

# Following Jesus When Things Fall Apart (Part 1)

Colleagues,

One of the most arresting presentations at the Fourth International Crossings Conference came on the last day, when Felix Meylahn, who is a pastor and trainer of lay preachers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa, told the story of his country's journey from colonialist and white-supremacist oppression, through the struggle for liberation, and into the current state of brokenness which he describes as a "second falling apart" of his beloved homeland. This week and next, we reproduce his conference presentation here. This week's installment sets up the essential historical background, with an emphasis on the role of the Church in the struggle for liberation, and on Felix's own experiences as a student of liberation theology during that time. Next week comes the conclusion, in which he explains how hope for his country's future must lie in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which produces what he calls a falling into the hands of our "ambidextrous" (that is, left-handed and right-handed) God. Taken together the two parts present a striking picture of modern Christian discipleship in a time of crisis. We expect you'll find Felix's story to be as eye-opening as it was when it first held the conference attendees in rapt attention this past January.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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# **Following Jesus when things are falling apart – a post-liberation perspective from South Africa**

## **By Felix Meylahn**

### **A. Brief autobiographical and historical perspective on the South African Context**

#### **a. Introduction – Who am I and where do I live and work?**

I was born in the Northern Cape on Pniel, a mission station of the Berlin Mission Society, where my father was appointed agricultural manager (to generate funds for the mission work of the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa). My first language was German, then I learnt Afrikaans in primary school, was taught Latin by Irish monks (CBC) and learnt to speak English under the tutelage of an Anglican Canon (Kimberley Boys' High). I will briefly come back to my place of birth a little later. I studied theology together with students from all the various Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa at the joint theological training institute (funded by the LWF) which is linked to the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. And now I am a pastor in the "Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Cape Church)" and work in the Port Elizabeth Congregation (Friedenskirche). I am also a member of the Church Council of our church and the Bishop's "vice" (Deputy of the Bishop). Our congregation in Port Elizabeth was founded by German immigrants just over 112 years ago, but we have since the early 70's become more and more an English speaking Lutheran community in which people from all the different backgrounds feel at home.

#### **b. The first "falling apart"**

After this personal introduction let me begin with a description of the historical context of my presentation, which will make clear why I use the “falling apart” phrase in my title. I believe it is very important to mention that we all see things through our own eyes and lenses. What I present here is thus my perspective, which, although I have tried to make it as wide and unbiased as possible, is still limited and one-sided, and should obviously not be taken as the only view of the situation in South Africa. However, the perspective that I offer is not based purely on my own view but tries to give an account of the way many people in my community/congregation experience and perceive South Africa today. At first, a little historical review: The continent of Africa has been ravaged by Colonialism and imperialism for many centuries. The effects have been well documented in various studies (Pakenham’s *The Scramble for Africa* is still a good overview). But I’d like to refer you in particular to a novel by Chinua Achebe, who movingly describes the detrimental impact of colonialism on his own culture in the book *Things Fall Apart*. He describes hauntingly how, through the onslaught of western imperialism together with the work of Christian missionaries, Western, Christian “civilization” has fragmented and almost totally destroyed the once stable culture and belief system of his people. Of course I do not insist, as some critics do, that the missionaries came merely as the “advance troops of the colonialists” to soften up the people for later exploitation. I believe that many missionaries had the best intentions and brought much to Africa which even today is worth keeping (education, medical

training and agricultural know-how and, of course, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which liberated many from fear and superstition). However the criticism holds true that unwittingly the missionaries did prepare the way for the devastation of colonialist exploitation.

c. The rise of the "liberation movements"

Across the continent there arose at the turn of the previous century liberation movements of various kinds. I can't go into too much detail here, but I need to mention the founding of the African National Congress in 1912. Its first secretary was Sol Plaatje, who was raised and educated by Lutheran missionaries on Pniel, the Berlin Mission Station in the Northern Cape Province which I mentioned as my birthplace. The history of the rise of African Nationalism and Black Consciousness is very interesting and important to understand the later developments in South Africa, but again I can only refer you to the literature. One of the first books on the subject written by an African is Sol Plaatje's "Native Life in South Africa", first published in 1916 in response to the "Native's Land Act" introduced when South Africa was part of the British Commonwealth in 1913. The author was part of a delegation sent by the ANC to Britain to ask the Queen and the British parliament to address their grievances against the harsh laws instituted against black South Africans, but this was to no avail.

