

A dialogue about the South African “here and now” with the legacies of the early church fathers as interlocutors

ABSTRACT

This article explores what the missional possibilities could be when we explore the present discourse on the Early Church Fathers, with a view to understand our missional calling in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Three dialogues explore issues of agency, inheritance and consumerism. These dialogues or interruptions open up new conversations that could lead to new imaginations.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade some missional writers have called for recovering the church's ethos in the pre-Constantine era. They propose a recovering of the methods of the early church (Clapp 1996; Hirsch 2006; Kreider 2001). In order to become connected to the church's original impulses or “Forgotten ways” (Hirsch 2006) the church is invited to recover the neglected ways that made the early church effective and to reapply these modes in order to engage with the future. Kritzinger notes that “one's personal identity is shaped by who one's primary interlocutors (discussion partners) are ... we need to ask who the ... people are that we allow to interrupt our conversations ... the answers we give to these questions do not merely have implications for our practice of mission, they are the first steps, the very foundation, of our mission praxis. Everything else flows from this” (2002:156-157).

These missional authors invite us to choose the early church as interlocutors. But what will the dialogue be about and which segment of the early church will we talk to? The early church is definitely not a homogeneous grouping of likeminded individuals. When we are called to be like the Acts 2 church we have to keep in mind that this church was a specific snapshot in a developing journey and that there are other models of church (Cole & Chan 2010:105).

Whoever we choose to talk with, we need to heed Luthuli's challenge that, “If the Christian concern is with people and not disembodied principles, its concern must be with the conditions under which its people live. Christianity must be concerned with what is going on ... here and now” (Luthuli 2006:131). If we choose the early church fathers as interlocutors, can the dialogue move us into a discussion of what is going on “here and now”? One of the “here and now” issues in South Africa that need some continued dialogue is the rampant materialism of an unfettered capitalism that is running rife. It is this materialistic capitalism that makes South Africa one of the most unequal societies in the world (Misra-Dexter et al. 2010:55). A continued dialogue about faith, wealth and engagement with the poor within a missional framework for the current South African context is needed.

As early as 1978 Newbigin elevated the interaction of faith and wealth in terms of mission, when he stated that, “The ideology of the free market has proved itself more powerful than Marxism. It is, of course, not just a way of arranging economic affairs. It has deep roots in the human soul. It can be met and mastered only at the level of religious faith, for it is a form of

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idolatry. The churches have hardly begun to recognize that this is probably their most urgent missionary task during the coming century” (1978:95).

Unfortunately, as Countryman (1980:1) has shown, the early church fathers’ teachings and practices towards the poor have almost disappeared in the twentieth century’s ideological battles between capitalism, socialism and communism. Their voices have been enlisted as support for arguments for or against these ideologies. Gonzalez (2002:xii) states that the study of the doctrine of wealth in the patristic writings “has usually been ignored by historians of theology, and it is even less known by the church at large”. Even though it has become vogue to call for a rediscovering of the pre-Constantine ethos, this has not been spelt out in detail especially in terms of faith, wealth and engagement with the poor. Yet, Holman (2009:6) believes the early Christian writers are interlocutors who could aid us in our mission by informing and challenging our current dialogues about social justice.

In this paper three possible dialogues about the early church’s engagement with issues of faith and wealth and how it influences engagement in mission with the poor will be discussed. The dialogue will be with the existing, living, legacies of Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great and Augustine.

FIRST DIALOGUE ABOUT AGENCY

Clement (c.150–215) was the head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. With the early church’s penetration into the Roman Empire, the church represented a “mixture of social levels” (Meeks 1983:3). Countryman (1980:48) notes that Alexandria was a moneyed city in the empire, and Clement himself was rich and “at home with the subject of wealth”. As more affluent people sought to enter the church, a diversity of opinions resulted in a debate as to whether they should be allowed to become members of the church (Weaver 1987:369). Some members wanted to include the rich recruits, as it afforded them some affluence and influence within their cultural milieu. Others were sceptical and recalled Jesus’ radical call for renunciation. Clement of Alexandria wrote a treatise on this question. Gonzalez reports it was the “first attempt at a systematic discussion of the relationship between faith and wealth” (2002:112). The treatise was based on Jesus’ teaching about the rich man in Mark 10:17-31, which includes Jesus’ famous phrase that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:25). This particular text sparked intense debate: the main contention was whether it was possible for the rich “to be saved without surrendering their wealth entirely” (Countryman 1980:48).

