


Bhengu's decolonisation vision of the gospel in South Africa: An analysis of the National Church

**Author:**Dan S. Lephoko¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Dan Lephoko,
danlephoko@gmail.com

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This article analyses Nicholas Bhengu's vision for decolonising the gospel in South Africa and throughout Africa when Europe colonised Africa in the 17th-century. The article addresses spiritual renewal that is fundamental to Bhengu's decolonisation endeavour in South Africa and the rest of Africa. Bhengu also addresses the threats of communism, nationalism and Islam. To achieve his goal, Bhengu launched the Back to God Crusade in October 1950 in East London, South Africa. His ultimate goal with this spiritual renewal vehicle was the continent of Africa and Africans. He called Africa to go back to God, using slogans such as 'Jesus for Africa', 'Africa for Jesus' and 'Cape to Cairo'. Although the bedrock of his decolonisation was spiritual renewal, he also focused on education for the youth, socio-economic development and entrepreneurial skills for women. The National Church thesis presented at the General Conference Plenary Session of the Assemblies of God on 10 October 1955 forms the basis of his vision. At this conference, Bhengu called for African leadership to take charge of the evangelisation of Africa instead of missionaries. The thesis points to Bhengu's foresight into the socio-political and geo-economic future of the continent, which is unfolding in sub-Saharan African countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania. The study method includes Bible texts, literature review, analysis of Bhengu's thesis on the National Church and his Farewell Message to the Church.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The purpose of the study is to challenge South Africa's political leaders and government to re-examine the effects of colonisation on various disciplines, which include, the socio-economic, political strategies and policies for true liberation by recognising the spiritual renewal project advocated by Bhengu in their approach to governance and development of the country and its people.

Keywords: decolonisation; missionaries; communism; nationalism; Islam; women empowerment; education; back to God crusade; missional church; spiritual renewal; National Church.

Introduction

Colonialism took the ugly face of the slave trade. In many parts of Africa, Africans became a commodity for economic gain in the hands of greedy colonial countries. Slavery was one of the most humiliating experiences suffered by African people who were treated as cargo, and shipped off to the Americas as unpaid labourers. Countries that were involved in the slave trade include Spain and Portugal.

Spain and Portugal introduced slavery and were soon emulated by other emerging colonial powers (Protestant ones as well), who all claimed a share in a lucrative trade in human bodies. In 1537, the pope authorised the opening of a slave market in Lisbon, where up to twelve thousand Africans were sold annually for transportation to the West Indies. By the eighteenth century, Britain had the lion's share of the slave market. In the ten years between 1783 and 1793 a total of 880 slave ships left Liverpool, carrying over three hundred thousand slaves to the Americas (Bosch 1991:227).

The slave trade epitomises the greed of capitalism which exploits labour for profit. It uses means for the sake of expanding its productive ends without permitting the subjects to fully participate in the production of wealth for themselves (McGowan 1989). Bhengu in Lephoko (2018:244) says, 'In African culture, there is no capitalism as experienced in the West. In Western culture the ten

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times millionaire will ignore you. The rich have plenty to eat and what is left is given to the dogs when there are hungry people around them. They lack compassion. Jesus had compassion'.

Bhengu further states (Lephoko 2018):

This attitude is the cause of wars and industrial strikes. What is good for the goose is good for the gander. It is not right that you should eat pudding but give me only pap (maize porridge) to eat. Why do you do that to me when our needs are the same, only compassion can address that. (p. 245)

Bhengu accuses capitalists of greed, uncaringness and inhumanity. Their attitude has been imbibed by African leaders who see political office as a means of getting rich through corruption at the expense of people who vote them to power (Chikane in Resane 2020:253).

Colonialism in South Africa

In South Africa, colonisation began with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck on 06 April 1652. Saayman (1991) writes:

In South Africa, this dispossession of land gave rise (together with other factors) to a whole series border of wars between colonists and colonised, wars in which missionaries also became embroiled, sometimes as chaplains, but always on the side of the colonial government. (p. 30)

It is clear from Saayman that missionaries were part of the problem that existed between the colonialists and the locals. Missionaries operated in a hostile environment within the conflict between the colonialists and locals. It is, therefore, not surprising that missionaries would provide spiritual support for the colonisers in exchange for the security provided for them by the military power of the colonists.

