argument of the article. Therefore, the document is viewed as a foundational text in contextual and liberation theology. The secondary sources used include books, book chapters, journal articles, dissertations,

and theses to craft the arguments in this article. The analysis and contextualisation of these sources proved important for the article. A desktop review was undertaken to access these sources.

We argue that the KD is one of the important theological and historical artefacts. In foregrounding and historicising this within the country's liberation struggle, the article draws substantively on the scholarship of historians, liberation theologians, and interdisciplinary researchers whose work has critically engaged with the intersections of faith, resistance, and political struggle in apartheid South Africa. As argued by scholars such as Villa-Vicencio (1988) and De Gruchy (1979), the KD should not be examined in isolation but situated within a broader historiographical framework that encompasses the evolving discourse of liberation theology and its contextual expressions in the South African political landscape of the 1980s.

3. Literature Review

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, the year 2025 marks four decades since the publication of the KD, a seminal theological statement that emerged in 1985 as a prophetic critique of apartheid and ecclesial complicity in South Africa. Over this period, numerous scholarly works have explored the KD's role within the broader frameworks of State Theology and Liberation Theology (Mabuza, 2010; De Gruchy, 1997). The publication of the KD was a theological and political watershed moment, challenging both the apartheid regime and the theological frameworks that had enabled its endurance. Therefore, this section of the article on literature review reappraises the KD and its impact on Christian praxis, ecclesial identity, and liberation theology in South Africa. Central to the emergence of the KD was the exposure of the theological and racial divisions within South African Christianity. Evident in this was the continuing existence of what we refer to in this article as 'two churches': on one hand, a white church aligned with the apartheid regime's divide-and-rule policy, and on the other, a black church engaged in resistance. In reference to the latter, Mabuza (2024, p. 1) makes the following remarks: 'As church activists, the Kairos Document became a very important contribution towards encouraging Christians to awake the Church from its slumber … it must never be forgotten that the Church was part of the soul of the community during the difficult days of apartheid'.

While some studies have focused directly on the KD, this article extends those arguments by examining its enduring relevance in the post-1994 democratic context. Following the transition to democracy, questions arose regarding the KD's continued significance, particularly as public theology evolved to address new socio-political realities (Nolan, 1988; Kritzinger, 2013). However, positioning this paper within liberation historiography reveals that the KD remains a focal point of theological discourse, reflecting substantial interest across ecumenical and academic circles. The KD was not conceived as an academic treatise but as a grassroots theological intervention, crafted 'from below' by clergy and laypersons who resisted apartheid through a contextual theological lens (Kairos Document, 1985; Chikane, 1990). Its critique of both State and Church theologies, along with its call for prophetic theology, continues to inspire contemporary theological reflection and praxis.

According to Villa-Vicencio (1988), the KD compelled theologians to re-engage with biblical texts in light of the political crisis, emphasising justice, solidarity, and resistance. It also challenged the Church to move beyond charity and reconciliation towards structural transformation. Villa-Vicencio argued that theology cannot be abstract or detached from the lived realities of oppression. In his view, the KD exemplified a contextual theology directly responding to the crisis of divide-and-rule created by the regime. He steadfastly believed that theologians must engage with scripture in ways that advocate for justice, resistance, and solidarity with the oppressed. In his other work, Villa-Vicencio (1987) boldly claimed that tyrannical regimes do not last long as they are exposed to challenges from the people. By quoting Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men," he was challenging the atrocities perpetrated by the regime and the divisions maintained in the name of God.

As theological resistance gained momentum in the 1980s, there was also renewed intellectual vigour through the work of liberation theologians such as Itumeleng Mosala. Mosala's contributions redefined the hermeneutical foundations of Black Theology in South Africa. Central to Mosala's intervention was the assertion that biblical texts must be interpreted through the lens of material social conditions, particularly those shaped by class struggle and colonial domination. His seminal work, *Black Theology versus the Social Morality of Settler Colonialism* (1987), interrogates the infancy narratives of Luke 1 and 2 by posing incisive questions about their socio-economic underpinnings: What social class assumptions inform these texts? Who constitutes their intended audience? And what ideological frameworks shape their discursive logic? Mosala situates biblical exegesis within a context of political liberation and resistance. His work is rooted in historical materialism and critiques State Theology. Consequently, Mosala's hermeneutics became a touchstone for KD framers, offering a rigorous theological rationale for confronting systemic injustice through scripture.