In order for mission to take place an agent is sent. This agent is not a blank slate, and plays an important role in the mission. In Kritzinger’s (2002) missional cycle, the dimension discussed first is agency. In order to engage with our agency, certain questions have to be asked. Kritzinger states, “This is where our missionary praxis has to begin.”

- Where are we inserted into social reality?
- How are we involved in our community?
- Where do we fit into the existing roles of gender, class, culture and “race” operating in society? (2002:153)

When Clement of Alexandria wrote his treatise he entitled it, “Who is the rich man to be saved?” Even in the title a dimension of agency is elucidated. In order for engagement with the early church as interlocutors it is therefore essential to identify who we are. I write this as a rich South African male who is part of a faith community that is affluent and it is from this position that I am having a dialogue with the early church. Acknowledging this richness as part of my agency has been a long and difficult journey.

Roxburgh notes that the missional journey does not start from an idealistic future but from the present (2009:123). The mission starts somewhere. In order to address Luthuli's "here and now" this has meant renouncing "the lie of the middle-class" (Smith 2010:30). Before Claypot, the community I am pastoring, renounced this lie our agency was skewed towards a view that the rich in South Africa were other people. This inoculated us against the challenges of Jesus regarding wealth and mission. Once we renounced this lie, the journey of discovering our own agency commenced. By facing our agency, the missional journey could start. It is a start because, as Kritzinger (2002:154) notes, before we go on a mission we have to become aware of and face our own hang-ups and frustrations.

If we engage with the early church and then specifically with Clement of Alexandria then we have to engage the journey of agency. The leaders of churches will have to be courageous enough to challenge the different identities and desires within themselves and the churches they lead. In the early church communities, just like ours, there was a temptation to shy away from difficult issues regarding the agency of the wealthy. Countryman notes, "the officers of the church were conscious how much the congregations depended on the rich and their gifts" (1980:172). The danger for church leaders was to allow a dependence on the wealthy to inhibit their engagement with the agency question. In the early church it was hard to assimilate the wealthy into congregational life. Not only did they want to dictate where their donations went, they also wanted the clergy to act as clients towards them as their patrons. This influenced ecclesiastical life to the extent that the rich wanted a say in who became bishops and priests. John Chrysostom vehemently protested against this state of affairs (Leyerle 1994:45-46). If our interlocutors are the rich who have more than we have it will be hard to move towards Luthuli's "here and now". Moving affluent congregations towards the question of agency and renouncing the lie of the middleclass will be costly.

SECOND DIALOGUE: A DIALOGUE ABOUT INHERITANCE

In the South African context, one cannot speak about the Afrikaners' being, and specifically their socio-economic space, without also speaking about the legacy of apartheid. The Afrikaner has benefited from the oppression of apartheid, and for a purposeful missional engagement this must be brought to the fore. Accepting responsibility for the privileges received through oppression is only the start of a process that includes much more than just an intellectual exercise and awareness – it calls for a conversion. Tutu describes the contours of a process that goes beyond an intellectual acceptance, "Apartheid provided the whites with enormous benefits and privileges, leaving its victims deprived and exploited. If someone steals my pen and then asks me to forgive him, unless he returns my pen the sincerity of his contrition and confession will be considered to be nil. Confession, forgiveness, and reparation, wherever feasible, form part of a continuum" (1999:273). We have to face what Njabulo S Ndebele calls "inherited, problematic inheritance" (Steve Biko Foundation Trust 2009). It is this aspect of inherited socio-economic privilege in post-apartheid South Africa that Lenka Bula explains when she writes that "our life experiences reveal that very little has changed in the area of economic and social justice. Many of our relations in this sphere are still, to a large extent, shaped by apartheid hierarchical relations" (2005:104). The early Christian fathers' teachings on the receiving of an inheritance could be explored in relation to this, especially for the group of Afrikaners who did not actively participate in the enforcing of apartheid. The missional challenges of being born in the 1970s and 1980s, as beneficiaries of apartheid, have to be explored.

