

## **The Curious Conversion of Adriaan Vlok**

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In early August of 2006, one of South Africa's most notorious apartheid-era leaders, Adriaan Vlok, contacted the Rev. Frank Chikane, a former anti-apartheid activist, and requested a meeting to discuss "a personal matter." The former Minister of Law and Order then appeared at Rev. Chikane's office with basin and towel in hand, resolved to wash the feet of the former head of the South Africa Council of Churches (SACC). Rev. Chikane, as can be imagined, was shocked by the overture, and at first resisted Vlok's attempt to reenact Jesus' expression of humility with his disciples as described in the Gospel of John. Finally, however, Chikane, a Pentecostal minister, relented, "having understood that my refusal would deprive him of his liberation and his release from psychological torture."<sup>[1]</sup> And so in the paradox that so often accompanies sacrament, the roles of power had switched, and Adriaan Vlok knelt at the feet of Frank Chikane. Neither could have predicted that this private encounter would become the focus of intense public debate. For South Africans, the significance of the footwashing was understood and debated, not as a dramatic, though isolated event, but in the context of the intertwined histories of these two men, key actors in the drama of South Africa in the 1980s.

Adriaan Vlok, now 70, is a lifelong member of the Dutch Reformed Church, but has never been accused of being a choir boy. A true believer in apartheid, he was associated with many of its excessive brutalities. As the South African government felt the squeeze of international pressure in the late 1980s, it unleashed its darkest tactics before the dawn of democracy in 1994. No one was more assiduous in implementing the paranoid and isolationist mentality of the Botha administration than Adriaan Vlok. It was he who had

ordered the bombing of theaters that were screening “Cry Freedom” in 1987. Further, he was responsible for the national security strategy, ordering secretive police squads to pluck suspected activists off the streets for detention and interrogation, thereby removing them from the political struggle. Under Vlok’s watch as apartheid’s top cop, an estimated 30,000 people were detained in the 1980s (including 15,000 during the State of Emergency declared in 1985) and over 100 were killed.<sup>[3]</sup> Not surprisingly, this precipitated a seismic reaction in the international human rights community.

Frank Chikane, ordained in the Apostolic Faith Missionary Church, worked throughout his adult life against apartheid in and through the faith community. In the process, he had been jailed and tortured a number of times and, like so many other leaders in this struggle, had lived and operated in hiding for periods of time. In 1987 Vlok had instituted the “restriction,” or banning of a number of political organizations, including a coalition that Chikane and other religious leaders were involved in, the United Democratic Front.

When Chikane assumed leadership of the SACC in 1987 at the age of 36, Vlok turned up the heat. Three days after he became Secretary General of the ecumenical organization, the SACC headquarters were raided. Undeterred, during the next year, the SACC organized nonviolent demonstrations against apartheid: clergy prayed and marched, met fire hoses and were carted off to jail, reminiscent of the civil rights movement in the United States.

Adriaan Vlok testified in the Parliament that these ministers had chosen “violence and communism above Christianity.” The SACC and its clergy grew bolder, so the government upped the ante. Khotso House, the organization’s headquarters was bombed. Chikane, too, was in the government’s crosshairs. Four times while he was traveling in 1989—including during a trip to the United States to meet with then-President Bush and members of Congress—he became violently ill and came close to death. The clothing in his suitcase had been dosed with poison. Despite these assassination attempts, Chikane continued to lead church folk “from merely lamenting about apartheid and the crisis in this country to active prophetic witness against this sin and death.” The SACC used international church structures to mobilize global attention on the struggle in South Africa and obtain widespread censure of the apartheid government. Finally world opinion and economic pressure were instrumental in bringing about the surprising bloodless resolution, ushering out the violent regime and bringing the African National Congress (ANC) to power in 1994. After the dismantling of apartheid and the transition to democracy, Frank Chikane moved from

church to state, and served President Thabo Mbeki as his Director-General.

Chikane was the personification of everything Vlok and the apartheid leadership were fighting against—people of color who, grounded in their religious faith, were able to expose the moral bankruptcy of that system and mobilize resistance both at the grassroots and international levels. He had moved from political prisoner to political power-broker. It was for that very reason that Vlok had chosen Chikane: he had come to symbolize for Vlok all those whom he had hated and had hurt. “I have to show humility for what had happened in the past. I came to you because I take you as a representative and an embodiment of all the other people I should be talking to and ... through you I shall have done so to everybody else.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Adriaan Vlok’s journey to Frank Chikane’s office to wash his feet had not been quick or easy. The political transformation of 1994 ended not only his political career but a way of life. In 1995 his wife committed suicide, provoking a period of soul-searching that led him eventually to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1997, one of only a few of the top leaders in the old regime to do so. He applied for, and received amnesty for his participation in the bombing of Khotso House, but did not accept responsibility for much else. During questioning before the TRC, he acknowledged that decisions had been made for political enemies to be “permanently removed from society, eliminated and neutralized.” But that if the foot soldiers had interpreted those as orders to torture and kill, they had seriously misunderstood him, Vlok insisted, leaving the TRC panel members “rolling their eyes.”<sup>[5]</sup> Still, he had been required to sit and listen to the pain of so many of the victims of the repression, his victims—a key element in the TRC process.