The hermeneutical building blocks advanced by Mosala (1987) in his biblical analysis assisted the KD to emerge not only as a theological critique of apartheid but also as a strategic medium through which biblical texts could be used as a mobilising tool to support the aspirations of liberation theologians. Far from being a passive theological reflection, the KD functioned as both an editorial intervention and a catalyst for scholarly engagement among South Africa's liberation theologians (Kairos Theologians, 1985). Its publication marked a decisive moment in using biblical texts to address the 'bread-and-butter' issues confronting the black masses in the townships. As postulated by Vellem (2010), this approach challenged the dominant narrative of the God portrayed by the regime. With the above analysis, we contend that the approach provided a dual engagement, both intellectual and symbolic, in attempts to position the KD texts as foundational for Liberation Theology. Without doubt, the KD offered a framework for liberation theologians to articulate new identities and theological constructs that resisted colonial epistemologies and affirmed the agency of the oppressed (De Gruchy, 1995).

Utilising the available literature on the churches and the liberation struggle in South Africa, the article does not seek to idolise the role played by anti-apartheid church leaders in their fight against the apartheid regime but rather attempts to highlight their expressions as cited in the numerous publications of the KD. In a misrepresentation of the country's political situation in the mid-1980s, Adam and Moodley note that Black religion implied 'reform and not revolution.' However, in the South African context, they incorrectly emphasised that liberation theology stressed the 'brotherhood of man, denouncing the policy of apartheid as heresy' (Adam and Moodley, 1986: 199). Of interest to the above-mentioned authors was their acknowledgment that the churches provided a platform and shelter for protest. Referring to the Kairos theologians, they observed: 'There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death, while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace' (Adam and Moodley, 1986: 199-200).

In her seminal work *The Voice of Black Theology in South Africa*, Kretzschmar (1986) provides a critical and nuanced examination of the role of liberation theology within the South African religious and socio-political landscape. She presents a distinctive interpretive framework that foregrounds the religious engagement of black South Africans, particularly in the context of systemic oppression and apartheid. Kretzschmar contends that Black Theology possesses a profound capacity to expose the latent biases embedded within dominant white theological paradigms. Her analysis underscores the importance of contextual factors, such as the educational and ecclesiastical environments experienced by black communities, in shaping theological responses to the liberation struggle. She critiques the apartheid regime's instrumentalisation of religion as a means of legitimising racial segregation, asserting that such theological complicity must be rigorously interrogated and dismantled.

In his PhD dissertation, Suderman (2017) employs the Anabaptist approach to analyse the significance and impact of the KD on the South African citizenry of the 1980s. Some important points he highlights in this regard include critical reviews of aspects of the KD, namely, the process by which the document was generated, the insightful analysis and bold proposals it contains, and its functional utility as a baseline against which progress could be measured. He also recommends a few suggestions for mid-course adjustments that could be helpful in the ongoing quest for ecclesial faithfulness within the South African context.

The KD, as interpreted by Ramalho (2020), seeks to catalyse a profound transformation in the theological and existential consciousness of Black Christians in South Africa. It envisions a liberated ecclesial and social space, one committed to the emancipation of both the oppressed and their oppressors, through a radical reimagining of freedom for the black masses. It challenges White Christians to confront the colonialist underpinnings of their inherited faith traditions, which have historically aligned the divine with systems of dispossession and racial subjugation. This theological rupture, as Ramalho suggests, destabilises foundational doctrines such as divine providence and compels a re-evaluation of identity and belief. Nel (1988) reinforces this critique by highlighting the internal contradictions faced by Christians who, despite opposing apartheid ideologically, continue to uphold its theological remnants. For Black Christians in particular, the KD exposes the deep psychological and spiritual imprint left by settler colonialism, which has conditioned them to internalise the hegemonic values of the white state and its constructed deity. Through this lens, the KD functions not merely as a political statement but as a call to theological decolonisation and spiritual renewal.

