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# Land, liberation and prophetic witness: Re-envisioning land justice through Biko's Black Theology



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This article investigates the outstanding question in South Africa of the land, by way of Black Theology, honing in on it the liberative optic of Steve Biko (Stephen Bantu). It argues that today's post-apartheid land clashes do not engage ordinary politics or law; they involve theological crises that expose the moral bankruptcy of both the Church and South Africa. The article juxtaposes the Reformed ethics of Jacobus Vorster, the eschatological perspective of Kelebogile Resane and the radical emancipatory paradigm of Black Theology with a view to highlight land as neither commodity nor property, but sacred inheritance, communal memory and spiritual root. Biko's theology is informed by Black consciousness, the memory of ancestry and incarnational practice, which constructs a decolonial Christology that challenges Christian nationalism and spiritual responsibility for land dispossession. The analysis contends against white refugee claims and theological amnesia that reverses justice, arguing for a prophetic voice rooted in remembrance, restitution and ethical impetus.

**Contribution:** It mobilises Biko, Mosala, Vellem and others to (re)imagine an African and African Christian identity by restoring the role of the Church as conscience of the nations. Land justice appears here as a theological imperative, as a site where liberation, self-expression and divine action meet. When people whose land was stolen from them regains that land, it is not, after all, just the land they are reclaiming but their testimony.

**Keywords:** Black Theology; land; prophetic theology; memory; Biko.

## Introduction

### Prophetic theologies in the struggle after post-apartheid

Three decades after the formal dismantling of apartheid and the birth of South Africa as the so-called 'rainbow nation', a term popularised by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Nelson Mandela, the country is a land divided by geography, by history and by a structurally unequal economy. Nowhere is this unresolved tension more painfully evident than in the issue of land. The political settlement of 1994 signalled the end of white minority rule, but did not yet remove the spatial, economic and psychological remnants of colonialism and apartheid. Land is still the clearest locus at which dispossession in our past and inequality in the present meet.

Recent debates, such as white South African farmers seeking refugee status in places such as the United States, expose a theologically and historically perverse reversal. These claims, grounded in the language of persecution and fear, symbolically displace the historical beneficiaries of systemic land theft to a new position: as the persecuted. These narratives use moralistic language to cloud over historical responsibility and turn whiteness into a symbol of threatened innocence. Theological danger is deep here in its appeal for Christian ethics to legitimate colonial amnesia and to misshape justice through cleansing power.

This article contends that such perversions must be subjected to prophetic theological scrutiny that does not pretend to sit on the fence. Building on three disparate but intersecting theological perspectives, namely Jacobus Vorster's Reformed ethics of stewardship, Kelebogile Resane's eschatological understanding of land as sacred inheritance, and the liberative and radical Black Theology tradition of writers such as Biko, Mosala, Mofokeng and Vellem, this article argues that land should be recovered not only as territory, but as testament. It is a sacred space that binds memory, justice and spiritual identity together.

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In the African imagination, the land is so much more than property or legal ownership. At a general level, Moyo (1992:55–56) observes, in the traditional African society, land was not private property but communal, used according to social and moral regulations. Ownership had less to do with power and more to do with shared responsibility. Reiterating this, Mbiti (1969:26–27) stressed that Africans are mystically, spiritually bound to the soil as the graveyard of their forebears, and the soil where their identity is rooted (Mbiti 1969):

> To remove Africans by force from their land is an act of such great injustice … there is a fundamental severing of ties which cannot be repaired and which often creates psychological problems with which urban life cannot as yet cope, he teaches. (pp. 26–27)

Black identity is marked by an acute sense of rootlessness, yet African philosophy stresses that meaning has its origin in rootedness. This relationship to land, to lineage, and to community is central to Black consciousness and is an essential expression of the African concept of *ubuntu-botho*, the notion that to be human is to belong, to be rooted, to dwell in relationship with others (Mazamisa 1994:210).

The ecological consequence of the loss of the land is more than an economic one; it is a spiritual catastrophe. It severs communities from inherited memory, faithfulness and cultural cohesiveness. In this way, the article pursues the theology of land in South Africa as prophetic demand and as a decolonial struggle that does not let escape the addressing of memory, restitution and engagement of justice.

Through juxtaposing Vorster's (2007) theological ethics, eschatological and ancestral perspectives of Resane (2023) and the liberative dimension of Black Theology, this article advances the case for a contextual theology of land that is not neutralistic but biased. It argues that any theological reflection that remains silent before the politics of land, or which spiritualises injustice, is responsible for the suffering of the dispossessed. Land is more than space. It is spirit, history and sacred inheritance. It is the ground in which the moral imagination of freedom must be planted.