Nine years later Adriaan Vlok read an article by a pastor in Pretoria about the ritual of footwashing and its therapeutic, even sacramental power to bring healing and reconciliation to the soul. Although the highest profile footwashing is done by the Pope every year during Holy Week, it is practiced across the ecclesiastical spectrum: communions as diverse as Pentecostals and Mormons, Methodists, and Seventh Day Adventists engage in footwashing. Noticeably non-washing are the Reformed Protestants, noted for individualized communion practices that minimize interpersonal contact. For the Dutch Reformed Vlok, this was new liturgical territory. By washing the feet of his former enemy, Vlok believed that he would have to humble himself and in the process let go of personal pride and a sinful sense of racial superiority. He sought a deeper experience of forgiveness

than the TRC process had left him with.

The action would have remained a private encounter had not Frank Chikane later asked Vlok if he could make it public. Chikane's hope was that it might inspire others and thereby make a wider contribution to the rebuilding of South Africa from the inside out. "I see it as a pointer to where we are now and where we may be headed, in our journey to mature reconciliation after past wrongs. It could just become a harbinger of inspiring acts that help transform our nation's psyche further and free us from the pain and horror of the past."<sup>161</sup>

As surprising as the footwashing itself was the controversy it ignited. For several weeks it became the hot topic of public and private conversation, on the airwaves and in blogosphere. Interviews with Vlok appeared in newspapers; he was featured on call-in radio talk shows, and faced intense questioning on television. In this already-vulnerable culture, itself in a constant state of soul searching, a scab had been picked and old familiar pain had come quickly to the surface.

Adriaan Vlok faced these public inquisitions wearing a red WSJD bracelet ("Wat sou Jesus doen?"). And inquisitions they were. Often angry and always passionate questioners probed deeply:

- Many challenged Vlok to be more forthcoming with the details of his past involvements. Full disclosure of the truth is crucial to forgiveness, as South Africans had come to appreciate through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- The selection of Chikane was questioned, as was the whole validity of having "a representative." Can an apology be generic? Can forgiveness be sought through a proxy? And who should get to choose the representative anyway? Should not the former Minister of Law and Order be washing the feet others, like the woman he framed for the SACC bombing, or the young men who carried out horrific orders, or the victims of human rights abuses themselves?
- He was pushed on the timing of his action: Why now? Why not ten years ago, or twenty?
- Those still languishing in the legacy of apartheid wanted to know what the substance behind the symbol is or will be. Can repentance be sincere without actions to back it up? Can forgiveness be granted without reparations? Where is

the evidence of this repentance, or more basically, this faith?

In one interchange before a panel of questioners on a televised talk show, Vlok was pushed on his motivation and his religious identity was scrutinized:

"I'm a Christian. ... I carry the name of Christ. This is something I had to do."

"Yes but you were a Christian when you did these things (during apartheid)."

"I was raised in the Church, but I did not have a relationship with God until about ten years ago."

"Then what took you so long?"

"Who can understand God's timing? It took a long time for God to deal with me."

The questioners were obviously frustrated, their energy fueled by the coolness of the respondent. In his media appearances, Adriaan Vlok was a study of "grace under fire." Is this something he had learned on the other side of the table earlier in his career, or just another irony of history? Vlok did not appear as a tormented man to those who so wanted him to be. But why?

Was this a man at peace with himself, secure in his forgiveness before God and the neighbor he wronged? Or was this a rerun of his infuriating denial before the TRC? There were echoes of his earlier testimony: he pleaded ignorance about human rights abuse by police at the local level, conceding perhaps he was at fault in not asking more questions.<sup>[7]</sup>

Or was this simply a man of Afrikaner reserve doing the best he can? When challenged on full disclosure of the truth, he repeatedly stated that he thought he *had* told the truth, certainly his understanding of it. Decades of denial, public and perhaps private, do not easily disappear. But he also stated that "I'm not running away," and he would continue to meet with those he had wronged. When pushed on reparations he finally disclosed that he had been working with a group of mothers to help them locate the remains of their sons who had been victims of apartheid's violence. In response to impassioned descriptions of the poverty that continues in the wake of apartheid, Vlok responded in terms of charity, but not justice. He has been economically supporting a family caught in poverty—perhaps another symbolic action.