4. Discussion and Findings

A fresh reappraisal of the KD reveals its enduring relevance not only as a theological critique of apartheid but also as a blueprint for ecclesial activism in times of national crisis. Rather than offering abstract doctrine, the KD was a contextual theology, interpreting scripture through the lived experiences of oppression and resistance. It challenged the Church to abandon neutrality and embrace a theology of action, insisting that God sides with the oppressed and that Christians must do the same. This radical stance exposed the divisions within South African Christianity, particularly between white and black churches, and called for unity grounded in justice and solidarity. This section of the article interrogates the theological and ideological role of South African churches during apartheid, arguing that their institutional endorsement or passive complicity in various ways perpetuated systemic racial oppression. While some denominations acknowledged the moral failings of apartheid, their failure to enact structural resistance rendered their stance ineffectual. This ecclesial silence created a theological vacuum, necessitating the emergence of the KD.

4.1 The origins of the KD

The KD publications were initiated by a committee of members under the leadership of Chikane and Nolan at the height of apartheid in 1985 (Denis, 2016). The first document was circulated to Jonsson, a Christian activist, who needed to sign it off after agreeing with its contents (Mabuza, 2010). Sparks (1995: 25) wrote the following in *The Daily News* to commemorate its founding and relevance ten years later: 'Shortly after President P.W. Botha declared a State of Emergency in July 1985, a group of Christian ministers met to discuss the growing political crisis and, in a short time, drew up the 30-page Kairos Document, fundamentally involving themselves in the political affairs of the country. When the document was signed by 151 ministers, it infuriated Botha. Signatories were unofficially banned from appearing on the radio or TV.' The 151 ministers belonged to the ICT, which opposed apartheid. It was initiated by a concerned group of Christians in response to state pressure. Within this ICT, the gospel became contextualised to understand its meaning in a situation of crisis and conflict (Boesak, 2012). Macqueen (2018) notes that the ICT provided a space to continue the theological critique of apartheid, which was crystallised by the issuing of the KD.

Attesting to the above regarding the origins of the KD, Nel writes: 'The Kairos Document that appeared in 1985 came from ICT circles. This document contains many of the central insights of black theology of liberation but follows more closely the line of what is called prophetic theology… The state's reaction to liberation theology was fierce and merciless. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was used to discredit liberation theology and the Kairos Document' (Nel et al., 1994: 145). Contextual theology was criticised by figures such as Prof Ernst Conradie of the University of the Western Cape, who argued that engaging the Bible through political and social struggles was uncalled for. He contended that apartheid supporters, who were mainly DRC members, had always provided biblical justification for apartheid. Defending apartheid, he condemned those who referred to the apartheid regime as sinful and inconsistent with the ideals of Christianity. This perspective was contradictory to the idea that contextual theology emerged from a context of growing politicisation in South Africa's churches, aiming to develop a theology from the perspectives of the oppressed (Nelson, 2002).

Goba's work on the KD suggests that it was a response to the deepening political crisis that engulfed the country during the mid-1980s. He contends that the KD provided a typical liberal response to the political situation in South Africa. Critically examining the churches in South Africa, Goba stated, 'When we met as a small group of Christians to respond to the deepening crisis in South Africa, we were very much aware of the serious confusion within the Christian community. Moreover, we knew that the prevailing theologies of our churches exhibited inadequacies and limitations for helping the Christian community to engage in the struggle for liberation' (Goba, 1987: 313).

Exploring the contents of the KD, Goba confessed that it differed considerably from other church-related pronouncements on the crisis and the political realities in South Africa. It also suggested alternatives regarding possible actions that could be taken by South African churches, particularly those opposed to the apartheid government (Goba, 1987). He noted that during the June 1985 meeting held in Johannesburg, political activists already engaged in various mass movements represented a wide ideological spectrum (Goba, 1987).

The KD identified three types of theology: State Theology, Church Theology, and Prophetic Theology. State Theology is described as the theological justification of the status quo, encompassing its racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism. Firstly, State Theology favours injustice by canonising the will of the powerful and reducing the poor to passivity, obedience, and apathy (Solomons, 2020). To achieve this, State Theology misuses theological concepts and biblical texts for its own political purposes. For example, the KD asserted that the apartheid regime used Romans 13:1-7 to grant absolute and divine authority to the State. Secondly, it employed the idea of 'Law and Order' to determine and control what the people might be permitted to regard as just and unjust. Thirdly, State Theology projected the label 'communist' onto anyone who rejected it (Solomons, 2020).

