
Transcendence in the context of abject poverty in informal settlements in Mangaung, South Africa

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Abstract

The confession that Christ is verily God is usually regarded as high Christology which is not readily accepted as relevant to the situation of those in abject poverty. Rather, Christology from below, from the perspective of Christ's humanity is regarded as relevant to the poor. However, this needs not be the case. The confession of Christ as verily God has implications for the poor and the sick. Christ is deeply concerned with the life of the person exactly because He is God. His kingdom, although not of this world, is the kingdom of God of salvation and renewal. Christ is the One who is God in profound relation with the person in deepest need. People in informal settlements in Mangaung (Bloemfontein) suffer serious challenges. Research in these areas shows that the churches in these areas need to address the challenges head-on in order to be of value to the communities. Should they only try to alleviate poverty or should they deal with the people in all their needs? The early churches proclaimed Christ as God and honoured Him for that. However, they also influenced the whole community through their love and service. Honouring Christ as God means that the church should be present in the community as the body of Christ in love and renewal of the sinner. A new future is only possible by acknowledging Christ.

1. Introduction

Regarding the confession that Christ is verily God and was also verily human, it is important to note that in many passages in the New Testament Christ is clearly confessed as coming from God, as the person that is from God, as the person who reveals God totally and is One with the One God. This is usually regarded as high Christology. High Christology means that it is accepted that Christ is One with God and that He is revealing God. This revelation of God in Christ is then regarded also as emphasising that God is glorious in his majesty. It is regarded as emphasis that God is totally different from any human being (Barth, 1957). Christ, however, as verily God and verily human, enters into human life as the Divine Son of God who became human. It has to be emphasised that this transcendence also has implications for poverty. In the situation of abject poverty in South Africa—and especially in Mangaung, South Africa—acknowledging Christ as verily God is important for the poor.

2. The implications of Christology

2.1 Christology from above and Christology from below

Christology from below regards Jesus as being human. He is regarded as a very important human who performed significant activities and who emphasised very important issues. He was a prophet, He was a person very interested in the poor, and He revealed God in the sense of his humanity. Christ in his humanity showed his compassion and his love for people.

Low Christology also emphasises that Christ is one amongst the many others. It means that He is regarded as a glorious person but that his humanity must be highlighted. This view is then also acceptable for adherents of religions such as Judaism, Hinduisms and Islam, because they also accept Christ as a very important person. This confession of Christ in his humanity is then regarded as important for reaching out to the poor. Christ is understood as totally human. Christ should then be understood as the person for others and the Jesus of this world. Jesus is then understood as the historical Jesus, as the person of love and kindness. According to the emphasis of low Christology Christ was murdered on the cross because of his love and kindness. This view should, however, be challenged, as the death on the cross has many implications and other aspects also come into play, such as that Christ yielded Himself on the cross for the sins of many.

There are many developments regarding views on the humanity of Jesus. The quest for the historical Jesus is important in this regard. Welker (2013:69) explains how the quest for the historical Jesus led to different views on Jesus as human. According to Welker there were instances where the humanity of Jesus was emphasised as relevant to the historical Jesus.

Political and liberation theology especially emphasise Christ's humanity. In this regard the views of Sobrino (1993:11ff) is of importance. Christ is not only the example of suffering but He calls the community to an active response in this regard. Suffering and poverty should not be taken for granted. According to Sobrino (1993:100ff) Christology should lead to active participation in this world to alleviate poverty. He further states that total emphasis must be on the poor and those who suffer. Post-colonial theology, which regards power relations as unacceptable, also emphasises Christ's humanity.

Vermes (2004:370ff) explains that Christ is unique in what He achieved and proclaimed, but that He must be regarded as a Jewish preacher reaching out to people in their different relations: "He was an existentialist preacher who endeavoured to persuade his disciples to change their lives and to collaborate with him in the great enterprise of preparing the way towards the kingdom of God" (Vermes, 2004:398).

Van Engen (1996:38) explains how the concern for relevance of especially the World Council of Churches after World War II led to an emphasis on the hermeneutic "from below". "Acts of faithfulness" was the starting point at the San Antonio meeting (1989) of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. The context became all important and therefore also the emphasis on Christ from below. In seeking a new hermeneutic, Van Engen (1996:40-43) suggests that the Bible be regarded as a tapestry where aspects from both below and above are emphasised. However, it must be asked, can Christ be acclaimed in his glorious divinity?