Speculation on Vlok's motives—getting inside his head—has been ongoing. Questions

remain unanswered. Hypotheses about his actions are left dangling: Is he doing this for his children? Does he have a terminal illness? But finally it doesn't matter. Underneath all of this public conversation is the question the nation is asking itself: Will we forgive him? And what will that look like? How does the thread of this forgiveness get woven into the emerging tapestry that is "the new South Africa?"

Most surprising in all of this, especially to an outsider, is that this public discourse is happening at all. But living in the context of an often vulnerable culture of national soul searching, South Africans do not seem to find it unusual that the meaning of a religious symbol—footwashing—is being dissected in the public forum or a political context. The questions being engaged have high stakes attached and are profoundly theological questions. What is the meaning of repentance? forgiveness? redemption? Few seminary classroom discussions on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of cheap and costly grace have as much urgency, depth, and insight. The passion of the public response reflects the layers of anger and grief that still exist in South African society a short generation after apartheid.

But it is not just the energy but the perspective that is different when theological concepts become the tools of public conversation and not just the property of a religious elite. For instance, the symbolism of footwashing shifted from its historical meaning as an act of humility to one of atonement. Jesus did not need to atone for his sins as he handled Judas' feet; what made the act so powerful was that the laws of the moral universe were not being followed, as Peter recognized in his protest that the washers should in fact be the ones doing the washing. But in the social reconstruction of the symbol in South Africa, 2006, humiliation signified repentance, and the act of the servant became a vehicle for atoning for sin.

Some have concluded that Vlok's action is too little, too late, an inadequate atonement. Others, such as Coenie Burger, Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, see this as a catalyst for "another phase of the reconciliation process which will take us deeper." Ongoing public dialogue will certainly uncover other wounds, other feet to be washed, and others to wash them. But the fact that reconciliation is unselfconsciously the stuff of public policy and conversation is an astonishing starting point. Theology has indeed entered the public forum not as outside critic, moralistic bully or ontological snob. Theological conversation is occurring without the immediate participation of academic theologians. Theology itself has become public domain, offering a language that enables

society to wrestle with the hard work of meaning-making, not only in coming to terms with the past but in constructing its future.

South Africa, rather, the New South Africa, is uniquely positioned to model a different appropriation of public theology in a post-modern world. During apartheid, they experienced both the positive and negative contributions theology can make in service to social justice. The Dutch Reformed Church had provided the theological rationale for apartheid; it also contributed some of its most ardent and articulate critics along with other faith traditions. Only history was able to expose “whose side” God was on. This ambivalent history cancelled out any notions of what a “civil religion” in South Africa would look like. When the TRC process was designed and implemented, under the tutelage of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a new language was introduced that was a fusion of the theological language of reconciliation with the political language of nation-building. This was differentiated from the language and political strategies of vengeance (as in post-Holocaust Germany), amnesia (as became policy in Central America) or reconstruction (the American model). Unlike prior models, the TRC had introduced a model of reconciliation-as-nation-building that stressed the importance of truth-telling (rather than amnesia), forgiveness (rather than vengeance), and mutuality in forging a new future (rather than having the victor “reconstruct” the nation out of the ashes of the vanquished.)

The legacy of apartheid, graphically reflected in the vast, segregated impoverished communities that still exist in South Africa, is going head to head with the legacy of the TRC. The commitment to reconciliation and its components (truth-telling, repentance, reparation, and forgiveness) has introduced a language and a set of concepts into the dominant culture that do not easily translate into American English. It is hard to imagine, for example, J. Edgar Hoover washing the feet of Martin Luther King, Jr., and not having the public respond either with cynicism and dismissal on the one hand, or pious sentimentality on the other. In contrast, in the New South Africa religious rituals and their theological meanings become the stuff of the hard, continuous work of nation-building. Theological concepts like sin, repentance, forgiveness, and justice have been taken off the shelf, dusted off, and put into active circulation. The *telos* is hoped for, but not a given. In the meantime, there are glimpses of redemption on the journey. Perhaps Vlok’s basin will spill onto other feet and his towel be passed to other washers.

1. 1. *Sunday Times*, Cape Town, 10 September 2006.
2. 2. Greg Barrow, "Botha Implicated in Church Bombing," BBC News, 21 July 1998, <http://news.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm>.
3. 3. "Adriaan Johannes Vlok, 1937-" South African History Online, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/vlok-aj.htm> (accessed 23 July 2009).
4. 4. *Sunday Times*, Cape Town, 27 August 2006.
5. 5. *New York Times*, 19 October 1997.
6. 6. *Sunday Times*, Cape Town, 10 September 2006.
7. 7. Read the full transcript of Volk's testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at [http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/amntrans/1998/98072031\\_pre\\_cosatu1.htm](http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/amntrans/1998/98072031_pre_cosatu1.htm).