Nolan, a leading figure in South African liberation theology and editor-in-chief of the KD, offered a searing critique of the apartheid regime's orchestration of socio-political unrest during the 1980s. He argued that the state actively incited violence in township communities, deploying security forces to suppress dissenting voices, including those of church leaders, thereby weaponising state power against prophetic religious witness (Nolan, 1985). This calculated repression, he maintained, precipitated a profound moral and spiritual crisis within Christian communities, compelling churches to confront their theological complicity and institutional silence in the face of systemic injustice. His intervention marked a decisive rupture from the theological conservatism that had long characterised ecclesial discourse in South Africa. He called for a radical reorientation of Christian praxis, urging churches to adopt a prophetic stance that not only denounced apartheid but also aligned themselves with the lived realities of the oppressed (Nolan, 1988). His theological vision was instrumental in shaping the KD's call for resistance, which sought to reclaim the gospel as a liberative force amid the violent and dehumanising conditions of apartheid.

In his work, Fortein (2019) situates Nolan's intervention within a broader theological movement, that of Prophetic Theology, which had gained traction among black churches by the early 1980s. This theology found institutional expression through organisations such as the Association of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA), the KD itself, and the Belhar Confession. Fortein's analysis underscores the theological ferment within the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), both of which contributed to the ideological and spiritual foundations of the KD. He draws a compelling parallel between the KD and the Belhar Confession, noting that both emerged amidst the violent upheavals of the States of Emergency, a period marked by widespread death, repression, and existential uncertainty.

It is worth noting that the expectation placed upon the church to both pronounce and denounce the atrocities of apartheid created a theological paradox: how could institutions historically aligned with colonial and apartheid power structures suddenly advocate for social justice? This tension sparked vigorous debate within ecclesial circles, with some theologians arguing for a reorientation of Christian praxis toward liberation theology, while others resisted politicising the gospel. Therefore, in light of the above, we argue that the KD advocated for a theological change whereby faith was reimagined in solidarity with the oppressed.

The issue of supporting the armed struggle, as endorsed by Nolan, faced significant opposition, with some Christians believing that the document was inspired by the devil. According to the KD, if the Church took liberation seriously, it would sometimes have to 'disobey the State in order to obey God' (Fortein, 2019, p. 4). In response, Johan Heyns, a critic of the KD, noted, 'If the Church is going to play that role, it is no longer a church' (Fortein, 2019, p. 4). At the same time, Ben Engelbrecht, Head of Religious Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, criticised the document as a 'ghastly document that all serious Christians should reject' (Sparks, 1995, p. 25). Referring to the KD ten years after its founding, Goba explained: '… the country was facing a new Kairos, which had its origins in the old. The country is experiencing a major economic crisis that has not been alleviated by the changed political environment. While there is now a different political context, the legacy of apartheid still lingers. People continue to confront life-and-death problems daily' (Sparks, 1995, p. 25).

The first edition of the KD was officially published on 28 September 1985, marking a pivotal moment in South African theological resistance to apartheid. However, the conceptual groundwork for this document was laid earlier that year during a conference convened by the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in Soweto. During the ICT conference, debates about communication strategies ensued, leading to theological responses to the urgent challenge of confronting the apartheid regime through religious platforms. The ICT members realised that to achieve their goals, they needed to write a manifesto. The leaders argued that this manifesto would serve as a genre allowing for both a critique of the situation in South Africa and a call for political action (Denis, 2017). Thereafter, the ICT organised additional meetings that included members from various organisations, such as church representatives, pastors, theologians, and the lay public, to discuss the contents of the manifesto. In the preface of this manifesto, contributors such as Drs E. Ngema and F. Chikane explained during these meetings that '… this was a people's document which they can also own, even by demolishing it if their position can stand the test of biblical faith and Christian experience in South Africa' (Denis, 2017, p. 7).