According to the confession of Nicea 325, Christ is regarded as verily God from verily God, and that He is in essence the embodiment of God in this world, who comes from God and is present as the true embodiment of God, without disregarding the fact that the Father and Son should be distinguished. In this regard the extra Calvinisticum should be acknowledged. Calvin explained that although Christ is regarded as verily God, it does not mean that in his earthly existence the fullness of the logos of God is present. It should be acknowledged that God is more than Christ's earthly existence. However, Christ is the One from God, who is also One with God.

2.2 Christology emphasised

What should be our emphasis? It is very clear from the Biblical revelation that Christ should be regarded as verily God and verily human. Chalcedon's 451 view on the relation of Christ's divinity and humanity as the *asungutos, atreptos, adiaretos* and *axoristos* (unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably), is still relevant today. Many instances in the New Testament show that, in his humanity, He reached out to people, lived among people and was totally human. It should be emphasised that He was verily God, that He came from God and that He was the revelation of God. This transcendence has huge implications.

Usually Paul is regarded as the one who did not strongly emphasise that Christ is God, but theologians such as Van de Beek (1998:45) emphasises that God is ONE and that Christ is revealed in the *unio personalis* as God and human in one – as God in person, while N.T. Wright (2013:405) emphasises that Christ came from God. He explains in his recent book "Paul and the faithfulness of God", that Christ was regarded as the true Messiah in the sense of Jewish monotheism to be the total embodiment of God in this world, and that loyalty to Christ is on the same level as loyalty to God. Hurtado (2003:48) explains how Christ, in his presence in the world, was worshipped in the same way by the Jews as Jahweh, whom the Jews worshipped as the One and Only God. This means that the worship of Christ was on the same level as the worship of Jahweh. Specifically Van de Beek (1998:71) shows emphatically that Jesus is One with God and that He is the embodiment of God.

I am of the opinion that Van de Beek's (2012) views must be accepted. When the Spirit is proclaimed as the Spirit of the Creator God in a general sense (Welker, 2013:319), it must be emphasised that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and in Him the fullness of God should be realised. A deep Christological view is needed in which the unity of God and Christ should be acknowledged.

3. Exegetical and hermeneutical evidence

Paul clearly explains in Philippians 2 that Christ, who is in a relation with God, came to us and humbled himself to become human. Although Dunn (1989:114) is of the opinion that one cannot infer from the reference that Christ was in the "morphe" of God or that He and God was regarded by Paul to be One. The structure of the text clearly refers to the Oneness of Christ and God (Schreiner, 2001:171; Van de Beek, 1998:122-123). If one takes the

agents in the pericope into account, namely Christ, God, and humans, one has to acknowledge Christ. It is explained that Christ, in the image of God, humiliates Himself to become one with humans. The fact that the agents shift from God to humans in the sense of humiliation clearly attests to the fact that in this pericope Christ is seen as One with God. Although Colossians 1 is regarded as being not from Paul, the structure of this early hymn is also clear on the Oneness of God and Christ. His glory as Son of God is attested to by his glorification (Schreiner, 2001:172-174; O'Brien, 2002:42-43).

Does Paul clearly emphasise, especially in Romans, that Christ is God? The text in Romans 9:5 is of utmost importance and it should be acknowledged as a text in which it is stated that Christ is God.

"⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen" (NIV).

Dunn (1989:144) differs from this translation and is of the opinion that it should read "... of the Messiah. God who is over all be praised for ever". However, the line of argument is then clearly broken and this translation disregards the logical explanation of the proposition. The translation of the NIV accepts the Greek's emphasis more clearly. Therefore, it must be accepted that "God" refers to Christ. 1 Corinthians 2:8, where the reference to Christ as "adonai kabod", "Lord of glory", is used in the same way that God is honoured, is also important. Now, especially in the gospel of John, it is made very clear that Christ comes from God and that He is the total embodiment of God. From the Gospel of John, (from John 1:1 and further) and other aspects of the revelation of God, it is clear that Jesus Christ is totally One with God and that He embodies God in this sense (DeSilva, 2004:419). The "I am" sayings clearly emphasise that Christ is regarded in the same way as God, as the One who revealed Himself as "I am". Concerning John 14:9, Beasley-Murray (2002:253-254) writes: "The reality is greater than human language can express, but that to which it points is sufficiently clear: in the depths of the being of God there exists a *koinonia*, a "fellowship", between the Father and the Son that is beyond all comparison, a unity whereby the speech and action of the Son are that of the Father in Him, and the Father's speech and action come to finality in Him."