After winning the election of 1948, the National Party government perfected the subjugation of black people by introducing racial apartheid laws that dehumanised them. The laws prescribed where black people were to live, what kind of work they could do, who to marry, where to go to school, the kind of education, and where to be buried. Apartheid passed laws that required black people to carry the hated *dompas*¹ [stupid] passbook, which they always had to carry on their person and produce on demand by the police or face prison.

Bhengu did not write a book. Instead, he relied on issuing circulars to his churches. For example, he wrote a circular (n.d.): *To all Assemblies, Pastors and District Councils*:

1. Before the apartheid government introduced Act No. 67 of 1952, black people were issued with permits to allow them to visit or enter towns or cities. The holders of the permits could pass on the document to another person without authorities knowing or detecting that the current holder was not the original person to whom the pass had been issued. The new Act provided for the amalgamation of all documents relating to all black people over the age of 16 years to carry the reference book known as *dompas*. It included: name, residential address, a record of employment, date of birth, photo of the owner of the reference book and other incidental information regarding the bearer of the book. It was called a *dompas* or stupid pass because the holder's personal information could no longer be transferred to another person. Therefore, it was stupid.

All finances are in the hands of each Assembly fully and completely on behalf of God and the Assembly. The Elders and Deacons may not dispose of any funds without consultation with the Assembly. God's money must do God's work, and nothing can be bought without consultation and authorization. (n.p.)

In this circular, he deals with various subjects: forgiveness, the role of the pastors, elders and deacons; harmony in the church; and the church's financial management. As far as church finances are concerned, his focus was on the need to educate church leaders to be accountable to the church and transparency on how church monies were spent. The purpose was also to prevent elected officers from becoming capitalists by taking all the money for themselves (Bond 2003:324).

Bhengu's ministry was well-received by white people in South Africa and abroad in places such as Norway, Sweden, Scotland, England and the USA. Lephoko quotes an article by *Daily Dispatch* 1966 (p. 215) about Bhengu preaching in East London to South African white people. Roberts (n.d.) quotes Bhengu's sermon titled *Begin At The Cross*, preached in America:

The cross is our starting point, and I preach the cross of Jesus Christ as a starting point for Africa.

We are preaching the cross in Africa, and many people who never heard of Jesus Christ are coming to the Lord. We preach in very simple terms, they understand and the spirit of God touches their hearts. (n.p.)

Paul describes preaching the cross as foolishness to those who perish, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18). The cross also brings together warring parties (Eph 2:15–16). It is the power of the cross that Bhengu believed would bring peace in Africa among different races, tribes and languages. For Bhengu, this was reinforced by the vision in his calling in which all the people who were drowning had black faces and spoke in different dialects (Dubb 1976:4).

Bhengu's understanding of decolonisation was the liberation of the African mind from being dominated by foreign missionaries. Some of the words Bhengu used were: 'ignorance of scriptures, ignorance of procedure and hunger for power and leadership, tribalism and destitution of God's Spirit plus greed for money unaccounted for' (The Northern Transvaal Dissenters n.d.:n.p.). Gull (n.d.), in *A History of the Emmanuel Assemblies*, writes on how missionaries only gave indigenous African leaders limited authority to run the work while they retained full authority over the work.

The thesis on the National Church presented by Bhengu at the Assemblies of God General Conference in Witbank (now eMalahleni) on Wednesday, 10 October 1955 (Bhengu 1955; Bond 2003:317), forms the basis of the article. Pentecostal missionaries from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Switzerland, Canada, Norway and Ireland attended the conference. To achieve his vision to decolonise Africa, Bhengu established and launched the Back to God Crusade in October 1950 at the *itiphu* (dumping site) (Dubb 1976:4).

Bhengu was calling Africa to go back to their God whom they had known before the advent of missionaries in Africa.

Bond (2003) quotes Bhengu as follows:

The Bible is not of European origin, it came to Europe from the East. We had it before Europe, but we rejected it and played with the gospel message, and God took it away from us and entrusted it to the peoples of Europe. If our people knew that it was not a concoction of the White men, as the Communists say, but it is their heritage also, we will soon have the desired result. (p. 321)

Bhengu was also driven by the vision of his call when God showed him African people drowning in the ocean. God showed him an open Bible and said:

This is the Word of Life; study this Word, and through the words of this book, you will break these fetters and free your people from the chains of sin in which they have been bound for centuries. I wish you to do this. (Dubb 1976:10)

He rejects the notion that Africa was a dark continent before the arrival of missionaries; he says '... but we are convinced that Africa was once a continent peopled by a civilised people, religious people, where Christianity once flourished' (2003:318). In this respect, Bhengu is corroborated by Mbiti, 'Christianity, in Africa, is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion' (Mbiti 1969:229).