The attendees of this conference were informed that this was an open-ended document requiring their contributions. This gathering, which brought together theologians and church leaders, was animated by growing concern over escalating political violence and the perceived failure of English-speaking churches, particularly the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist denominations, to adopt a confrontational stance against the apartheid regime (Ramalho, 2020). The urgency for ecclesial intervention intensified following the declaration of a nationwide State of Emergency on 21

July 1985, which signalled a deepening national crisis and underscored the moral imperative for churches to move beyond cautious diplomacy toward prophetic engagement. The KD thus emerged not only as a theological critique but also as a strategic call to action, challenging churches to reject complicity and embrace solidarity with the oppressed (Ramalho, 2020).

The establishment of the KD was not without criticisms and was viewed as divisive. Beyerhaus Peter's criticism underscored the importance of grounding theological dissent in biblical faith and lived Christian experience. In contrast, the KD's authors advanced a more radical interpretation through Contextual Theology, emphasising the socio-political realities of oppression (Cormick, 2012). Black theologians, particularly those aligned with the BCM, argued that reconciliation must be redefined from the perspective of the oppressed rather than dictated by the apartheid regime's terms. We contend that this reframing positioned reconciliation not as passive forgiveness but as active justice, echoing liberationist principles. The KD's strength lay in its broad coalition of contributors, including figures from the United Democratic Front (UDF), the National Forum (NF), and the BCM, whose diverse ideological commitments enriched its theological and political resonance (De Gruchy, 2016). By integrating grassroots activism with theological reflection, the KD became a mobilising force that not only condemned apartheid but also reimagined the church's role as a site of resistance and transformation.

The critique extends far beyond State Theology and the theology of the Dutch Reformed churches. The KD also addresses what liberation theologians refer to as the shallow liberalism of the mainline English-speaking churches, both Catholic and Protestant. The most controversial aspect of the KD was its support for the armed struggle to overthrow a "tyrannical government". Additionally, there was opposition to church support for sanctions (Sparks, 1995).

4.2 The historical and theological significance of the KD

The KD emerged as a theological and political intervention that foregrounded the moral responsibility of churches during the height of apartheid repression in the 1980s. With political parties and trade unions banned, as argued in the KD texts, the church became one of the few remaining institutions capable of offering spiritual and communal refuge, prompting widespread reliance on its moral authority and intercessory role (De Gruchy, 2016). The KD challenged churches to move beyond passive prayer and adopt an active stance against systemic injustice, asserting that true Christian witness demanded solidarity with the oppressed. It articulated a theology rooted in the sanctity of all human life and called for structural transformation, including workplace equity, gender justice, and racial inclusivity. Vellem (2010) stated that the KD's endorsement of civil disobedience was not merely political but deeply theological, grounded in the conviction that obedience to God's moral law superseded compliance with unjust human legislation. In doing so, the KD redefined the church's role from a neutral observer to a prophetic agent of liberation, compelling faith communities to confront the ethical contradictions of apartheid with courage and clarity.

To achieve this, liberation theologians, assisted by the grassroots forces of the congress-aligned movements, argued for engagement in peaceful demonstrations, protests, and campaigns against the apartheid regime without resorting to violence. The KD's perspectives on reconciliation, equity, and non-violence contributed to the achievement of its objectives, which were based on the wishes of church leaders (Goba, 1987). According to the KD, reconciliation was the primary basis for problem-solving. However, for black and white reconciliation to be achieved, justice must be served, as there is equality among all. Additionally, non-violence must be practised, as the killing and torturing of humans must not be permitted (Goba, 1987).

The KD has also been a valuable resource for Christians around the world in speaking out against oppression and injustice. Since the drafting of the KD in South Africa, at least eight other KDs have

been created globally, each attempting to articulate its own 'Kairos moment'. Ideally, the KD serves as a moral voice advocating for the responsibility of the State and the role of the Church in society. It raises the question of what the Church should do when the State fails in its moral obligation to care for all its citizens, especially when the State itself is the oppressor (Vellem, 2010). This was clearly articulated by one prominent theologian, Allan Richardson, who stated that Kairos is "the appointed time in the purpose of God, and in Paul Tillich's theology, it refers to those crises or turning points in history that demand specific existential decisions while the opportunity is still present" (Vellem, 2010, p. 4).