## Steve Biko: A black theologian

Steve Biko's legacy is frequently reduced to the narrow terrain of political activism and Black consciousness philosophy; yet as Jentile (2018) effectively demonstrates, Biko was a theologian of remarkable calibre. His theology did not spring from the halls of church institutions or the couches of dogmatic orthodoxy, but from the life lived by black South Africans under oppression. For Biko, freedom was not just a theoretical or political notion, it was a theological command based on the wholeness of the black self, mind, body and soul. He was not just interested in changing laws, but reclaiming personhood and restoring dignity, and as a result was practising a theology of embodied resistance.

### The theological underpinning of Black consciousness

Biko's key philosophical framework, Black consciousness, is, in fact, entangled with his theological imagination. A plausible case could be made that the work of Biko was a 'theo-political intervention' in the sense that the struggle for liberation was not separable from the struggle for spiritual freedom. Biko (2004:64) writes that 'no nation can win a battle without faith …'.

His diagnosis of the colonised mind was that it was the main field of contestation for freedom (Biko 2004:101). This was political analysis but also theological critique. He dreamed of a Christianity that might awaken in black people the divine image latent within them, freeing faith from its colonial captivity. Biko's involvement with the University Christian Movement (UCM) provided an opening into alternative theological discourses that introduced him to liberation theologies and contextualised readings of the Bible.

His confrontation on the Christian religion was not on the gospel, but on the perversion of it by colonial powers. 'Obviously', he writes, 'the only path open for us now is to redefine the message in the Bible and to make it relevant to the struggling masses' (Biko 2004:34). Here, he repossesses Scripture as a site of black struggle in a manner that is consonant with Black Theology's appeal to read the Bible from *below*. Crucially, Biko was not calling for an unqualified rejection of Christianity or saying we should hate all white people. He was criticising systems of domination, not individual people. This is seen in how he also kept friendships and comradeship with white sympathisers such as Donald Woods and Father Aelred Stubbs, who promoted his work and defended his memory. Closest to him within the Black Consciousness Movement were Christian clerics like Malusi Mpumlwana and Barney Pityana, clerics who were theologically and politically anchored in the struggle. This detail illustrates Biko's vision of a fair, cohesive society, and not one where liberation was simply the inversion of race, but rather human reclamation.

### A decolonial Christology

Biko's (2004:104) theology was Christocentric but deeply decolonial. He maintained that Jesus should not be presented only as a victim of suffering, but as a liberator. Biko fought against the racialised religious order that came from colonial Christianity by insisting on a contextual Christology that supports black life. He said that 'the black God will have to raise His voice and make Himself heard over and above noises from His counterpart' (Biko 2004:33). This daring call broke down imposed hierarchies and gave the oppressed back their divine utterance. The 'Word become flesh' is not only a matter of dogma, but of making it concrete through practice for Biko. Jesus is incarnate in the face of the oppressed, crucified in apartheid, and risen in the agency of the marginalised. Hence, neutrality, so to speak, on the

theological front is not a viable alternative. As Biko's critique suggests, between complicity and prophetic solidarity, the church must decide.

### Spirituality as praxis: Biko's theology on the streets

Biko's theology was based on the rhythms of communal living, of spirituality from below. It was an incarnational theology, forged in the fire of pain and strife. He also thought that theology should arise from the groans and cries of human beings, rather than from the consolations of institutions. Biko 'listened and then theologized', taking a praxis-oriented stance analogous to liberation theology's preferential option for the poor (Jentile 2018:202). In that regard, Biko was a theologian in the footsteps of James Cone or Gustavo Gutiérrez.

His focus on African culture, ancestral memory and the sacredness of the land is part of the larger stream of African theology. It is necessary to restore to the black man a sense of importance (Biko 2004:108). To be restored to one was to be restored to all. Biko's articulation of the sacred character of land was simultaneously political and theological. He viewed dispossession not just as a historical wrong but as a spiritual trespass. The lost ground was a separation of people from place and lineage, a break in the theological geography. Biko imagined the return of land as a restoration, not compensation, of memory, of community, of divine justice.

### Influences and legacy for Black Theology

Biko's theological provocations have influenced generations of South African black theologians. Allan Boesak claims that the Church was 'stunned, then shamed, then converted, by Biko's criticism of Christianity and, in particular, of the black church' (Boesak 2014:1063). Boesak's own resistance theology is derived directly from Biko's criticism of ecclesial complacency. Itumeleng Mosala (1989) broadened Biko's analysis, taking it into the domain of biblical hermeneutics and arguing that theology must be for material liberation and against Eurocentric exegesis. Vellem (2016) made this point more explicit when he defined the post-1994 Church as well often compromised by neoliberal rationale and suggested that the Biko prophetic radical posture be revisited. Biko's demand that faith must address suffering and dignity is still central in these theological paths.

