

# The Christian politician? An investigation into the theological grounding for Christians' participation in politics

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Party politics is a controversial subject in mainline ecclesiastical circles in South Africa. While one can be forgiven for thinking that this perception changed after 1994, the reverse seems to be the case. This article is an attempt to start a conversation on the subject of Christian leaders' participation in politics. It will become clear from this article that the entrenched idea of the separation between the material and the spiritual is problematic. Acknowledging the sensitivity around this subject, this article aims to intentionally engage the involvement of Christian leaders in party politics. This is done in a positive albeit careful manner simply because the need for ethical leadership in present-day South Africa has become urgent.

## Introduction

The controversy around the involvement of Christian leaders in party politics necessitates that we have this conversation, especially in a time when the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow in South Africa. Unlike with the apartheid regime, against whom there were many combined efforts to work towards its end, challenges faced by those on the margins of the society are numerous and varied. The church order of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), which is considered as the constitution of the mentioned church, is unapologetic in its discouragement of the involvement of Christian leaders in party politics.<sup>1</sup> This article attempts to not only ask the uncomfortable questions around the subject mentioned, but also engages a reality where the uncritical yielding to the directive of the said church order is exposed as problematic today.

It asks a question related to the morality of the involvement of Christian leaders in party politics, but understands that the duality that became entrenched in the Christian understanding of party politics runs deep. By relying on the theologies and examples of well-known reformed church theologians, this article tries to make the point that politics is unavoidable yet necessary. It demonstrates the theological grounding for politics, and at the same time calls for a striving to transcend party political ideologies.

## Is it immoral for Christians to participate in party politics?

It seems to be less problematic to argue that Christians, because they are affected by politics, can and must become involved in politics. Yet quite often when the question is narrowed down to party politics, responses seem to be vague and less attractive, especially within mainline theological and ecclesiastical circles. While recognising the indisputable necessity for Christians to be involved in the politics that governs their existence in civil society, this article attempts to probe the question of party politics by drawing on the insights of great reformed teachers, such as Karl Barth, whose heritages influence us still today.

Firstly, to answer the question as mentioned in the title of this section, it has to be understood that political parties are not constituted by aliens, rather human beings, whom Christians affirm to have been created in the image of God. Moreover, some belong to the church, and ministering should take place in every aspect of life. To lead a spiritual life is to live as the people of God in all aspects of life. Failure to do this is problematic as Bridston (1969) has observed. He argues:

the problem is that the church generally has denied its character as a political institution, has camouflaged its political processes, and has refused to admit the political responsibilities of its leaders. (p. 116)

1. Northern Synod church order says the following regarding this matter in stipulation 15.4: 'the occupation accepted by a Minister of the Word should not be of such a nature that it distracts from his or her dignity as minister of the Word. He or she should also not jeopardise his or her status as minister of the Word by accepting employment from the governing body of a political party' (URCSA:16).

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The current South African reformed context is one where the church through its ministers, who might have some political affiliation with a particular political party, is not free to declare such affiliation. The result is that this is hidden and can therefore not easily be detected.

There is a particular history that has sustained this understanding with disastrous consequences. While it could have been perceived to be Calvinist in the past, it is certainly contrary to a true understanding of Christianity as pointed out by Reinhold Niebuhr (Niebuhr in Brown 1986). He argues that:

Christianity is a religion which measures the total dimension of human conduct, which is expressed in the law of love, but also in terms of the fact of sin. It recognises that the same man who can become his true self only by striving infinitely for self realisation beyond himself is inevitably involved in the sin of infinitely making his partial and narrow self the true end of existence. (p. 102)

From this point of view, a local congregation cannot be seen as promoting the 'politics of secrecy' by denying its political character simply because such a false promotion suggests dishonesty and therefore disloyalty to the true nature of the human who happens to be a Christian.

Karl Barth is helpful here in assisting us to make this point more concrete. Known for his infamous replacement of the word 'Christian' with the word 'church' in his first attempt at writing his magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*, Barth reminded us at a later stage to be careful all together with the notion of church and suggested the notion of community instead, as we attempt to deal with the relationship of those who profess to be Christians in the civil community (Barth 1939a). Barth (1963) writes:

the word 'community', rather than 'church', is used advisedly, for from a theological point of view it is best to avoid the word 'church' as much as possible, if not altogether. (p. 37)

A deeper issue related to our main question here, which needs clarification, is the following: why do people join political associations? Human beings come together and form associations, merely for the sake of life (Hull 1993:11). Human beings are created as social beings. It has to be understood that it is through socialisation that we come together, share and learn from one another. It is also coupled with valuable information about life and the skills needed to live well, and this togetherness can be a powerful tool for promoting human development.