To understand the significance of the KD, it is important to comprehend the influences that accompanied the drafting of the document. The KD was influenced by Liberation Theology, a movement that gained strength in Latin America during the 1970s (Noble & Jandejsek, 2020). Liberation theologians believed that God speaks particularly through the poor and that the Bible can be understood only from their perspective. They perceived the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in Latin America as fundamentally different from the church in Europe. The church in Latin America was expected to actively engage in improving the lives of the poor (Noble & Jandejsek, 2020). Therefore, to build this church, they established what were referred to as base communities, consisting of local Christian groups made up of 10 to 30 members each. These groups studied the Bible and endeavoured to meet their parishioners' immediate needs for food, water, sewage disposal, and electricity. A significant number of base communities, mostly led by laypersons, sprang up throughout Latin America (Barger, 2018). Liberation theology in South Africa was adopted within this context during the struggle for justice against apartheid. The conviction that the notion of struggle, rather than liberation, was the appropriate emphasis for the liberation movement also shaped South African forms of liberation theology.

Liberation theology encouraged radicalism within the church by reinterpreting the Scriptures to develop a theology that rejects injustice. According to Siphamandla Zondi, '… liberation theology teaches that man should be liberated from being truly human. Liberty or freedom is, therefore, a central leitmotif of Christian life, according to this theology' (Zondi, 2010, p. 1450). In the KD, liberation theology is presented in a way that urges Christians not to remain neutral but to side with the oppressed and the poor. By doing so, it elevates the defence of human rights and justice for all to a moral duty. Zondi further notes, 'Liberation theology is situational in that it encourages the church to base its relationship with politics on an understanding of conditions of inequality, injustice, state oppression, and the proximity between white affluence and black poverty as it prevailed in South Africa during apartheid' (Zondi, 2010, p. 1450). In summary, liberation theologians believe that God speaks particularly through the poor and that the Bible can only be understood from their perspectives.

4.3 How KD presented forgiveness and reconciliation

The KD stands as a seminal expression of Contextual Theology, offering a bold theological counter-narrative to the legitimising discourse of State Theology under apartheid. It did not merely advocate reconciliation as a moral ideal but positioned it as a radical and non-negotiable pathway toward justice, rooted in biblical truth and the lived realities of oppression. The KD issued a scathing indictment of church leaders who, through silence or equivocation, failed to confront the moral atrocities of apartheid, thereby perpetuating systemic violence through theological complacency. Central to the KD's theological framework was its uncompromising stance on reconciliation. It insisted that authentic reconciliation could only be achieved through total repentance and the dismantling of segregationist policies (Solomons, 2020). This approach rejected superficial gestures of unity or dialogue that ignored the structural roots of injustice. By asserting that forgiveness and negotiation were impossible without genuine repentance, the KD redefined reconciliation not as a passive or sentimental act but as a transformative process demanding truth, accountability, and

radical change. Its theological rigour and moral clarity continue to challenge contemporary discourses on justice and ecclesial responsibility.

Some theological scholars, such as Solomons, criticised the KD for its analysis of reconciliation, claiming that it lacked a future vision of how nations are formed. However, biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless they repent of their sins (Solomons, 2020). Those subscribing to 'Church Theology' contend that reconciliation according to the apartheid regime was the root cause of the problems in South Africa. These theologians argue that Christians should not use racial connotations in advocating for reconciliation in South Africa.

Schliesser and Vellem, writing across diverse scholarly platforms, contend that reconciliation must not be construed as a universally applicable principle in all instances of conflict or dissension. Schliesser underscores the inherent asymmetry in many conflicts, noting that reconciliation becomes profoundly complex when one party is a violent and fully armed oppressor, while the other remains defenceless and systematically oppressed (Schliesser, 2022, p. 234; Vellem, 2010, p. 4). In alignment with this critique, both scholars advocate for a theological paradigm that resists facile calls for reconciliation and instead embraces a biblically grounded practice of confronting structural evil. Vellem calls for a shift from a conciliatory theology that risks legitimising injustice towards a prophetic theology of resistance that mirrors the moral convictions of many Christians who reject compromise with sin and systemic violence (Vellem, 2010, p. 4). Echoing this perspective, Khabela argues in his doctoral dissertation that reconciliation, justice, and non-violence must be approached from the standpoint of the oppressed, rather than through abstract theological or historical frameworks that fail to account for the lived realities of apartheid-era South Africa (Khabela, 1992). This collective body of work challenges ecclesial leaders to reimagine reconciliation not as a neutral or benign ideal, but as a radical and context-sensitive commitment to justice.