There have been numerous stages of growth in South African Black Theology (Motlhabi 2009). James Cone and local leaders, including Basil Moore, Dr Manas Buthelezi, Bishops Alpheus Zulu and Lawrence Zulu, Rev. B.N.B. Ngidi, Rev. Clive McBride, Rev. Bonganjalo Goba, and others were responsible for the first formulations in the 1970s (Motlhabi 2009:164). The 1980s saw the rise of contextual theology, especially through the Kairos Document, which linked theological study to political activity. In the democratic period of the 1990s and early 2000s, theologians like Takatso Mofokeng and Tinyiko Maluleke examined the responsibilities of both the church and the state in misconduct. Vuyani Vellem, Rothney Tshaka and Puleng LenkaBula have made Black Theology more significant in the most recent wave by arguing about gender justice, economic inequity and decoloniality. This larger family tree makes it simpler to see how Vorster, Resane and Biko fit into the current developments in South African Black Theology.

### Biko's theology-challenges for today

In a time of land imbalance, ecclesial silence and spiritual alienation, Biko's theology is urgently relevant. His intertwining of identity, land and liberation theology offers a template for dialoguing with today's crises. Jentile (2018:153) points out that Biko did not only plead for liberation from apartheid, but he also wanted liberation from the theological paradigms that perpetuate oppression. Biko's spiritual vision is one that calls upon the Church to reject neutrality and to recapture prophetic witness, which calls upon the Church to ground its ministry in the dignity of the oppressed.

His life, according to McClendon's (2002) understanding of 'biography as theology', is a living parable, a Christological testimony in history. He had lived what he believed and so died a martyr without preaching a sermon but with theological testimony.

Biko was not just a political activist; he was a liberation theologian, and not just a theologian but a prophet of dignity. His theological challenge to the Church was to have a relevant, incarnational and brave ecclesiastical body. His amalgamation of African spirituality, radical Christology and liberative praxis makes him one of the cornerstone authors of South African Black Theology. In Biko's imagination, land, dignity and faith intersect. To be faithful to him is to make theology dangerous again, alive to suffering, aligned with justice, rooted in black self-love.

## Land as theological ground: Black Theology, Biko and the sacred struggle for land

Land and theology have not always been perceived as parallel concepts in the theological beliefs of most South Africans.

Thirty years into South Africa's democracy, the land justice question has neither gone away nor been settled, but has become even more disputed. Although the formal apartheid era ended in 1994, the structural, spatial and spiritual intimacies of land dispossession remain. In discussions of white refugee claims in recent years, we have seen the discourse being re-muddied, often in ways that reverse historical culpability. But at its most fundamental level, the land question is not political; it is deeply theological. This section centres on Black Theology of liberation and Bantu Stephen Biko in the exploration, juxtaposing those with views expressed by Jacobus Vorster and Kelebogile Resane.

It was purposeful that Vorster, Resane and Biko are the dialogue partners. Vorster represents a Reformed evangelical ethic wrestling with democracy, Resane concisely integrates contemporary classic Pentecostalism with ecclesial political theology, and Biko, not a professional theologian, has a theological voice through his articulation of Black consciousness that essentially re-configures Christian witness in apartheid era South Africa. Put together, these three form a conversation between three people that is both intra-ecclesial and extra-ecclesial; at the same time, it grounds the article in a variety of different, yet converging traditions of ethical thought and theology.

Therefore, this section proposes a threefold outline: land as divine stewardship (Vorster), land as sacred inheritance (Resane) and land as liberative identity (Black Theology), with the prophetic vocation of liberative theology with respect to land.

## Land as the stewardship of God and the commons (Vorster)

Jacobus Vorster, a reformed theologian, subscribes to the belief that the land is the Lord's, and God grants it to human fraternity with the implication that it is a moral duty. Three of his points he states from this view:

**Justice as fundamental norm:** Vorster (2007:48–50) identifies justice as the paramount ethical norm of Christian involvement in the land issue. He contends that justice is not an abstract ideal, but the applied will of God in the affairs of human society. In his view, ethical responsibility entails the formal recognition of historical land dispossession and the pursuit of restitution through transparent, legally regulated, and morally accountable processes. Justice needs not to be blind, but it must view historical instances, indicating the necessity of socially informed restitution that values not only the rights of individuals, but collective restitution as well (Vorster 2007:60). His notion of justice also includes a concept of distributive justice, how land and its resources are considered and perceived as just or unjust relative to inequality and human need.