There is therefore a sociological element to this question which cannot and must not be glossed over. African world views and realms are of particular importance here. Human beings do not exist for their own sake; it is therefore not by chance that you have a common understanding of human beings in relations to other human beings in the Bantu languages across the African continent. Again that this facet seems to have disappeared from African reformed theological circles can only be credited to an intense obsession for the new adherents to comply with conditions for acceptance

into a new faith. It is significant that we ask the question: what purpose does politics serve? Hull gives this directive about politics: 'Political governance ... implies deliberations, aspiration for rationality, and subjecting governance by folkways to questioning and criticism' (1993:13).

If this is the case, the question should then be as follows: if the church or Christian minister is not involved in politics, how do they become part of the mentioned process of deliberations? The problem of the involvement or non-involvement of ministers of the word in party politics is further exacerbated by a recent past that has elevated political correctness above sincerity. Political correctness does not only plague the current South African societies, but because what affects the civil community also affects the Christian community, this problem of political correctness is even more strongly applied in the church through a church order that has not allowed itself to move away from its past<sup>2</sup>.

With its own challenges, it cannot be denied that the church is still perceived to be one of the most credible institutions. This is said here because churches are trusted in those institutions that are better placed to assist communities to struggle against issues of poverty and HIV or AIDS. They are also seen as institutions with less room for breeding corruption. The URCSA stipulation 15.4, already mentioned in this article, therefore raises challenges in which the church serves a role of ameliorating the social conditions of the majority.

Reformed church people through the ages have always acknowledged the need of people to be led. Sometimes this acknowledgement had dismayed many who had held these reformed leaders in high esteem (see, for instance, Luther's regrettable remarks about the peasants after the Peasants' Revolt) (Blickle 1981:xxiii). The latter Calvin and his attitude against radicals can also be construed as problematic; the case of Michael Servetus has particular reference to the point made here; yet what remains is the fact that these reformed pioneers (Luther as well as Calvin) were not oblivious of a political role that can and must be played in the material transformation of societies.

Politics cannot be separated from ethical considerations. Barth makes this point poignantly clear in his essay, 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community', where he argues:

The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of the church's primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the state's special responsibility for these weaker members of society. (Barth 1989:284)

2. The word past here refers to the apartheid era in which the relationship of the dominant white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) with the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), was based on the latter conceding to their subservient roles in society. The URCSA is a result of the amalgamation of the DRMC and a significant portion of the DRCA, respectively a congregation for the so called colored and blacks in SA. Dubbed the so called sister churches, these congregations relied heavily on the financial support of the so called mother church. It was that imbalanced relationship which allowed the daughter churches to subject them to the benevolence of the DRC and therefore acquiesced to the manner in which it was treated by the DRC. This is evidenced by the fact that the church order of the daughter churches for a long time remained mere copies of the DRC.

From this point view, we must concede that morality and politics cannot be divorced because morality simply means priority of good over evil in social relations. Our social relation or contract is governed by politics. Moreover, if morality is the answer to the question, 'how ought we to live at the individual level?', then politics can be seen as addressing the same question at the social level. It is therefore unsurprising that evidence has been found of a relationship between attitudes in morality and politics. We must understand that 'group morality' develops from shared concepts in the spectrum of social life, and the same applies to theology, that is, it develops from shared concepts (Gousmett 1994:34).

This is prompted or motivated by belief that the proper means for developing moral codes and re-examining standards lies in the practical application of political theory. We should remember that 'the responsibility of the state is to ensure relationships within and between the other spheres of society' (Gousmett 1994:34). It is the duty of the state to safeguard the 'collective morality', such as protecting the rights of others. Thus, a conclusion could be drawn that a denial by the church for any members to join a political party of their choice is a violation of the rights of individuals through the statement that the imposition of a collective ideology or faith is in itself an immoral act.