John Chrysostom contended that all riches have injustice at their roots. If one traces the lineage of inheritance then it will be found that somewhere someone robbed someone else

of something, for “God in the beginning did not make one man rich and another poor” (Krupp 1991:193). John, like some of the fathers before him, appeals to nature to show that God created all things to be in common. Inequalities must therefore stem from injustice. “The rich have that which belongs to the poor, even though they may have received it as an inheritance, no matter whence their money comes” (Gonzalez 2002:205). Owensby (1988:38) notes that Chrysostom was the first of the fathers who spoke on the morality of inheritance and comments that he saw two negatives in leaving an inheritance. Firstly, it took away from the poor and secondly, it made the recipients lazy. Chrysostom conceded, however, that one could inherit wealth and not be unjust. In his sermon on Timothy, he engages in a dialogue with someone who inherited riches. Through a series of questions and answers, John shows the responsibilities of someone who has inherited money:

Let your riches be justly gained, and without rapine. For you are not responsible for the covetous acts of your father. Your wealth may be derived from rapine; but you were not the plunderer. Or granting that he did not obtain it by robbery, that his gold was cast up somewhere out of the earth. What then? Is wealth therefore good? By no means. At the same time it is not bad, he says, if its possessor be not covetous; it is not bad, if it be distributed to the poor, otherwise it is bad, it is ensnaring. “But if he does not evil, though he does no good, it is not bad,” he argues. True. But is not this an evil, that you alone should have the Lord’s property, that you alone should enjoy what is common? Is not “the earth God’s, and the fullness thereof”? If then our possessions belong to one common Lord, they belong also to our fellow-servants. The possessions of one Lord are all common. (2009:6).

Having received an inheritance places certain obligations on the recipient. Acknowledging that an inheritance brings these responsibilities links the inheritance to issues of social justice. Avila (1983:97) argues that the recognition is only a beginning and without further rectification of the present order it will be “a continuing and fresh robbery.” Avila’s reference to robbery is a recurring theme when one is in dialogue with the church fathers. Karras (2004:51) shows that Chrysostom defined a robber as a person who has the ability to share resources and decides not to do so. Claiborne quotes Basil as saying that by not distributing when one has the means to do so becomes a form of theft (Rutba House (Organization) 2005:30), “When someone strips a man of his clothes we call him a thief. And one who might clothe the naked and does not – should not he be given the same name? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat in your wardrobe belongs to the naked; the shoes you let rot belong to the barefoot; the money in your vaults belongs to the destitute.”

The acceptance of white privilege is a major challenge for the Afrikaner and white South African churches (de Gruchy 2002:195). This inheritance includes economics, education, life skills, job reservations, land/property, being mobile and access amongst other things. Reframing these inheritances in terms of a missional engagement with South Africa is of utmost importance. Yet, it will not come about without contestation. Steve Biko identified some of the reasons for the reluctance of engaging with this process of awareness when he wrote:

Equally we should agree that through living in a privileged society, and through being socialised in a corrupt system, our white Christian counterparts though brothers in Christ have not proved themselves brothers in South Africa. We must agree also that tacitly or overtly, deliberately or unawares, white Christians within the Churches are preventing the Church from assuming its natural character in the South African context, and therefore preventing it from being relevant to the black man’s situation. (Biko & Stubbs 1987:58)

Biko wrote these words many years before our democracy was realized, in an address entitled

“The church as seen by a young layman”. It is this awareness of the implications of a “problematic inheritance” that is desperately needed in white communities so that we can become part of a brother and sisterhood that is more reflective of our South African context. A dialogue with the early church can stimulate important quests in terms of a “problematic inheritance”.