The KD posits that genuine reconciliation necessitates a profound commitment to both repentance and confession on the part of individuals and communities. This theological imperative entails the explicit acknowledgement of personal and collective complicity in the formulation, endorsement, or passive acceptance of apartheid policies, accompanied by an authentic expression of remorse for such transgressions (Khabela, 1992). Within the KD's framework, repentance and confession are not peripheral acts but foundational elements of a transformative practice aimed at fostering healing and restoring fractured relationships. Crucially, the KD underscores that reconciliation is unattainable without the unequivocal recognition of the injustices perpetrated during the apartheid era. It insists that accountability, both moral and structural, is essential, requiring that those responsible for systemic oppression, as well as those who materially benefited from it, be confronted and held to account. As Khabela (1992) puts it, this insistence on truth-telling and justice is presented not merely as a prerequisite for reconciliation, but as a vital mechanism for rebuilding trust and enabling authentic communal restoration.

The KD called upon the church to be an integral part of the reconciliation process. It urged the church to take a leading role in healing and restoration by actively contributing to the resolution of the effects of apartheid, promoting justice, and fostering social transformation. The involvement of the church was deemed essential for establishing a culture of reconciliation and forgiveness within society (Le Bruyns, 2015). The KD stressed that true reconciliation cannot occur in a society characterised by persistent economic and social disparities. It necessitated a radical transformation of the social and economic structures that had contributed to the perpetuation of inequality and marginalisation. Addressing these fundamental problems was essential to create the necessary conditions for genuine reconciliation (Le Bruyns, 2015). The document highlighted the fundamental principles of unity and equality as the basis for reconciliation. It proposed a society in which all racial and ethnic communities would be treated with the same level of dignity and respect, ensuring that no one group

would dominate or exploit another. This principle of equality was regarded as essential for promoting a sense of unity and belonging among all South Africans (Mabuza, 2010).

4.4 How KD used Romans 13: 1-7 to justify oppression

The New International Version (NIV) of the Bible quotes Romans 13:1-7 as follows: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves... For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience." This passage has long been used by the apartheid regime to defend the role of the state. Selectively, this scripture was often invoked to argue that the state was established by God to repress evil and encourage good. As such, citizens were expected to submit to and obey the governing authorities as they sought to fulfil this divine mandate.

The KD noted that the apartheid regime often appealed to Romans 13:1-7 both to justify its actions and to urge South African citizens—who were expected to be Christian—and those in its territory (since those depicted as 'non-white' were not officially considered citizens of South Africa) to obey and support its policies, including those that enforced racial segregation and separation, which created and maintained an unequal society based on race. Apartheid's use of Romans 13:1-7 made it a requirement for those who benefited from apartheid to support and defend its policies because of the state's divinely ordained mandate. The KD challenged this interpretation and understanding of the scripture.

In the KD, the authors begin their critique by defining state theology as merely the theological justification for the status quo, including racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism. They allege that this theology perpetuates injustice, sanctifies the will of powerful individuals, and reduces the lives of the poor to passive, obedient, and apathetic states. They further claim that the state was upheld by the misuse of theological concepts, particularly Romans 13, to assign divine authority to the apartheid regime for its own sinister purposes (Munro, 1990). According to the authors, the regime was not alone in its abuse of Romans 13; throughout Christian history, totalitarian regimes have attempted to legitimise a state-sanctioned attitude of complete obedience and servitude to the state by citing this text. This apartheid regime is part of a long line of similar governments that committed Christians have traditionally been obligated to oppose (Munro, 1990).