If Christians believe that God created human beings with freedom of choice, it must be assumed that people may choose. The statement proves that every Christian must be free to support any kind of political ideas and ideals. Above all, to demystify through all kinds of intellectual tools, the concealed ideologies used by our governments to hide and justify the inhuman situation of the majority of our population is the ultimate task of theological engagement. Marshall (1984:46–47) shares the same view by defining the state as follows: 'The state is what God through Jesus Christ has set up to maintain justice. Its officers are as much ministers of God as the prophets and priests'. Marshall's definition and classification of political officers as ministers of God helps us to transcend the situation where people only look and view politics as cruel and morally dangerous, and at that moment (negative viewing) there is something we miss.

We forget and overlook that even in the church we have politics simply because human beings are involved. In some cases, these ecclesiastical politics are as cruel as secular politics. What we argue is that all human beings are bad, they act under compulsion. And because of our negative judgement of politics, we fail to see even the obvious good in it. The immediate question would be: is anything good that could come from politics or can be found in politics? The answer to this question is affirmed by Hulled (1993:11), when he asserted that: 'The good in the sphere of politics is justice; and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest'. This common interest can only be promoted by participation. Thus, exclusion from the structures (like political parties) where common interests are established and negotiated is immoral as it has 'anti-creational sentiments'.

Bretherton (2010) labels exclusion as 'anti-creational', arguing that:

Exclusion is the process by which the proper separation and connections that God establishes are exploded and imploded. Exclusion is destructive of creation because, first, it cuts good connections, breaking down interdependence, so that the other emerges as an enemy; and second, it erases separation, not recognising the other as someone who, in his or her otherness, belongs to the pattern of interdependence. (pp. 148–149)

The other then emerges as an inferior who must be either assimilated or subjugated to me.

Bretherton reminds and teaches us that we are mutually supporting one another. We are interrelated and thereby inter-reliant. We are actually designed as human beings to serve one another and find our fulfilment by supplying the needs of others. The idea of interdependence is not a promotion of others to our neglect or disregard; this would be 'co-dependence'. Christians cannot stand aloof, believing that politics is a dirty game, and complain about moral deterioration but failing to point the way for others in the leadership of political parties.

## The theological grounding for Christian involvement in politics

In his essay, 'Community, State and Church', Barth marks a vital distinction between the Christian community and the Civil community. He defines the differences between the two as follows: by 'Christian community', Barth refers to what is traditionally called the 'Church', whereas by 'Civil community' he thinks of the State (1939b:149). These differences are fundamental in the sense that they ascribe different roles to both these communities. Barth seems content that by using the concept 'community' to describe both entities, one serves at the very onset to underlie the positive relationship and connection between them. For Barth, this twofold use of the concept 'community' is intended to draw attention to the fact that we are concerned not primarily with institutions and offices, but with human beings gathered together in corporate bodies in the service of a common task (1939b:149).

This view is of particular importance to us, for it is only by thinking not primarily of institutions but of people congregated for a common task that we are able to approach them. The communities to which Barth is referring have different tasks, and it is our view that these communities complement each other. Barth holds the view that the Christian community is the commonality of the people in one place, region or country which is called apart and gathered together as Christians by reason of their knowledge of belief in Jesus Christ. The meaning and purpose of this assembly (*ecclesia*) is the common life of these people in one spirit, the holy spirit, in obedience of the Word of God in Jesus Christ; thus, the inward expression of their life as a Christian community is the one of faith, love and hope by which they all stand, their joint acknowledgement and expressed

responsibility for the preaching of the name of Christ to all humanity and worshiping and thanksgiving which they offer together.

On the other hand, the Civil community (state) is the commonality of all people in one place, region or country in so far as they are under a constitutional system of government that is equally valid for and binding on them all and which is defended and maintained by coercion. The meaning and purpose of this mutual association, according to Barth, is the safeguarding of external, relative and provisional freedom of the individual and the external, relative peace of their community and, to that extent, the safeguarding of the external, relative and provisional humanity of their life, both as individuals and a community (Barth 1939b:150).

The question could then be asked: how is this safeguarding extended? There are three essential forms in which this safeguarding takes place: (1) legislation, which settles the legal system that is binding on all; (2) government, which applies the legislation; and (3) the administration of Justice, which deals with cases of doubtful or conflicting law and decides on its applicability. Given these, there can be no doubt that in the Civil community we do not necessarily have to do with Christians. This means that it is not impossible for this community to be made up of those who do not share allegiance in Christ. For this reason, no appeal can be made to the word or spirit of God in the running of its affairs. Barth put it bluntly, 'the Civil community as such is spiritually blind and ignorant' and it has neither faith nor love nor hope (Barth 1939b:150).