A THIRD DIALOGUE ABOUT LIFESTYLE AND CONSUMERISM

Just as individuals battle with consumerism, the church as institution is also realizing that it can easily become a kind of shopping mall where people’s wants are fulfilled (Jethani 2009:127). The churches become “vendors of religious goods and services” and do not see themselves as “called to be bodies of people sent on a mission” (Guder 1998:108). In order to move into mission we have to deconstruct the consumer mindsets we have developed as individuals and as church bodies. Niemandt notes that we are blessed in order to bless others and that one of the best cures for individualism is listening to others, when they tell their stories (2007:98-102). If the churches want to be a blessing to those around them they will have to take stock of what they have been blessed with. Yet in the face of consumerism and ever-rising standards of living, the rationalizations against “downward mobility” are many. If the church’s interlocutors remain themselves, then the stories they listen to will only strengthen the rationalizations for moving upwards. However, when one dialogues with the early church fathers it becomes evident that they spent a lot of their energy towards working against the tendency of baptizing every want as a need. Clement, in his treatise, shows that someone who has been born into wealth is not automatically barred from heaven. For if one is cursed for being born wealthy, then that person is “wronged by God, who created him, in having vouchsafed to him temporary enjoyment, and in being deprived of eternal life. And why should wealth have ever sprung from the earth at all, if it is the author and patron of death?” (Stackhouse 1995:146). Being born to wealth is therefore a responsibility and those who are born into wealth have, according to Clement, very specific responsibilities. These responsibilities include the breaking of the power of wealth by developing a life of simplicity, exercising self-control and seeking God by following the commandments. Such a person is redefined as someone who is poor (Carr 2001:44). In modern parlance, the above concepts can be seen as understanding the difference between contrasting lifestyles of either luxury or necessity, popularized in the simplicity movement (Foster 2005). Clement devoted some of his other writings to consider the “luxury of some in social circumstances where other persons are poor” (Avila 1983:36). In the second book of *The Instructor*, he wrote that:

Those concerned for their salvation should take this as their first principle, that all property is ours to use and every possession is for the sake of self-sufficiency, which anyone can acquire by a few things. They who rejoice in the holdings in their storehouses are foolish in their greed. “He that hath earned wages,” Scripture reminds us, “puts them into a bag with holes” (Haggai 1:6). Such is the man who gathers and stores up his harvest, for by not sharing his wealth with anyone, he becomes worse off (Avila 1983:35).

Clement makes a distinction between possessions that are used and those that are held. The use of property is a means toward self-sufficiency. Yet whenever holding possessions becomes a goal it is an act of foolishness. For Clement, holding possessions that are not used for self-sufficiency degenerates into a lifestyle of luxury; this way of life will be lived at the expense of the poor and will render the possessor worse off and mark him as a fool. This utilitarian perspective towards possessions leads him to criticize the rich in Alexandria. For him the rule is the use of possessions: “Expensiveness should not be the goal in objects whose purpose is usefulness. Why? Tell me, does a knife refuse to cut if it be not studded with silver or have a handle of ivory?” (Wood 1953:126), and also “It is monstrous for one to live in luxury, while many are in want” (Gonzalez 2002:115).

Chrysostom judged style and fashion according to a principle of functionality. Jewellery and other flamboyant accessories were condemned because they fell in the category of the superfluous and the money could have been given to the poor (Krupp 1991:192). Determining needs was a constant question explored by Chrysostom. He does, however, allow for some people needing different things than others (Gordon 1989:107). Clement notes that whatever excess one has should be given away. "What the rich should do with the superfluous – with that which goes beyond the necessities and is therefore a burden – is to distribute it" (Gonzalez 2002:116). Clement contrasts hoarding possessions – "I have more than enough, why may I not enjoy?" with an attitude that states, "I have more than enough, why not share?" the former statement is not worthy of a human or a society. The latter, for Clement, shows that a person is "perfect, and fulfils the command: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'" (Saxby 1987:67).

Gonzalez (2002:177) points out that for Basil the quantity of what should be given is determined by superfluity. Therefore the rich should define what their real needs are. They should avoid making up myriad excuses to justify an ever-increasing standard of living. Basil noted that the rich are like someone who goes into a theatre and, being the first one there, bars all others from coming in. It is this attitude of "exclusive ownership" that Basil criticized (Gonzalez 2002:177). For Basil, the rich had to see their privilege as a tool to help the poor; any other interpretation of wealth was wrong – wealth was given for sharing (Gonzalez 2002:178). Basil also challenged the propensity of the rich to use their wealth to gain social power, which in turn leads to the oppression of the poor and to the further enrichment of the already wealthy. Brown (2008:291) explains that Basil saw wealthy people's propensity to accumulation as a bad habit that could be broken.