The fact that Christianity first came to Africa dispels the view that Christianity is a white man's religion designed to tame black people while the invaders used the Bible to rob them of their land. This is a liberating truth; firstly that Africa was once a civilised continent before colonists and missionaries arrived; secondly, when Bhengu calls Africa to go back to God, he is calling them to a God, whom they once used to know before missionaries came.

Back to God Crusade

Bhengu used the Back to God Crusade to call Africa to go back to God, organised and trained women in entrepreneurship to raise funds for evangelism and planted missional churches. He also founded a student bursary fund to help educate young people to be ready for leadership roles in a democratic South Africa, which he believed would come (Bond 2003:97).

The Back to God Crusade was his flagship for the evangelisation of Africa and planting of missional churches. It is in the crusade that thousands of people were converted, lives were changed and often with crime coming down wherever he pitched his tent. The crusades were well-organised and publicised. His preaching is logical, educative and well-rendered according to the type of audience. He convinces them by citing simple examples pertaining to their everyday lives (Dubb 1976:5).

Bhengu was not a politician. However, through the Back to God Crusade, he addressed social consent that he considered critical in the lives of African people, giving them dignity as

opposed to the dehumanisation behaviour by white people. He gave them confidence and dignity. He called upon them to stop doing crime because crime does not pay (Balcom in ed. Ranger 2008:208–209). His preaching also brought stability in the domestic affairs of individuals as a result of conversion and his preaching in the Back to God Crusade (Dubb 1976:36).

Bhengu under political attack

Hollenweger (1976:136) quotes Schlosser who says, 'Bhengu was caught in the crossfire of apartheid government and liberation movements in South Africa'. He was labelled a traitor by Manilal Gandhi, son of Mahatma Gandhi: 'Bhengu has been bought by the government and inculcates the natives with their doctrine, that is, that the natives are exploited by Indian merchants' (1976:136). On the contrary, Bhengu was regarded as an honest man by Chief Albert Luthuli, former president of the African National Congress (1976:136). Schlosser further states that Bhengu was on the cutting edge of bringing Christ to his people while fending off his political and missionary opponents (1976:136).

Gandhi's criticism seemed to be motivated by racial considerations. He was more concerned about protecting Indian merchants rather than thinking about the liberation of African people from the oppression and dehumanising laws of the apartheid government under which they suffered discrimination for decades. This is contrary to the commendation of Bhengu by none other than the President of the African National Congress, Chief Luthuli.

Tutu, one of Bhengu's staunch critics, writes: 'Bhengu was not a sellout. He was a broad-minded man who wanted to accommodate everybody' (1986:117). Tutu (1986) also writes on how the apartheid government thwarted Bhengu's progress:

At the 33rd and last convention in the big church he cried, 'This house was the zenith of my efforts, the height of my ambition. Today we are told to quit without any money to build another church'. (p. 118)

This convention was held in his 5000-seater church during the December holidays in East London and brought together his members from South Africa and neighbouring countries for spiritual renewal and strategic plans for ensuing years.

Bhengu was buffeted on both sides, by liberation movements on the one hand and by the government on the other. Because of his impact and his following by the black masses, each side wanted his support; however, Bhengu did not join any. Instead, he was 'overmastered by a single vision, the conversion of Africa. He was an Africanist at heart' (Bond 2003:97). In his attempt to reach everyone and everywhere with the gospel, he also ministered in homelands (Mt 28:19–20; Rm 10:13–15). The government enacted the *Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act*, No. 26 of 1970, which deprived black people of their birthright as citizens of South Africa (Lephoko 2018:15). The apartheid government directed that

Bhengu move his church to Mdantsane because the government declared that Duncan Village was a black spot in a white area; this was a painful experience for Bhengu, having spent a lot of money building the largest church in Southern Africa.