**Human dignity and freedom:** Another critical norm in Vorster's ethical imperative is human dignity, by which he means the theological and moral acknowledgement that reflects the *Imago Dei* (Vorster 2007:48), that is, the relation that all people are created in the image of God. Therefore, programmes to reform the land should not only reverse material dispossession but also help to restore the dignity of those who have been dispossessed. Losing land entails losing human dignity, argues Vorster (2007:51), an observation which emphasises the existential and identity dimensions of dispossession. According to Vorster, ethical governance cannot ignore an individual freedom, on the one hand, but cannot deny systemic unfairness, on the other, because true freedom is not freedom from regulation, but freedom for equity and justice (Vorster 2007:53). Land reform, then, should be about creating even more of the circumstances that enable human thriving, not merely reshuffling land holdings.

**Reconciliation, peace and public responsibility:** Vorster makes another reference to reconciliation as being an important ethic that ought to play an important role in post-apartheid discussions on land. Quoting from Christian scripture, he says that without the truth and justice, there can be 'no reconciliation'. Real reconciliation demands the acknowledgement of guilt and the performance of acts of reparation (Vorster 2007:55–56). He places the Church in the role of mediator between warring communities, calling on it to function as a bridge between civil peace and public morality. He also emphasises the shared social responsibility with the other members of the community and invites Christians to participate in the democratic processes to work for the most suitable structures where truth and justice can be pursued through legal and institutional ways. Ethical citizenship has implications for Christianity, for when, in terms of the common good, Christians must contribute, especially in our policies of land and equity reconnections that do not subvert the orders of the democracy (Vorster 2007:57–58).

## Land as sacred inheritance (Resane)

Resane has written extensively on the role of the Church in the debates around land. Consider three things that come up strongly from his work.

Firstly, it is the *theological representation of land as sacred inheritance*. Kelebogile Resane shows that the land is not only a sacred legacy found in biblical tradition, but also a core element of African cosmology (Resane 2023). Referring to the 1 Kings 21 narrative of Naboth's vineyard, he contends that land is not for sale or permanent transfer because it belongs to God and is passed on by divine covenant (Resane 2020:3). He condemns the western concept of land as a 'commodity', arguing that the land is an aspect of human identity and dignity and dispossessing people is to dehumanise them (Resane 2021:2). Land, for Resane, holds spiritual, ancestral and community meaning; its loss is about more than material impoverishment; it is a theological injury.

Secondly, it is the *prophetic dimensions of the church in land justice*. According to Resane, the South African Church should assume a prophetic stance in the national land discussion. He cautions the silence of the ecclesial institution writing the church needs to speak out, to move from being an armchair critic to being a prophetic movement of calling for restitution and justice (Resane 2020:6). He contends that neutrality in the light of historical land dispossession and contemporary forms of injustice is complicity. Such congregations which spiritualise injustice and refuse to confront its material realities fail to meet the non-negotiable ethical demands of the gospel (Resane 2021:4). In restoring among you the biblical ethic of Jubilee, which requires us to return the land and liberate the poor, Resane calls the Church to a theology of transformation, rather than simple charity.

Lastly, it is the argument on *restitution, reconciliation and ethics as intervention*. Resane pushes back on a thin notion of reconciliation that does not account for the structural aspects of injustice. He

adds there can be no real reconciliation without economic justice, and land forms the crux of that justice (Resane 2021:6). He is critical of post-apartheid approaches that favour legal processes over moral or theological imperatives, and he urges a holistic approach to restitution in which Church and state are both implicated. He articulates that the Church must be a vehicle of ethical transformation and moral consciousness in society (Resane 2020:9) and must demonstrate an ethic of liberative faith that is in solidarity with the dispossessed. Within this theological vision, the Church is summoned to transcend the reductionist discourse of 'development speak' and to reclaim its vocation as the moral conscience of the nation, rooted in Scripture and animated by a steadfast pursuit of justice.

## Land as liberative identity (Black Theology)

The richness of what may be termed the *Black land-gospel* lies in its fusion of historical memory, theological conviction, and liberative praxis. This is a more radical, incarnate and liberation-focused black theological approach to the theology of the land expressed by Biko, Mofokeng, Mosala, Vellem and Soyemi. Mofokeng's (1997) exclamation that 'land is our mother' offers land as a space of identity, memory and struggle. Itumeleng Mosala (1997) argues that for biblical interpretation to be relevant today, it must help to uncover the meaning of liberation in the face of social, economic and political oppression; that the Church does need to challenge systems of ownership and develop criteria for redistribution as divine justice.

Settler theology and missionary complicity are criticised by Vellem (2016) for not identifying land theft as 'sin'. He denounces spiritualising pain without addressing structural injustice. Neoliberal democracy 'post-apartheid' has deepened inequalities, according to Vellem (2016), with 'zinc forests' as a metaphor for spiritual decadence of landlessness. Eventually, real transformation will demand that we reclaim theology as prophetic witness based in the memories of our ancestors, in black agency and its spiritual geography.