The liberation theologians assert that their primary objection to the use of Romans 13 by State Theologians is that the latter attempt to apply this passage as if it were a universal principle, disregarding its inherent contextuality. Furthermore, it is possible that State Theology engages in a form of theological imperialism, as State Theologians do not read Romans 13 in the context of the entire Bible (Mukuka, 2012). By neglecting the biblical context and their own perspective, they fall into the heretical fallacy of overlooking the central point of the entire biblical message. Having forgotten God's acts of liberation, they fail to understand how Romans 13 relates to this narrative. It illustrates an evil situation that God permitted but did not intend, which the Apostle Paul mentioned in passing, as some of his flock mistakenly believed that all state authorities would vanish from the earth (Mukuka, 2012).

The KD states that 'State Theology' believes the state has a 'God-given right' to use violence to maintain its system of apartheid. This is based on the principle that 'the authorities serve God'; they execute God's vengeance by punishing transgressors. In this way, state security becomes more important than justice. Those who seek to alter the unjust structure of society on God's behalf are

branded as 'unjust agitators' and 'unjust rebels'. The state often instructs church leaders to 'proclaim the pure gospel' and not to 'intervene in politics'. The state engages in political theology that claims God's approval for the use of violence to uphold an unjust system, and many scholars have argued that 'the apartheid state' is guilty of this crime, asserting that the use of this text was 'consciously and intentionally misleading' (Solomons, 2021, p. 3). The KD goes on to argue that various scholars have written about this subject and have called for the use of proper exegetical tools to be examined when analysing the text. It argues that taking a verse out of context and interpreting it abstractly misinterprets the literal meaning of the Word of God. Furthermore, the context in question is not limited to the preceding and subsequent chapters of the Bible, or even the entirety of the Bible (Schliesser, 2022).

The context also includes the circumstances in which Paul's statement was made. At the time of his writing, Paul was addressing a specific group of Christians in Rome who had their own issues with the State. However, the most revealing aspect of Paul's writing is that the Roman Christians he was addressing were neither revolutionaries nor advocates for a change in government. Instead, they were what is commonly referred to as 'enthusiasts', holding the belief that Christians (and only Christians) were exempt from obedience to any form of state, government, or political authority, as Jesus alone was the Lord and Saviour of all men (Schliesser, 2022).

Therefore, the KD's intention was not only to examine the application of State Theology to Romans 13 within the context of the South African situation but also to acknowledge that the passage may not be applicable from the outset. According to the KD, Paul is simply demonstrating that there will always be some form of secular authority and that Christians are not exempt from obedience to it. Furthermore, Paul does not provide guidance on what to do when the state becomes unjust or oppressive.

4.5 How States of Emergency impacted the delivery of the KD messages

The successive States of Emergency declared by the apartheid regime in the mid-1980s, particularly from 1985 onward, profoundly disrupted the ability of liberation theologians to publicly deliver their messages of resistance and justice. These emergency measures granted the state sweeping powers to detain activists without trial, censor publications, and suppress gatherings, effectively criminalising theological dissent that aligned with liberation ideals. The regime's measures became counterproductive as heightened political violence spread across the country. Many scholars wrote about how the regime sponsored this political violence as the climate of fear intensified. Some liberation theologians and church leaders were arrested, while others went into exile or continued their underground work. As explained by West (2025), in this volatile context, liberation theology became not only a spiritual framework but also a form of political defiance, reshaped by the urgency and danger of the times. These constraints failed to force liberation theologians to abandon their mission; instead, they adapted by embedding their messages in coded sermons and hymns and publishing under pseudonyms.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the KD stands as a profound theological indictment of apartheid and a clarion call for ecclesial accountability in the face of systemic injustice. By challenging the theological frameworks that legitimised oppression, particularly State Theology, the KD repositioned the Church as a prophetic institution tasked with defending divine truth and advancing social justice. Its supplication of the early Church's witness under persecution served not only as a historical precedent but also as a moral imperative for contemporary Christian praxis. The KD's widespread reception among grassroots Christians, particularly those in the townships, and church leaders alike, underlines its resonance as a mobilising force, while the resistance it encountered reveals the deep ideological fissures within South African Christianity. Ultimately, the KD did more than critique apartheid; as

highlighted in this article, it exposed the theological and institutional complicity that sustained it. Furthermore, the KD demanded a radical reorientation of the Church's mission, shifting from passive observance to active resistance. Its legacy endures as a testament to the power of contextual theology to confront injustice and to galvanise faith communities toward transformative action.

6. Declarations

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