The question is: Does this have any relevance for the poor? Can we say that this confession of Christ as verily God has implications for the poor and the sick, for those in informal settlements, for the sick suffering from HIV/AIDS and other illnesses? Can it be said that Christ is in this sense also an embodiment of God amongst them, and how can this be confessed?

The emphasis must be that Christ is deeply concerned with the life of the person precisely because He is God. Because He is God and became human, He showed his compassion for human beings. From the realm of God He came to the realm of humans, but He did that especially because of his love and of his interest in humans. Especially when we confess Christ as verily God, can we see his emphasis on help for the poor and the relation with the poor. If He were only human, then He would have been only a human person that showed some compassion and love for other human beings. But if we confess that He is verily God coming from God, then it shows that God is interested in the poorest of the poor and those suffering in this world. This means that God is deeply concerned about the lives of the poor and how the poor should be reached.

4. Christ's kingdom

Although God's kingdom is not of this world (Christ explicitly said so in John 18:36), and is a kingdom of the glory of God, the kingdom of majesty, not to be misunderstood as a kingdom of this world, of worldly kings and worldly emperors, it has to be regarded as the kingdom of God's salvation and renewal. This means that the kingdom of God in this world should be seen in another light. It should not be regarded as a kingdom in this world from the perspective of our own understanding. The kingdom of God is far more important than only some issues in this present world, but on the other hand, it has profound implications for us living in this world. Therefore, when we see that we have to gather riches and treasures for heaven, it means that these treasures should be collected while living in this world; it should be gathered through what we do in this world so that it can be realised in the world to come. Van der Walt especially refers to the importance of the issue that the treasures for heaven should be gathered on earth. He (2003:536) writes: "Christ's kingdom is certainly not **of** this world, but it is very clearly intended **for** this world and directed **towards** this world. We have to find the 'treasures in heaven' **here on earth**, in our daily, often difficult labour (cf. Matthew 13:44). This treasure is the same as Gods' kingdom, where we obey Gods' commandments – doing his will **here and now**."

Van de Beek is critical of the idea of God's kingdom being realised in this world. According to him, God's kingdom is not of this world. In this world Christ is the Christ of the cross and not of the glory. The church following the crucified Christ should live according to the calling of Christ – one with God

but also the one who yields power. Although Van der Walt, Welker and Van de Beek have different opinions on the realisation of the kingdom, they agree that any new situation can only be achieved by Christ as One with God. He brings about new life.

The Kingdom therefore is larger than the world we live in, but it has implications for everyday living. Christ is then the One, whom from God is deeply interested in the living relations of people on earth and therefore, because He comes from God, is deeply interested in the relations of people living in informal settlements.

Research in the informal settlements in Mangaung, Bloemfontein, established that people in these informal settlements face serious challenges (Verster, 2012:31ff.) These challenges call for a radical approach, and for the church to be involved in the issues of the people living in these situations. It means that the church following Christ as verily God and verily human should be involved in every aspect of the lives of the poor in these circumstances. The needs and the challenges should be approached head-on to be of value to the communities. These communities should be helped to understand the predicament and to live according to the Word of God.

5. Alleviation of poverty

Now the question is: Should the church only try to alleviate poverty or should it deal with the people and all their needs?

The first aspect to be regarded is the person of the poor. Although it is possible to be a complete person even though one is poor, the realisation of one's personhood comes under much pressure from one's predicament. The person should be empowered by the living Christ to come in a new relation with God. Research in the informal settlements in Mangaung established that there is great need for personal development. The positive influence of the church at large was, however, also emphasised. Empirical data from research shows that the church is expected to not only play a supportive role in communities, but to also look after the poor's spiritual needs (Verster, 2012:35-35; Verster, 2013:1-12). Many respondents replied that the church must be involved in their predicament by helping them to have better lives. However, many also stated that the church should be involved in their spiritual wellbeing (Verster, 2013; Interviews in Informal Settlements 2015-2016). One respondent replied:

**I believe if the church can be more in this Area, especially the main line churches, because most of the people preferred them. They must start projects that can change the life of the people, and also they must try to have time to start bible studies/discussion and prayer sessions that can help people a lot and they will love God and His Church.*

The second aspect is the environment of the poor in informal settlements. This includes lack of housing and infrastructure, as well as educational, medical, transport, shopping, governmental, and recreational facilities. Research in the informal settlements in Mangaung indicated that environmental issues pose serious challenges. Sometimes the ill and the dead have to be taken to the main roads in wheelbarrows due to the terrible roads in the area. People are living in shacks constructed mainly from corrugated iron sheeting that are very cold in winter and very hot in summer. Those shacks do not provide privacy and are not sufficient for all the needs of the people. Lack of sufficient food is also detrimental to development. Sometimes people in informal settlements survive by terribly little means and they have to cope in these situations by having to fend for themselves with the meagre means that they have. They therefore have to find other means to survive.