Ṣóyẹmí (2023) expands on what Biko termed Black consciousness by showing how land is a symbol of ontological emancipation. Biko maintains that being dispossessed of one's homeland is not just to go without material things. It is the uprooting of oneself, one's memory and past. Soyemi emphasises Biko's plea to recover the black man's dignity: 'But the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging cell…' (Biko 2004:30). Land, then, is not just property; it is the soil of sacred possibility, where God, ancestors and identity meet.

Biko cautions against reconciliation, which leaves toxic power in place. The liberal democratic system that he spurns echoes the broken structures in place that hold up procedural equity and deflect from material restitution. In that vision, land reclamation is not technical or symbolic, it is existential. Then Black Theology demands reparative justice rather than conciliation. The Church must repent before its collusion and side with the landless to recover both land and testimony.

Ngcukaitobi (2018, 2021) reinforces this theological paradigm with accounts of historical and legal evidence for how colonial law rendered sacred communal land into alienable property. He maintains that reform in the post-apartheid era falls short for want of ethical urgency. There are legal instruments, but there is no moral courage. Land justice, Ngcukaitobi argues, has to be both a spiritual and constitutional project, a site of memory and redemption.

This point is reiterated by McCutcheon (2021): 'land isn't simply real estate – it's sacred space, a site of memory, resistance, and livelihood'. 'Black food on sacred land' becomes a liturgical act of defiance and healing. Land reclamation is more than justice; it is the act of restoring divine approval and ancestral rhythm.

## Frame of reference and theological implications

All three theological frameworks, Vorster, Resane, and Black Theology, are in agreement on the importance of the land, but their framing, ethical assumptions and theological consequences are at odds with one another. Vorster understands land essentially in terms of a Reformed ethics (besides the land as a family inheritance) as a moral trust given to the care and maintenance of a liberal democratic society. He believes that the road to justice is through the constitution, institution building and public ethics that maintain civic peace. Resane, on the other hand, represents in land a sacred inheritance – one that lies at the heart of African cosmology and biblical covenant. It is a theological space in which memory, dignity and spiritual continuity are fused together. In that sense, land reform is not just about economic and legal structures but also a process of healing, one that rights the injustices of history and restores communal identity.

It is important to distinguish between African Theology and Black Theology as the two are in fact interrelated and yet distinct intellectual traditions. African theology has thrived in East, West and Central Africa, accenting inculturation, African cosmologies and the recovery of indigenous religious lore (Sawyerr 1987:12–13). Conversely, South African Black Theology arose in opposition to apartheid and focused on the themes of race, structural oppression and neo-colonialism. Both traditions uphold African identity and dignity, but Black Theology in the South African context is historically grounded in the resistance to racial oppression, rendering it more explicitly political. Nonetheless, as Motlhabi (2008:49) observes, after comparing the views of Buthelezi and Tutu, these theologies continue to engage in dialogue, and given that Africans possess a shared continent and legacy, it is appropriate to refer to their collective theological endeavour as 'African Theology'. In this study, the term 'African' will denote cosmological and cultural frameworks, whereas 'black' will be utilised as a political and theological category, influenced by the Black consciousness model proposed by Steve Biko.

Black Theology of liberation, deeply influenced as it is by Biko, Mosala, Mofokeng and Vellem, while by no means angsty in either tone or the sense of urgency delivering it,

diverges quite radically in that regard. It does not regard the land as trust or inheritance, but as liberative identity, a theological locus where disinheritance is sacramental trauma and restoration is spiritual resurrection. Whereas Vorster fears disorder and Resane appeals for reconciliation, Black Theology demands pertaining to rupture and redress. Land justice is integral to the reconfiguring of social power, the abolition of structural whiteness and the reclamation of African theological selflessness. For as Biko suggested, psychological freedom and territorial sovereignty are linked: to reclaim the land is to reclaim the self.

Apiece, in these views, land is given theological significance. In each case, land is understood as morally significant, ranging from trust in the divine (Vorster), sacred space (Resane) or liberative ground (Black Theology). Yet their prescriptions vary. Vorster pleads for moral stewardship and judicial reconciliation; Resane argues for a forgiving of memory and theological integration, while Black Theology insists on revolutionary restitution and historical responsibility. We meet in the Exodus and Jubilee stories at the common symbolic location of land as promise, provision and prophetic evidence. Only Black Theology also enacts Jubilee as reversal, not of mere economic poverty but of colonial conquest, spiritual exile.

In the end, land is not neutral in any of these theologies. It is a contested memory, a moral inheritance and a holy creed. To reclaim land is, in either perspective, to reclaim some aspect of the *Imago Dei*, whether through justice, dignity or self-definition. Yet Black Theology is the one that confronts most directly systems of whiteness and theological implications. It calls dispossession sin, baulks at tidy, reconciliatory transactions, and holds that land is not remuneration; it is rather the very platform on which freedom plays itself out. In reclaiming the land, the dispossessed reclaim their theological agency, their historical narrative, and their sacred value.