d. Diamonds and Gold

I need to speed up a little to get through important stretches along the road to the "New South Africa". British imperialism was insatiable and, among others, Cecil John Rhodes had the dream of

acquiring land all across Africa from "Cape to Cairo". The agricultural and mineral wealth of the continent was just too tempting to leave unconquered. When Diamonds and later Gold were discovered in the two Boer republics of the Freestate and the Transvaal respectively, a war was instigated (the so-called "Boer War"), which today is seen by many as the first desperate attempt at a "liberation war" of a South African "tribe" against the imperialism of Britain. The "Afrikaner" people, who called themselves "Boere," farmers, were made up mostly of Dutch, German and French descendants, who had been living in Africa for several generations by this time and had often freely mixed with indigenous people as well as with slaves from the Far East. For the first time in military history, the British used "concentration camps" to imprison the women and children of the farmers (where many of them died) and a burnt-earth policy to force the heavily outnumbered "Boere Kommandos" to capitulate.

e. The rise of Afrikaner Nationalism

In the wake of the lost Boer war and jumping on the bandwagon of nationalisms arising around the world, the "Afrikaners" started seeing themselves as a "Nation" oppressed and exploited by foreign rulers; the Reformed theology of their pastors added fuel to this understanding, using language like, "we are the chosen people to bring the faith to the heathen of this land." In 1948 the "National Party" came to power in the "democracy" of the Union of South Africa and began instituting an ideology that became known as "Apartheid". The basic idea was that different ethnic groups should stay segregated and be allowed to develop separately. Looked at from the

perspective of world history the implementation of "Apartheid" as a government system was the legal codification of the elitist, western world-view (white or European supremacy) joined with a Nationalism that took its cue from Nazi Germany. The main ideologues of Apartheid studied theology and law in Nazi Germany during the late 30's and early 40's.

f. The "liberation struggle"

Another jump to get through this background stuff: The opposition to racism, which had already taken a big step with the founding of the ANC in 1912 of course grew immensely as the harsh racist laws of Apartheid were implemented. But the ANC was not the only, nor even the most popular liberation movement initially. Other strong protagonists of the liberation struggle were the Pan African Congress (PAC with a strong Black Consciousness element as represented by Steve Biko) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which had a strong national following until its leaders were systematically eliminated by ANC cadres. (See Anthea Jeffery's book, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*, for the details.)

Under the influence of Gandhi and others the struggle for the most part was a nonviolent one until a faction within the ANC came to the conclusion that nonviolence was not going to bring the necessary results and founded the military wing of the ANC (MK. "Umkhonto we Sizwe") and began the violent struggle against Apartheid. In 1978 a senior delegation made up of members from the ANC and the SACP went to North Vietnam to gather information and to receive training in "People's War," a strategy

developed by General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese army. The ANC adopted this military and political strategy as its blueprint for taking over South Africa by force. As Anthea Jeffery writes,

*“A people’s war, as the term suggests, revolves around the use of people as weapons of war. As many people as possible must be drawn into the war, whether by joining organizations allied to the insurgents, or taking part in demonstrations, or helping with the propaganda campaign, or taking part in violent attacks. In addition, all individuals within the arena of conflict—including those who support the insurgents—are regarded as expendable in the waging of the war, in the same way as arms and ammunition are expendable in a conventional conflict. It also means that children are just as expendable as adults and that there is no bar against using children either as combatants or as targets for attack. As a combatant, a child may be more willing to take risks, and as a victim of violence the child has much greater value in subsequent propaganda and mobilization.”*

For a summary of the various elements of this strategy and the long-term consequences becoming visible in South Africa now, see the detailed study by Anthea Jeffery.

g. The church’s involvement in the “struggle”

As is well known, prominent members of the Christian community in South Africa were part of the liberation struggle from the beginning—well known

among them are Father Trevor Huddleston, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak. (John De Gruchy's books, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* and *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, are well worth reading for a detailed history of the church's resistance to Apartheid.) As soon as I began my studies of theology at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg in 1981, I tried to inform myself about liberation theology and the struggle for freedom. At first we joined clandestine seminars on liberation theology, led by Father Theo Kneifel, which were announced innocently as meetings of the Catholic Students' Society on the Campus. We read various "banned" works, mostly by South American liberation theologians. We lived together in a residence for theology students, in which black students were officially not allowed to live, but we managed to dodge these rulings for the most part. We studied liberation theology, we read Bonhoeffer, saw many parallels between the Barmen Declaration and the South African situation, and saw this concern expressed in the now famous "Kairos Document," which has a very clear theology of resistance and liberation, and was co-authored and/or signed by some of the theologians who taught us.

"It was all so clear and simple" is a thought that often goes through my head now. We knew who the enemy was and what "they" were doing wrong and we also knew how it should be "done right." So we gave our support to the "struggle," even joining in with the international call to support the ANC financially, some of us actively joining the UDF (a movement founded to represent the liberation struggle inside South Africa while the ANC was



officially banned). The worldwide pressure that was created especially by the church's support of the liberation struggle was an important factor influencing the Nationalist Party to dismantle Apartheid and hand over power to a democratically elected government.