Security is a very important issue. Mphambukeli (2015:172) refers to the fact that the residents of Grasland's movements at night were restricted due to high levels of crime. The respondents said that they were not safe.

Mphambukeli (2015:172) refers to respondents:

R1: People move around here at night; they don't stop because the tavern closes at 2 a.m. When you come from the tavern drunk they will kill you they won't spare you. Yes, they won't leave you. It's like those who are coming from the shacks are the ones targeted. Yes, you can't just walk around not know your destination. Yes, people are killed. R2: There are tsotsis (hooligans) that could come and take your money or your belongings or break in the houses. R3: Sometimes they could rape you inside your house when people are there. Sometimes they are pointing guns at you and even rape you all with the children.

Mphambukeli (2015:173) refers to strategies of the inhabitants to deal with the challenges of security, namely calling the police from a station further away, because they respond better or by taking matters into their own hands using "mob justice" or to form a "community policing forum".

Mphambukeli (2015:173) refers to one resident who recalled: "We are a community here in Khayelitsha and we deal with the criminals. We talk to each other and sort the crime issue out as we are fed up. My husband is one

of the patrollers so that we are safe when we walk. When police are not able to do their job, the community is forced to take matters into their own hands. The community patrollers were used as a strategy to access safety, and the perceptions of the respondents were that the police were scared to come out at night, because whenever there was a fight, the police were likely to be killed themselves. The absence and fear of the police to come out at night sometimes forced people to take matters into their own hands.”

Mphambukeli (2015:179) is also highly critical of the way in which the authorities deal with the challenges: “They pacify people by promising them adequate services. Services are provided only when it’s time for elections and thereafter, the residents do not get anything. This conclusion was influenced by the findings which are generalised in this case from interviews with municipal officials. One of them indicated that they usually promise to deliver services to local residents, but a day after the elections they tell people that they don’t have money – after the residents have voted for the ruling party which in Grasland is the ANC local government.”

Thirdly, unemployment is a very serious issue. It is a challenge for the people in the informal settlements. It is a serious problem that cannot be separated from South Africa’s present economic predicament. Unemployment has to be addressed. Jobs have to be created for people to be self-sufficient. Research in a school near informal settlements (Verster, 2017) established that most of the teachers cited unemployment in replying to the question: What is the most serious challenge facing the community in the informal settlements?

It is important that we also have to regard the person in his or her totality. The fact is that persons have to be accepted in their personhood, and that they should have to respect themselves. They have to have respect for their being and themselves in their present situation.

What is expected of the church? Again it was expected of the church to be involved in helping people, and also to offer “*Nothing else than the Gospel of hope and salvation*” as one respondent put it (Verster, 2012:38). Another respondent said that “*caring and love is expected from the church*” (Verster, 2012:39).

In some informal settlements it is shown that people do have respect for themselves, and are trying whatever they can to better their circumstances, such as beautifying their shacks and their environment by planting food; they cultivate vegetables and fruit to develop this situation (www.spaudazo.co.za). But, on the other hand, a very important issue is the issue of the

person in relation with the church and with relation to God, and this is where it is very important to emphasise that Christ is verily God becoming human in our situation; therefore He shows God's love to the people in the informal settlements. Christ's presence in the informal settlements is the way in which God comes to us and reveals himself. Many issues are then important and will now have to be addressed. These are i.a. urbanisation, service delivery protest and the church's view of involvement in the lives of suffering people.

I am quite aware of the fact that there are researchers who are highly critical of the way in which urbanisation in South Africa was established and that they largely contribute it to colonialism and apartheid. In this regard Vellem (2014:4) writes: "The point is that urbanisation, whilst plainly viewed as an inevitable process of people's movement to cities (places inhabited by human beings who do not produce food for themselves), in South Africa this movement and the construction of the apartheid city cannot be viewed without racial, political, economic and theological views that saw the movement of black Africans only as the means of cheap and docile labour." I am of the opinion that it is much more complex. There were many push and pull factors present in the South African community, such as unemployment, shifts in population growth, droughts and other environmental crises in the rural areas, etc. The serious question is how to be involved in a situation with such enormous challenges.