## Black Theology, Christian nationalism, and the memory politics

No challenge to the still unresolved land question in post-apartheid South Africa can be resolved without confrontation with the theological ideologies that perpetuate inequality. In this way, two rival theological imaginations, Black Theology and white Christian nationalism, expose drastic differences in the way land, justice and identity are construed and pursued. The claims to refugee status of white South African farmers, supported by international figures like the US President Donald Trump, are not anomalies but reflect a wider ideological trend. These contentions both rely on and reinforce Christian nationalist logics that enshrine land ownership as sanctified by God, whiteness as the normative condition and black restitution as persecution.

### The white Christian nationalist theology

Settler colonial contexts of white Christian nationalism have frequently used theological rhetoric to legitimise land theft and racial domination. White settlers, in South Africa, following myths such as *manifest destiny* (Boahen 1989; Dubow 1997:56), empowered themselves as the elect, divinely ordered to civilise 'heathen' lands. In this schema, land was presented as God's gift to Europeans, and resistance by indigenous people was framed as rebellion against divine order. So Christian nationalism combined conquest with mission in a theology that justified dispossession.

Obery Hendricks' (2021) *Christians Against Christianity* offers a similar critique of American practice. He reveals how right-wing evangelicals have used their faith to defend position, nationalism and narrow religiosity that have too often served to undermine the liberating spirit of the gospel. Such skewed theologies, Hendricks argues, are a betrayal of the teachings of Jesus, transforming Christianity to be something to be co-opted by empire rather than a path to compassion and justice. His diagnosis resonates in the South African context, where a theological story has been wielded to block land reform and defend white privilege.

This theological perversion endures today in the fears about land reform. The story that white South Africans are now being 'persecuted' literally reproduces colonial paranoia, the same spectre of justice rebranded as reverse racism. Christian nationalism has made this fear spiritual: restoring the land is not believed to be the return of a theft, but rather an attack on the very existence of civilisation and faith. It is exclusion theology concealed as God's will.

### Critique of Black Theology as a prophetic challenge

Black Theology attacks these distortions head-on. Native to the liberation efforts of oppressed people over hundreds of years, it lays claim to the Church to say no to neutrality and yes to justice. No theology unconnected to the liberation of the oppressed can be a theology of Christ (Cone 1986:135). Steve Biko, in his own theological reflection, exposed the Church's complicity with apartheid, noting that many congregations sided with power while preaching a false gospel of passivity. 'The Church itself has all along been part of politics', Biko (2004:58) was emphatic, noting the moral debasement of institutional Christianity in failing to oppose state brutality.

Black Theology reinterprets land as holy heritage instead of property. It asserts that biblical stories of emancipation, from Exodus to the Jubilee tradition, mandate the reclamation of dignity, agency and ancestral land. Biko's preoccupation with psychological liberation resonates nicely with this vision: colonial Christianity was not so much spiritually disempowering as psychologically destructive in the sense that it perpetuated not just a spiritual but a psychological inferiority. His credo, 'It's better to die for an idea that will live, than to live for an idea that will die', (Biko 2004) epitomises the moral courage that Black Theology calls for.

Hendricks also insists that Jesus sided with the oppressed, and in this, opposed systems of domination. He observes that

fundamentalist Christianity 'preaches a Jesus that is not the Jesus of the Scripture' (Hendricks 2021), expressing a sentiment similar to Biko's disdain for a domesticated, colonised gospel. Both theologians share a vision of faith that is not that which serves empire, but rather faith that stands with the oppressed.

### When past and present collide: Postcolonial amnesia and theological forgetting

Post-apartheid South Africa reeks of selective memory and theological amnesia. The end of formal apartheid brought not a complete reckoning with the Church's complicity or with the systemic injustice embedded in the ownership of land. Many churches embraced a theology of reconciliation without truth, very much in support of unity but without confession. Without justice, hope is empty liturgy (Biko 2004:56). This amnesia is not innocent, it is not benign; it is theological treason. The refusal to name and repent for past sins enforces the moral scaffolding of inequality. It enables white Christians to disavow the fruits of apartheid and refuse the calls for reparation. Theologian amnesia operates as denial under the guise of maturity. Hendricks' critique of the American religious right also cuts through the South African lens: In both cases, Hendricks locates a 'toxic theology of avoidance' that privileges the comfortable over the confrontational, a post-apartheid religious rhetoric that values stability over justice.