The Civil community can only have external, relative and provisional tasks and aims, and that is why it is burdened and defaced by something which the Christian community can characteristically do without 'physical force-law enforcements'. Clearly, here Barth takes it for granted that the Christian community have paid heed to the warning that it ought to be different from the rest. One can also add that Barth almost naively seems to be in dereliction of a view which he maintained tenaciously – the goodness within humanity. In his opinion, humanity is more in harm's way when it stands outside the realm of the church, for the state is more merciless.

By comparing the church to the state in the manner that he [Barth] does here, one can easily conclude that Barth's view of the church is idealistic and not realistic. Such a view renders Barth surprisingly different to his political insights when following him through especially as observed during his Safenwil years. For when Barth's activities are understood within the particular context in which his theological engagement takes place, then one realises that Barth is a staunch opponent of the organised Church (McCormack 1997:282). On the affirmative, Barth admits that the Christian community exists alongside the Civil community in a still unredeemed world; therefore, there is no single problem harassing the state by which the church is not also affected in some or other way.

## The responsibility of the Church towards the State

We have just attempted to argue that both the Church and the state are significant entities, each in its own right. We have also discussed (albeit cursorily) that both are composed of human beings; as a result, they remain fallible. We have noted that one (Church) espouses some faithfulness to its head who is Christ and expects of those who have committed to it to emulate this head and rely on the Holy spirit for guidance, whereas the other (State) depends largely on its philosophical and political knowledge for its survival. We wish to argue, now that the former also exists within an unredeemed world and is consequentially fallible, the existence of this community is also political.

Barth is of the view that the object of the promise and the hope in which the Christian community has its eternal goal consists of (according to the unmistakable assertion of the New Testament) not an eternal Church but the *polis* built by God and that has come down from heaven to earth.<sup>3</sup> Barth believes that it is only by bearing these statements in mind that we are compelled to regard the existence of the Christian community as of ultimate and supremely political significance (1939b:154). The Christian community is particularly conscious of the need for a Civil community primarily because it knows that humanity needs to have kings and rulers over it.

In line with Barth, we maintain that the idea of a government is God ordained; it is thus a gift that we receive from God. More importantly, this community must also know (if not yet) that the original and final pattern of this order or government is the eternal righteousness of God's grace. The church not only preaches the kingdom of God in this eternal form, but also thanks God that his kingdom has an external, relative and provisional embodiment 'in a world that is not yet redeemed', in which it is valid and effective even when the temporal order is based on the most imperfect and clouded knowledge of Christ (1939b:154). For this reason, the state cannot be a product of sin, but one of the constants of the divine providence and government of the world in its action against human sin. Because the state is a gift from God, the state even in its perversion cannot escape from God and God's laws as the standard by which it has to be judged. Thus, the Barmen Declaration asserts that the Christian community concedes the benefaction of this ordinance of its thankful, reverent hearts.<sup>4</sup>

From the above discussion, we can clearly contend that the Church owes some kind of service to the state. Deducing from the teachings of the gospels as well as from the Letter to the Romans, Christians are called to offer 'supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings' for all of humanity

3.Cf. Revelations 21:2; 24 'the nations shall walk in the light of his glory' and Matthew 25:31ff 'in the *basileia* of God – in the Judgment of the King on the throne of his glory.

4.Barmen theological declaration, thesis no. 5.



and, in particular, for kings and all those in positions of authority. It is imperative to note that the church does not do these duties chiefly because it can come into good term with the state, but because it is called for to perform so. The church prays for the civil community simply because this community is not in a position to pray for itself. Concerning the reference made to Romans 13:1–7, which is the charge that Christians should subordinate themselves to authorities, Barth is quick to point out that Luther's translation of the very instruction is dangerous, for the last thing that this instruction implies is that the Christian community and Christians should offer the blindest possible obedience to the Civil community and its officials (Barth 1939b:152).