A serious question is then whether the churches, as members of the community, should also be involved in service delivery protests. It must be emphasised that the living Christ is engaged in the needs of people, but that He is predominately the One of peace and will always expect his followers to keep to his message of peace and non-violence. He is, however, also the One seeking justice who calls for righteousness. However, all possible non-violent means to get attention and change a situation must be used to empower the most vulnerable. The church, as institution, must not become a political vehicle, but must empower and inspire members to be involved in bringing about a new situation.

Van Schalkwyk (2014:2) writes: "My thesis is that an exploration of this creative and redemptive mission may bring about the restoration of the ecology of life – urban, human, natural ...– the restoration of the whole earth ecosystem. It may bring about new and innovative, sustainable ways of living in an earthly city where the 'greening power of the spirit' brings the fullness of life to the most marginalised communities; and life-sustaining justice to the centres of innovation, economy, and political power of the city, in an egalitarian and participatory manner."

Mphambukeli (2015:194) concludes: "The fact that people of Grasland do the 'best' with what they have under oppressive situations, attests to the fact that, despite poor living conditions, they are able to continue living as they strive to access jobs, provide shelter for their families. In a nutshell, they live a purposeful life. It can therefore be concluded that as a result of pressures for municipalities to meet the backlog challenges, rather than to involve the communities' concerned, social justice and its incorporation in the planning process is hindered."

6. A Christological approach

First of all, we have to worship Christ for who He is, the One who brings us in a total new relation with the living God. This is possible because people can then know God even in their poverty. But the living Christ is deeply concerned with the whole person. Therefore, it is important to reach out to people in their personhood, so that they will be empowered in their poverty. It must be proclaimed that Christ is the answer to their deepest needs. Therefore, all aspects of the people's needs should be addressed by the church in following Christ who is verily God, verily human. Only then can we reach out to people and emphasise how new hope is possible in such situations. It is not enough to only give food; the relation with the living God in those situations should also be emphasised.

The early church did proclaim Christ as God and honoured Him for that and we should acknowledge this. The early church was prepared to suffer for the belief in Christ. This is the glorious God from whom all things come. The early church emphasised the glory of God. The early church proclaimed Christ even to death, but He is verily God that came to us. But they also influenced the whole community through love and service. They lived compassionately with other people and sometimes it was very clear that they were prepared to live according to the Bible in humbleness and not in glorifying themselves. Honouring Christ as God means that the church should be present in the community as the body of Christ, as love and renewal of the sinner in the sense of our presence in this community. The early church showed much compassion for the plea of those marginalised and living on the fringes of society. Schnabel (2004:1559) explains how the early church practised love and praxis of Christian charity. Many pagans were also impressed by their compassion. Christians especially showed significant involvement in the needs of people during the epidemic of A.D. 165-180 and A.D. 251. Christian brotherhood anchored in Christ had a profound influence on the community.

The early church was, however, also imperfect as is clear from internal strife, but despite this, it had a message of love and charity. It was clearly linked with the confession of Christ as Lord.

There is the well-known statement mentioned in the letter to Diognetus (Online Diognetus Ch 5): “They (*Christians* PV) are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified.” It shows how Christians in the early church shared their means with others and lived in glory with God, although they had little themselves.

Therefore, in Christ, a new community comes to the fore; a community of love, the community of compassion, the community of dealing with one another in this sense. But it also means that even the poor should know that in their poverty Christ is there for them so that they can be saved and be in a total new relation with the living God. This is only possible when we emphasise that Christ is verily God and verily human and that He came to us in his glory and was present amongst us. A new future is possible in acknowledging Christ. Does this mean that the church following Christ as verily God is not interested in the bodily and the human challenges of poverty? Not at all. It means that a new perspective comes to the poor, that a new perspective is related to the poor, and that the poor will be helped in this new relation so that they can understand how it is possible to live with the living God. The poor is then also recognised as whole people before God and we bring the glory of the fullness of God to them, so that they can understand the fullness of God and the glory of God.

7. Conclusion

It is clear that a confession that Christ is verily God, has much influence on how we see the church’s role in communities of adjunct poverty. These communities also need to realise that their personhood is important to God; that God reaches out to them to deliver them from their challenges and to give them the fullness of hope that is only possible in God and only through Him the glory of God can be reached. Only then can the glory of God be emphasised in the correct way.

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