### Memory in counterpoint: A reawakening of Kairos

The Kairos Document (1985) diagnosed that situation prophetically and declared that South Africa was in a time of reckoning for morally decisive action or inaction. We are still in that kairos. Ngcukaitobi (2021) has demonstrated that land reform has been bogged down by political timidity and elite capture, although this is also a spiritual failure, a failure to remember. Black Theology provides a hermeneutics of remembrance. It reads scripture and history from the scarred standpoint of those who are hurt, retrieving the biblical tradition of lament and liberation. The question, as Maluleke (2008:115) points out, is not whose God we are serving but whose story we are recounting. Memory turns into a theological discipline, and an act of witness and redemption, when we see how things were and cannot be again.

### Biko's progeny: Ancestors on theological bearings and the prophetic

The life of Steve Biko embodies this theological memory. He didn't theologise from comfort, but from the crucible of black suffering. He preached a theology of risk, community and incarnational protest. His friendships with white allies and with black clergy, demonstrate his nuanced position. Biko did not hate white people, nor did he hate Christianity – he hated oppressive structures and regimes that employed religion as a tool for domination. For Biko, faith has to be liberating, or it cannot be faith. His call to recover African dignity, redeem ancestral memory, and resist theological complicity is still haunting and challenging the Church. 'Black man you are on your own' (Biko 2004:90) is not isolationist, but a call to spiritual and political self-sustenance against the breach of faith.

### From amnesia to the work of prophecy

Christian nationalism and Black Theology are not merely opposing readings; rather, they are opposing paradigms. One seeks to entrench privilege in the name of faith, the other insists on liberation at the heart of the gospel. Post-apartheid churches have a choice: to continue to be silent in their sanitised unity, or to confess, repent and issue a land-decency in the spirit of justice. To remember, in the tradition of Biko, Hendricks and the prophets, is to refuse. It is to remember that land is more than an economic thing, it is spiritual inheritance. That theology is not of the abstract, but the call to action. When it's faithful, that memory can heal. Black Theology has sustained this prophetic imagination. It is adamant that theology has to accompany the wounded, heal the earth, and speak the truth. Anything less is betrayal. As Desmond Tutu (1999) has said: 'We are not responsible for the past. But what happens now is up to us'.

## Reclaiming prophetic witness: Towards a liberative African Christianity

The final section encourages a synthetic reading of Biko's theological imagination alongside current contestations over land, identity and justice, in order to suggest what a vision of prophetic African Christianity courageously, contextually, and liberative, might look like. At a time when many churches are being tempted to opt for institutional preservation or spiritual escapism, Biko's legacy calls the Church to reclaim its prophetic calling and to be a voice of moral resistance, a refuge for the oppressed and an instrument for change.

### Decolonising African Christianity

This point explores the possibility of bringing to an end the enduring impact of western domination on African Christianity. Biko recognised that it would not be pragmatic nor effective to call upon black South Africans to completely reject Christianity altogether (Jentile 2018). He saw Black Theology as a necessary response to the spiritual impoverishment of colonial and apartheid Christianity. As it commandeers the future, a reimagined, prophetic African Christianity must start by decolonising its theology. It is not simply about refuting a western theology of God; rather, it requires recentring of African spirituality, history and agency in the discourse of faith. For Biko, the recapturing of an African identity was not a culturally determined preference, but a regenerative spiritual survival necessity. He described how colonial Christianity alienated African people from their heritage and presented the gospel wrapped in white superiority (Biko 2004:52).

### Land as theological and familial homeland

Land is at the centre of this decolonial project. Land is not merely a resource but also a spiritual and ancestral birthright.

African cosmologies have traditionally conceived land as a living entity with meaning, memory and divine significance. What to recover, after all, is not just land in the physical sense; the reclamation of land is, in this sense, not only to try to correct the injustice of the past but also to rediscover the spiritual geography of African life. An emancipatory theology will recognise that the land is holy, not something to be bought and sold. So, the Church should not keep quiet when land reform is delayed, derailed or demonised. However, in *Reconciliation and Reparations*, Joseph Evans (2018) emphasises that reparations involve not only financial but spiritual and community-based acts of repair, necessary in healing the historic violences of the past.

### Prophetic witness as practice: The Black Community Programme tradition

The Black Community Programme (BCP) that Biko co-headed was such a testament in the early 1970s as to what the prophetic witness would look like in action (Ramphele 1991:154). The BCP could see that liberation meant freedom of the mind, economic independence and development of the community. It viewed theology not as an abstract doctrine but as something lived and incarnated in terms of clinics, cooperatives, literacy campaigns and youth work. This would not be a theology from the pulpit; it would be a theology from the people, from liturgy to liberation. The Church today must rediscover this ethos and locate itself in the struggles of local communities, placing its mission of salvation on the axis of the material needs of the outcast.