Yet what is not taken away from this is the fact that politics has a very intentional role to play in society. It is concerned primarily with the good of society. Given the fragility of human beings, the notion of party politics cannot summarily be disregarded. When Barth visited the British House of Commons in 1936, this is what he observed:

my impression here (in this 'sacred play' between the English Government and the English opposition) is that in human terms decisions are being taken about the political future of the world which one regards with some degree of confidence. (Barth 1975:287)

Party politics had remained inevitable also for Barth. In Safenwil, we see him involved in the establishment of four trade unions as well as his acquisition of membership to the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which afforded him the title of the 'Red Pastor' of Safenwil. It was this very tendency of practising theology and relating it to politics that led Marquardt to the conclusion that Barth's socialism was a *socialist praxis* (Hunsinger 1976:47ff).

Had the reformed faith been more attentive to the South African and African experience when it arrived on the continent, it would have learned that it is impossible to separate the spiritual from the material. The emphasis that 'all things in the world are under God's sovereignty' is motivated by the acknowledgement as well as the understanding that God is the One who created this present physical world with everything in it. Seen in this way, binaries, that seems to be common place in western epistemologies, remains as a matter of fact impossible. It is thus impossible to divide the whole into different parts (sacred and secular, holiness and secularism).

Spirituality, economy, politics and culture are under the control of God, which means that God works not only through the Bible and Christian traditions but also through governments, financial institutions, cultural organisations and personal experiences, etc. This dualistic thinking and prejudicial attitudes interfere with social responsibility. Moreover, the dualistic thinking denies that 'the Scripture speaks directly to political life' (Gousmett 1994:57).

While the particularity of Africa in terms of its intentional inclination not to engender dual thinking must be stressed,

it would be frivolous to argue nonetheless that this exercise is uniquely African. A case in point is to be found in Holy Scripture itself. A number of examples can be cited to justify the unity between the spiritual and the material. As a matter of fact, one can even argue that the dualistic thinking, which had become entrenched in Christianity since the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, is ant-Christian and even goes against the grain of Calvinism. The South African situation is precarious when it comes to the issue of politics and its relation to the spiritual.

Firstly, it must be admitted that there are indeed many variants of Calvinism. In the case of South Africa, we have seen how the Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper was adapted to justify the advancement of one particular nation at the expense of others. Kuyper had become famous for his concept of autonomous spheres of existence. The title *Soevereiniteit in eigen kring* was the very title of his address at the inauguration of the Vrije Universiteit (VU) of Amsterdam. The guiding principle of his address was that he would find a university which, under the legal guardianship of the state, would be free of both state and church (De Klerk 1975:257). When he later delivered a lecture to the student body at the VU, he uttered the phrase for which he was to become most famous with: 'There is not a single inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine' (Bratt 1998:488). Although the idea of autonomous spheres of sovereignty is somewhat related to *Ordnungstheologie* which was particularly famous in the time of the Third Reich in Germany, many apartheid theologians did not use this idea as such but instead found an ally in Kuyper and his views with regard to the spheres of sovereignty.

The apparent vagueness around the question of how Kuyper was interpreted and used to justify the apartheid ideology therefore makes it impossible to speak about apartheid ideology without referring to Kuyper's Neo-Calvinism. It is for this reason that a number of theologians blame the apartheid ideology on the Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper (De Gruchy 1984:107ff). It is the [*sic*] reason that the likes of De Gruchy in pointing to the many variants of Calvinism can speak in the case of Calvinism in South Africa as Afrikaner Calvinism (De Gruchy 1991:11ff).

In essence, one can argue that dualistic thinking had proven to be ridiculous even in situations to which we have just alluded, where Calvinism (itself not without its own contradictions) was used to give credence to a situation where the minority could exploit the majority with ease of conscience. Thus, the question unfortunately still stands: how does the Christian leader, because who is a member of the Christian community is also in fact a member of the civil community, get involved in party politics? It is precisely here that we see how this binary or dual thinking had become entrenched. The Christian is rightly or wrongly perceived to be the spiritual leader and, by virtue of this, is to transcend material and therefore politics.