Bhengu rejects the perverse theological teaching by missionaries

Bhengu denounced the perverse theological teaching by missionaries designed to oppress black people and make them worse sinners than white people (Hollenweger 1972):

The white Protestant missionaries definitely give a false interpretation of the Bible when they always drag the burden of sin around with them. This is a doctrine of which, as Africans, they can make nothing. The white missionaries easily conclude that blacks have to bend their backs to carry the burden of sin laid upon them. (p. 129)

The phrase 'to bend their backs', illustrates the contempt with which Bhengu perceived the spiritual enslavement of Africans by missionaries. He accuses them of false biblical interpretation that places Africans under the subjugation and authority of the missionary by making the African the worst sinner. It was this kind of enslavement that he was determined to deliver his people from, including the spirit of paternalism that is often applied by missionaries to their mission converts (Kritzinger, Meiring & Saayman 1994:18–19).

Colonisation of the African mind

The colonisation of the African mind by both the colonists and missionaries is at the centre of the dehumanisation and enslavement of Africa. Kgatla quotes Douglas (2007):

Colonisation of the mind consists of external forces: (the coloniser's intervention in the psyche of the subjects – the colonised) the intervention affects the mental sphere of the subjects, c) the effects are long-lasting and hard to remove, d) the result is asymmetrical power relationships between the parties, e) parties can live aware or unaware of the newly acquired relationships, and f) parties can participate in the relationships voluntarily or involuntarily. (p. 148)

African leaders who have gained political liberation are nonetheless influenced by colonialism, which they fought against. These leaders continue the slave mentality of dehumanising their people, inherited from their oppressors. Bengu (1975:100) quotes Awoonor who writes that there is nothing wrong with all activities except that the reaction of the fleeced Africans is:

I am being sold to slavery a second time! By the gods of Africa(sic) I am being sold again. I came back after three hundred years. And ye gods of Africa, I am being sold into slavery a second time. (p. 100)

Awoonor describes the agony and anguish of African people whose hope of liberation from slavery has been dashed by the people whom they have put their trust in. Bhengu was convinced that the gospel message would impact Africa in

his lifetime, like a burning bush for generations to come. He had seen the power of the gospel change lives in South Africa and countries such as Eswatini and Zimbabwe. Criminals and thugs voluntarily turn in their weapons of trade and bring in stolen goods that were returned to the police in truckloads. He hoped that the gospel would change the hearts and minds of African leaders to rule with justice and righteousness for their people and usher in socio-economic peace and prosperity for the people.

In South Africa, colonisation of the mind was imposed on the black majority by the introduction of the *Bantu Education Act, no. 47* of 1953. Introducing the Act, Dr Verwoerd, the then Minister of Native Affairs, said (Suzman 1993):

What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot be used in practice? What is the use of subjecting a Native child to a curriculum which, in the first instance, is traditionally European? I just want to remind Honourable Members that if the Native inside South Africa today in any kind of school in existence is being taught to expect that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a big mistake. (p. 35)

This policy by the government led to the Soweto student uprising of 1976, after which Dr Andries Treurnicht, Deputy Minister of Bantu education said:

In the white area of South Africa where the government provides the buildings, subsidies and pays the teachers, it is surely our right to decide what the language dispensation should be. (Hartshorne 1992:203)

The government decided that half the subject would be taught in Afrikaans and another half in English, forcing black learners to learn in Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor in order to pass their exams (Lephoko 2018:22). As a pushback to the imposition of Bantu education on the African children, Bhengu established a bursary fund to help African students to pursue college or university education to equip them for leadership roles in a future democratic South Africa. He did this despite the fact that he could not change government policy, but to cushion the impact of the policy implemented by the government. Bhengu, in the spirit of Steve Biko, stated that black people needed to reject the notion of worthlessness or enslavement (Balcomb n.d.:15).

Bhengu's vision for Africa and threatening powers

Bhengu's vision to liberate African people also stems from his dramatic and decisive call to break the fetters that bind the people of Africa. Dubb, in a personal interview, stated how Bhengu relates the story of how God called him. In a vision, God took him to a sea-shore where people were drowning and crying out for help. All these people had black faces and spoke in African dialects which he could understand. They were asking him to deliver them from drowning. Bhengu (1975) continues that Jesus appeared to him and said:

This is the Word of Life; study this Word, and through the words of this Book you will break these fetters and free your people

from the chains of sin, in which they have been bound for centuries. I wish you to do this. (p. 10)

Bhengu was driven by the vision of his calling. God showed him a Bible which he would use to liberate his people with the power of the gospel. The chains with which the people were bound would include, not only personal sin but also chains of colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, nationalism, Islam, communism and tribalism.