#### h. Freedom

At last we had a new Constitution, a "New South Africa," and we were a "Rainbow Nation." We are the most progressive democracy in the world, on paper. I remember with great fondness the 27 April 1994, the day of our first democratic election. I was then serving in Philippi, a congregation on the "Cape Flats," near Cape Town—in one of the most diverse and volatile communities in South Africa at that time. On the day we all came to the polling station in peace and joy, stood in the long queues for over seven hours to be able to make our mark on the ballot paper to elect a new, fully representative government to rule in justice and peace. I will never forget that day! There are many beautiful examples of the "rainbow nation," a phrase coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, actually becoming a reality—just one example that I need to mention is the Alexander Road High School which my children attend.

#### i. The second "falling apart"

But, sadly, things are falling apart again. The first 17 years of "freedom" saw an unprecedented increase in nepotism and corruption among the elite rulers of South Africa (see R.W. Johnson's *South Africa's Brave New World—The Beloved Country since the End of Apartheid*). The saddest part of this

development for me is that many of these leaders were once our heroes, they stood up for justice, freedom and accountability against all forms of discrimination and now they have fallen into an elitist, greedy, power-grabbing way of leadership, that they back up with an African National-Socialist ideology, that in too many ways reminds me of the ideology of the “previous regime.” It is as John Holloway puts it, that, “the nationalism of the oppressed (anti-imperialist nationalism), although it may aim at radical social transformation, is easily diverted from its broader aims into simply replacing ‘their’ capitalists with ‘ours,’ as the history of anti-colonial movements makes clear” (*Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, Pluto Press, London, 2010 [New Edition], page 64). And so, after all the idealism, the courageous struggle for freedom and justice, things are falling apart again. From our experience in South Africa I have to fully agree with John Holloway’s sad cry: “How many times has the scream against oppression been diverted into the assertion of national identity in national liberation movements which have done little more than reproduce the oppression against which the scream was directed?” (ibid. page 73) Some of the symptoms of this new “falling apart” that I see are these:

- Appointments to government positions are made according to party loyalty and often family loyalty and not according to competence.
- Billions of Rand could not be accounted for in the Eastern Cape Province’s Education Department last year (the poorest of the Provinces of South Africa).

- The so-called “Secrecy Bill” (giving the government the right to declare any information secret and threatening vicious punishment on journalists—25 years’ imprisonment)
- Poverty, social disintegration, and unemployment are worse than ever before, while the ANC members of parliament and local government officials are living in decadent abundance, granting themselves salary increases and so-called “performance bonuses” every year far in excess of the inflation rate. The activists of the liberation struggle have become mindless consumerists who unscrupulously take what they can get without regard to their fellow South Africans for whom they allegedly struggled for freedom and justice.
- This year (2012) marks the centenary of the founding of the ANC (1912). The higher party officials celebrated this before a huge crowd of supporters with expensive champagne and other luxuries. I quote from the “Tuesday column” on Facebook by one of our foremost anti-Apartheid journalists, Max du Preez, called “‘A Better Life for All’ will have to wait” (posted: 10 January 2012):

*“Just about the most memorable moment was when deputy president Kgalema Motlanthe, surrounded by the ANC bigwigs with glasses of champagne in hand, proposed a toast ‘to ANC unity’ and told the ordinary faithful that if they did not have champagne, they could take photographs of their leaders drinking, or*

*raise clenched fists. 'The leaders will now enjoy the champagne, and of course they do so on your behalf through their lips,' he said. As they have been doing for quite a while now."*

- Very high crime prevalence, very often accompanied with extreme violence. The rape statistics show that a woman is raped every 20 minutes in South Africa and many white farmers have been murdered or driven off their land by threats of violence).
- With the exception of the Revenue (Tax) Department, no Government department is functioning efficiently. Corruption and mismanagement are rife.
- Government schools, especially in rural areas, are in total chaos and the teachers often do not get paid, and do not come to school because they "have" to earn money with other "business," etc. Jonathan Jansen, black rector of the University of the Freestate in Bloemfontein, and a well-known educationalist, wrote in the Sunday Times that if he was a poor black South African, he would rather send his children to school in Zimbabwe than to a school in rural South Africa.
- "Race" has to be filled in on all documents and applications, and is then blatantly used to discriminate against "white" students and candidates for appointments, bursaries, etc.

This all begs the question, why? There is, of course, not one simple answer, but way back in 2001 George Soros already said,

“South Africa is in the hands of global capital. That is why it can’t meet the legitimate aspirations of its people.” Today I believe one would have to add: The ANC elite, many of whom have become multi-millionaires over these last 17 years, are not even trying to meet those legitimate aspirations, they are merely making sure that they remain in power.

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Coming next week: The final two sections (**Following Jesus when Things are Falling Apart** and **Finding Ourselves in the Story of God’s Faithfulness**) of Felix Meylahn’s conference paper.

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*The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to [clessmann@charter.net](mailto:clessmann@charter.net).

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