Gousmett pointed to these challenges when he argued that 'Calvinism as part of the Protestant Reformation rejected the medieval ideal of faith as the contemplation of God, and instead posited the ideal of faith as obedience to God' (1994:1). Others before Gousmett can also be added to make the point concrete, for instance, Ernst Troeltsch (1931), who described original Calvinism as:

a systematic endeavour to mould life of society as a whole, to a kind of 'Christian Socialism' ... it lays down the principle that the Church ought to be interested in all sides of life, and it neither isolates the religious element against the other elements, like Lutheranism, nor does it permit this sense of collective responsibility to express itself merely in particular institutions and occasional intervention in affairs, as in Catholicism. (p. 602)

For Calvin, there was no doubt that the church should be interested in all sides of life. It was for this reason that he argued that:

This life, though abounding in all kinds of wretchedness, is justly classed among divine blessings which are not to be despised. Therefore, if we do not recognise the kindness of God in it, we are chargeable with no little ingratitude towards him. (Calvin 1989:27)

He remained completely aware of the fact that all areas of life have evils; however, he maintains that all areas of life even in the midst of wretchedness are definitely of blessings. He furthermore indicates that those who are ungrateful about life or spheres of life will be charged. The likes of Calvin and many other renowned fathers of the reformed faith seem to be in agreement with the fact that the spiritual cannot and must not be separated from the material.

Calvin himself is a champion of this view as his magnum opus dedicated to the French king indicates, yet it seems that Calvin again seems very careful to have all Christian leaders mindful of the inherent intricacies of party politics. Barth unlike Calvin before him was particularly careful to insist on those intricacies. In a posthumous publication, Barth warns that it is significant for every Christian to transcend ideologies. Thus, to be involved in party politics is inevitable in his opinion; yet it is only the example of the Christian leader who is able to transcend any political ideology which must be lifted up to be followed. In his work on the 'Lordless powers',<sup>5</sup> this point is poignantly made.

## The unavoidability of Christians in politics: A conclusion

Politics is unavoidable. The likes of Luther, Calvin, Barth and others have indicated on several occasions their inclination to

5. Barth employs this concept in his work 'The Christian life' where he focuses especially on the 'Lordless powers'. It was Thomas Hobbes who made this notion famous in a book entitled *Leviathan* which was published in 1651. In his attempt to answer the question 'who' and 'what' *Leviathan* is, Hobbes asserts that *Leviathan* is the epitome of the rise and existence, the past, present and future, the essence and reality or state as the only earthly potentate and sovereign with one or more heads. People have handed over and entrusted to it all their political, social, economic, intellectual and even ethical and religious freedoms, possibilities and rights. By their consent, *Leviathan* is safeguarded against every possible protest; thus he rules in their place over them. Essentially, *Leviathan* is an ideology and Barth held that this very *Leviathan* was detectable in totalitarian states such as Fascism, National Socialism and Stalinism. Cf. Tshaka (2010:43).

be biased towards democracy. Decisions about the economy, society and beliefs are taken in the political realm. Thus, the absence of a Christian in politics implies that a Christian is not part of this decision-making process and, because what affects the individual in the Christian community also affects the same individual in the civil community, the idea of the Christian from politics is in fact absurd.

What we cannot deny is the fact that we have histories to point to how this idea of the non-participation of the Christian in politics came into being. At the heart of the separation of politics from the spiritual was not the understanding that the Christian who remains apolitical will preserve himself or herself for posterity (although that was the perception which many imbibed), but in fact the objective was to ensure that the new converts comply with the dictates of the new masters of their destiny. Any attempt to speak about the Christian's involvement in party politics in South Africa today must start with this acknowledgement.

Senokoane and Kritzinger (2007) warned against the privatisation of Christianity by arguing that:

If we as Christians, who make up a statistical majority of 70% of South African society, do not commit ourselves to significant processes of people-centred development, anti-racism and church-re-unification, but continue in our lukewarm and comfortable private Christianities, we should not be surprised when South African society at large leaves us behind or even splits us out. (p. 173)

The reality and the truth is to choose not to participate in community activities (including the community of political parties) may lead to isolation and a failure to witness the gospel. If Bonhoeffer (1995:355) is correct by saying that, 'in both word and deed, the church-community has to witness to the work on removing any offense, and to make room for the gospel in the world', then it would mean that the Christian community, Christians, can make that room in the world by making space. That space is possible by entering and removing.

Politics is therefore unavoidable and necessary; yet we need a kind of leadership that is ethical and can strive to transcend political ideologies. A Christian role should be one which is proactive. History has shown on several occasions how the Christian faith has always been reactionary instead of proactive. Bonhoeffer speaks against this reaction when he argues that: 'the space of the church is not there in order to fight the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God' (2005:63).

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## Authors' contributions

R.S.T. was chiefly responsible for integrating Barth with the present discourse of ministers of the word and sacrament and politics. B.B.S. was responsible for contributing to social activism and how that can be applied in the present theological discourse of the relationship of the church and state.

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