Bhengu believed that true liberation would come through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Political liberation was necessary for the oppressed people of Africa. However, political liberation in itself did not bring peace or social and economic change. It fails to deal with the core problem of sin, 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ...' (Rm 3:23). He also did not harbour any resentment towards nationalism, communism or Islam. His concern was about the ideologies taught, promoted and implemented by their proponents, some of which resulted in conflicts between people.

Nationalism

In South Africa, Afrikaner nationalism became the cornerstone of the Afrikaner ideology of self-existence. According to B.J. Vorster, former prime minister of South Africa:

Yes, I believe profoundly . . . that we [Afrikaners] have been appointed by Providence to play here [in South Africa], and that we have the human material to play that role. (eds. Leatt, Kneifel & Nurnberger 1986:66)

Afrikaner nationalism encountered opposition from African nationalists who fought for liberation from colonists. Men like J.T. Jabavu in the Transkei established the first African newspaper in 1884 to address the aspirations of black people. Reverent Mangena Mokone established the Ethiopian church for 'Africa for the Africans' (eds. Leatt et al. 1986:89). In Rwanda, African nationalism led to genocide.

Nationalism was undesirable for a peaceful, prosperous country. In South Africa, the government, through its homeland systems, divided black people by tribes and ethnicity. It determined where different tribes of black people would live, where their children would go to school and in what language to learn. At the political level, it led to a violent armed struggle led by the liberation movement. Bhengu was not in support of violent armed struggle as the solution, and this was a recipe for conflict among the groups and should be resisted by applying the word of God as a remedy.

Islam

Bhengu describes Islam as swarms of bees that have descended on the darkening and deteriorating continent. They compelled African people to accept their anti-Christian religion at the edge of the sword, and women were sent to slavery overseas (Bond 2023:320). This is even though Islam describes itself as a religion of peace.

To Bhengu, this brand of Islam is not different from the colonisation of Africa by Europe and the apartheid ideology that oppressed black people in South Africa. He believed that it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that would prevent Islam from subjugating all of Africa into becoming an Islamic continent. In Nigeria, Muslims clamouring for the implementation of Sharia Law as well as the Kadhi Courts in Kenya are creating tensions in East as well as West Africa (Meiring n.d:10). Such actions are a violation of human rights for people to choose their religious practices.

Communism

In Lephoko (2018:244–245), Bhengu describes communism as: 'Soviet Russia's socialism is premised on Karl Marx scientific socialism. This socialism is like religion, it does not address the question of racism, tribalism and ethnicity'. Communism is atheistic in its approach to religion. It sees religion as a force of consciousness of the human need. It concludes, therefore, that religion is the opiate of the people (Messages of PACLA 1976:361). The proletariat decides what is good for the people, 'the good is what which is good for the proletariat' (Messages of PACLA 1976:365). The difference between Marxist dialectics is based on two things: (1) The communist says, 'What is yours is mine' and (2) Christianity says, 'What is mine is yours'. Christian Socialism is nothing more than compassion.

In Bhengu's thinking, communism is not a remedy for the poor, oppressed and marginalised. It abrogates the power to decide right and wrong for the people. The communist is in need of gospel like any other. Africa of all shades needs to be reached with the gospel that brings change in the hearts of men and stability in the social and economic realms. His call is 'Africa Back to God', 'Africa for Jesus' and 'Jesus for Africa'. The essence of preaching Christ is the message of reconciliation between God, and men and men (2 Cor 5:18–21). This is the message that Bhengu conveys to nationalists, Muslims and communists.

Bhengu's resolve to liberate Africa

Bhengu was unambiguous about his vision and mission of liberating his people from the yoke of colonialism and missionary enterprises. Bhengu wanted to bring the impact of the gospel in Africa like a burning bush. He did not call for a moratorium on missionaries, but assigned to them the role of training African workers without leading them to servitude or religious serfdom (Bond 2003:323).

Bhengu's exact vision was to bring salvation to Africa through the gospel of Jesus Christ the Redeemer, which would bring spiritual, social, mental, political, and economic revival and recognition of human rights by politicians, capitalists, communists, nationalists and other religions such as Islam. In Bhengu's mind, other liberation strategies deal only with the external issues without addressing the real cause of oppression, capitalism and other human ills. It is the vision of his calling that guided him in his mission to

bring change and release of prisoners of sin, oppression, poverty, hatred and polarisation among tribes (See p. 34 of this article).