Augustine shared these sentiments with Clement, Chrysostom and Basil. He also made a distinction between what is truly necessary and what is surplus. The only things that are truly necessary are food, clothing and shelter. He does, however, make concession to those who have become accustomed to some luxurious items (Ramsey 1982:235). Newhauser shows that in translating the concept of "enough" from a monastic to a laity context, he defines "enough" as "the limits of an individual's social and economic circumstances" (2006:89). It is in this part of his teaching that Augustine provides a major loophole for the rich – if you surround yourself with people who are of the same socio-economic class then the limits – can be shifted. But Augustine argued that because the rich have so many extras, they are not using those objects to enjoy God and to retain wealth in this way and not using it to enjoy God is to "misuse it". The Christian is therefore to have a utilitarian view of possessions, wherein they only take what they need and give the superfluity away. Not to do this is to commit fraud. Gonzalez (2002:217) notes that in Augustinian teaching, giving away what is superfluous is not to be called "liberality; it is a mere act of restitution". Newhauser notes that Augustine's criticism of the greedy person was "that it destroyed justice in human beings' relationships with each other..., and thus the greedy person attempted to take for himself what was justly the property of another" (2006:88). In equating this grasping or unwillingness to let go of the superfluous with thieving, Augustine is agreeing closely with the church fathers before him (Gonzalez, 2002:216).

All four of the fathers mentioned above used their preaching as a platform to painstakingly work through the categories of needs and wants. Even though these sermons seem out-dated (Witherington 2010:156), a leading New-Testament scholar, notes that there are clear guidelines about luxuries that should be avoided by followers of Jesus, "expensive clothes, ridiculously expensive jewellery, unnecessarily large gas-guzzling luxury vehicles, enormous houses with rooms that are seldom if ever used", yet for the suburban church it is not as obvious that these mentioned categories should be avoided. He further suggests that,

Every Christian should begin to draw up a list of his or her own necessities of life, and

then list the luxuries. This will require a good deal of thought, and the process alone is beneficial because it fosters critical thinking about one's lifestyle and whether or not it is godly. This process of discernment and de-enculturation is crucial to spiritual health, and for freeing ourselves to do more for the kingdom, with less focus on self and one's own family (Witherington 2010:56).

In dialoguing with the church fathers our consumer conversations become interrupted. However, it is important to note that the interruption of an ever-increasing repertoire of wants wasn't for the sake of an abstract principle of simplicity or frugality but in order that resources might be shared with the poor. Clement even suggests in his treatise that the rich should set over themselves a mentor who can help them to distinguish between the needs and wants in their lives. This "trainer and governor" would be allowed to:

- Speak freely into your financial situation through harshness in order to speak healing
- Intervene when the "soul has uninterrupted pleasure"
- Pray for the rich man

Clement explains that when rich people allow a person like this into their life it will be a sign that the rich are really on the road of repentance.

CONCLUSION

We have explored three dialogues with specific church fathers exploring issues of agency, inheritance and consumerism. All these conversations can serve as awakenings towards developing praxis for a missional engagement. When we explore the "forgotten ways" we choose interlocutors in order to engage the "here and now". The Early Church Fathers' can offer further dialogues that can be explored. These dialogues can interrupt our conversations further.

Even though the early Christian fathers had a total different economic system from the capitalistic one we function in, this study shows the possibilities that the discourse on the early fathers can offer. The personal examples of Clement, Basil, Chrysostom and Augustine challenge us. Their tireless efforts towards the poor and their prophetic engagement with the wealthy in their congregations showed their commitment to Jesus as he shows himself in the poor. They understood that "being converted to God, rich and poor are converted toward each other" (Bosch 1991:104). It is a conversion process that is desperately needed in our post-apartheid South Africa.

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KEY WORDS

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