South African Apartheid Leaders Apology for Racial Sins

Could the world use a bit more contrition, forgiveness and reconciliation?

Recent international news reports brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime.

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can being people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing." {1}

Here's an exception.

During the 1980s, conflict raged between South Africa's white minority Afrikaner government and the black majority opposition. One former African National Congress operative—now a government official—told me over breakfast in Cape Town that his responsibilities back then had been "to create chaos." Mutual hostility and animosity often reigned.

Bombing Campaign

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film. {2}

I had tickets to see “Cry Freedom” in Pretoria for opening night, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You might imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok’s recent attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president’s office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: “I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15).”

An Example to Follow?

That biblical reference is Jesus’ Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another’s feet. The inscription’s words echo those of the Prodigal Son who in the famous biblical story returns home after squandering his inheritance, hopes his father will accept him as a hired hand, and says, “I have sinned against heaven and against you.” {3} The father rejoices over his return, warmly receives him as son, and throws a welcome celebration.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: “He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said ‘you must allow me to do this’ and washed my feet in my office.” Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture. {4}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time “to go to my neighbor, to the person that I’ve wronged.” He says he and his compatriots should “climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, ‘Look, I’m sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.'” {5}

Startling contrition, indeed.

Forgiveness Components

The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes stressed three components of forgiving others: “First, we surrender our right to get even…. Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer…that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us…. And third, we wish our wrongdoer well.” {6}

Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson has quipped that those in Washington, DC traveling “the high road of humility” won’t encounter “heavy traffic.” {7} Too often the same holds in workplaces, neighborhoods and families. Could Vlok’s example inspire some changes?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, “The Forgiveness Factor,” Christianity Today, January 10, 2000, 38.
2. “Botha implicated in Church bombing,” BBC News online, July 21, 1998; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
3. Luke 15:21 NIV.
4. “Feet washed in apartheid apology,” BBC News online, 28 August 2006; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
5. “Minister atones for race sins,” BBC News video, 3 September 2006; http://tinyurl.com/g899l; accessed October 4, 2006.
6. Lewis B. Smedes, “Keys to Forgiving,” Christianity Today, December 3, 2001, 73; www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html.
7. Harry Kreisler, “Let ‘er Rip! Reflections of a Rocky Mountain Senator: Conversation with Alan K. Simpson, Former U.S. Senator, Wyoming,” Conversations with History, Institute of International Studies, University of California-Berkeley,

September 17, 1997; globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Simpson/simpson1.html; accessed October 2, 2006.

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