### Coming to terms with ecclesial complicity

This imperative is compounded by the assessments in *Religion and Social Development in Post Apartheid South Africa: Perspectives for Critical Engagement* (eds. Swart et al. 2010), especially in Chapter 1. The editors contend that a number of churches, who were outspoken in their dissent toward apartheid, have instead been depoliticised establishments of service delivery in the democratic period. Ensnared in the logic of development aid, government funding structures and bureaucratic partnerships, churches frequently give up their prophetic role to remain solvent institutionally. In so doing, it is in danger of jettisoning the radical language of liberation for the technical language of 'social development'. And this domestication of theology has diluted the church's moral conviction and hidden its calling to confront structural evil. Such a liberative African Christianity must eschew the temptation of this and reclaim the defiant voice of old, a voice that troubled power and stood firm with the oppressed.

### Kairos and the demand for ethical purity

Likewise, the Kairos Document (1985) offers an indispensable template for prophetic involvement. It attacks 'state theology' as well as 'church theology' as inadequate responses to apartheid and rather demands a 'prophetic theology' that takes the part of the oppressed and reads the signs of the times in a spirit of justice. Kairos theology calls on churches to assume the risk of institutional discomfort for the sake of moral clarity. The demand remains the same today: In the face of economic inequality, political corruption, gendered violence, xenophobia and ecological devastation, silence is complicity (Mabuza 2024).

### Towards a prophetic imagination redeemed

To rediscover prophetic witness is to say no to neutrality on the way things now are. It is to regard worship not as a retreat from the world but as 'ground zero' for a life well lived in the world. It is to know that Christian faith, when authentically lived, unsettles the powerful and lifts up the broken. It has to reveal the crucifying and the crucified of history.

In addition, African Christianity needs to deliberately integrate its other half of African Women's theologies, indigenous knowledge(s) and eco-spirituality. Today's prophetic witness, then, must be intersectional, understanding how race, gender, class and ecology converge in order to create new sites of oppression. Therefore, churches need to be spaces of healing and resistance where lament is combined with action, and here the dignity of an African person is declared unapologetically. The African Church shall wait no longer for approval from Western institutions or theological gatekeepers. It is time, as Biko urged, for black people to articulate for ourselves and for all what we believe, what we know, what we celebrate and what we hope. 'Black man, you're on your own', he said, not as a form of abandonment, but as empowerment.

That is the task and the call of prophetic witness, rootedness in the soil of Africa precisely, truth-telling regarding empire and hope not in a desert of illusion but in the real dream of resistance. An African Christianity of liberation must begin to imagine a world beyond the shadows of apartheid and the scars of colonial rule. It needs to realise that aspiration is not only about the afterlife but life after domination.

## Conclusion

### A theology that must resurrect

This article examined three major theological responses to the question of land in South Africa. Vorster and Resane's moral and theological ideas are a strong counterpoint to Biko's ideas. Even though these three points of view place different amounts of emphasis on different things, they all show both conflicts and similarities that show how important it is to have a new theology in South Africa. Vorster, who comes from the Reformed tradition, says that public officials have a moral role and that they need to be morally responsible. Resane, a Classical Pentecostal theologian, emphasises that the church bears a prophetic duty to combat corruption and injustice. Biko urges black people to have their dignity restored and for Black consciousness to be a freeing way to define oneself. When you read these voices together, they say that resurrection theology is not just a hazy idea; it is a call for moral renewal, prophetic witness and action that will free people in South Africa right now.

A shared common understanding is that land is not a purely economic possession or physical space; it is a sacred endowment from the hand of God, the Creator and Preserver of all. So too it is bound up with human dignity, communal identity and seeking justice. Whether thematized around stewardship (Vorster), sacred inheritance (Resane), or liberative identity (Black Theology), the land grieves for healing, truth-telling, reparations and spiritual restoration. South African theology can't be neutral any longer; it has to find the bravery to call dispossession sin and contribute to imagining the making of a social order that will restore.

The life and testimony of Steve Biko provide a mirror of theology that reveals the incomplete business of liberation in post-apartheid South Africa. Grounded in African spirituality and prophetic resistance, Biko's theology calls for churches, theologians and communities to break the chains of silence surrounding continued violations such as landlessness, structural inequality and historical absence. His assertion that '*Black is beautiful*' was not only a cultural slogan, but a radical theological statement, the declaration of the divine image in black lives, black land and black futures.

And today, in white farmers' denialism and as land reform flounders in political torpor, Biko's challenge to the Church by asking it to decide whether to offer up prayer for the status quo, or the creative promise of Jubilee, is one that still belongs to the present. Will it be a chaplain of power, or a conscience of the nation?

Black Theology, too, inspired by Biko, kept alive by voices like Boesak, Mosala, is the most courageous, nothing spared, critique of theological collusion. It demands truth before peace, reparations before reconciliation and prophetic witness over institutional comfort. Liberation is not something we won in the past; it is what we are for now. And faith, if it is to be faithful, must ascend to it.

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The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.


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