To engrave his vision in the minds of his audience, he used words such as: not an ambiguous man, remove every fog, unscrupulous workers, liar and servant of the devil, sowing the evil seed of dissension, hordes of Islam, Koran, sword, chains, servitude, religious serfdom, the promised land of the Holy Ghost, and autonomous assemblies (Bond 2003):

The use of the words servitude of religious serfdom highlight Bhengu's abhorrence of the slavery of African people brought upon them by missionaries and colonists. The liberation of the African people would be affected by the power of the Holy Ghost, meaning it was not going to be achieved through human endeavour only. From this statement, it is clear that Bhengu's vision focused on South Africa and the rest of Africa. He also looked at the liberation of the next generations of Africans. (pp. 317, 320, 323)

He was scathing of those who frightened the missionaries over his focus on liberating the African people. The presentation of the National Church was not well-received by all missionaries and some churches were given birth to by some missionary endeavours.

Missionaries leave the Assemblies of God

The departure of missionaries from the Assemblies of God, following the presentation of the National Church theses by Bhengu did not occur immediately after the presentation. The American missionaries left in 1964, the English left in 1977, while Canadian missionaries and some white churches left in 1981. There was no immediate exodus to leave the Assemblies of God in South Africa. Gull, missionary of the Elim Churches of England, gives a detailed account of why they left to establish the Emmanuel Assemblies. In what he calls factors or reasons for severing ties with Assemblies of God could be said to apply to all other missionary formations for leaving the Assemblies of God. Gull enumerates eight reasons that he calls factors. According to Gull, the Back to God factor is at the centre of his reasons for leaving the Assemblies of God. It relates to Bhengu's evangelisation and his mobilisation of Africans to take charge in leading the church and the evangelisation of Africa (Gull n.d:3). The fact that missionaries from different countries worked among black people in the townships became a source of contestation between Bhengu and missionaries.

For the missionaries, black people were the only group they could minister to. Missionaries felt that Bhengu was becoming dictatorial and wanted them to take a back seat. One of the missionary leaders; 'Vermon Pettenger, also found himself out of the churches that he had helped to build' (Watt 1992:62). Section 7.1 of *the Constitution of the Assemblies of God* allows people to organise themselves into groups (2:3). Section 7.5

allows for the groups to form themselves into associations for mutual benefit, ministry fellowship and administration. These associations or groups have the right to formulate their own rules. Section 7, 7.5 of the constitution gives the right to local assemblies to augment their leadership by the inclusion of some person or persons of mature spiritual standing accepted by the Assembly, provided such a person or persons are approved as overseers by the Executive (38:17) and to have the right purpose to fulfil the objectives and principles to which the members of Assemblies of God are dedicated to. Bhengu did not have authority over missionaries; it is some of the Assemblies who were under missionaries that asked Bhengu to give them oversight.

American missionaries leave the Assemblies of God

Missionaries felt that Bhengu was robbing them of exercising leadership among the Assemblies that they had established. This concern led American missionaries to leave the Assemblies of God and establish the International Assemblies of God in 1964. Motshetshane (2015) writes:

For the first time in the history of missionaries and their converts in South Africa, it was the missionaries who seceded from a work they had been part of as they stood challenged by resolute African leadership. In a traumatic display of financial power and rejection of African leadership, the American missionaries withdrew from the AGSA.² (p. 275)

Missionaries reckoned that they had nothing left to report about to their sending mission boards on how the natives were responding to the gospel. As far back as 1940, Bhengu and his friend Alfred Gumede, Nuku and Mjaji challenged the missionaries for inclusion in the decision making of the church, something that missionaries were not accustomed to (Watt 1992:40). The African leadership had become mature and wanted full participation in the affairs of the Assemblies of God.

McGee (1989), head of the Assemblies of God World Missions Department, postulates on why the Americans left:

Having major reservations about this ecclesiastical structure and aware of Bhengu's fundraising activities in the United States and other countries to support it, the Assemblies of God (U.S.A.) severed the relationship in 1964 and launched the International Assemblies of God in South Africa. (p. 110)

The ecclesiastical structure McGee writes about, has to do with Bhengu and Mullen's commitment to the gifts of the ascended Christ (Eph 4:11), with both men propagating the calling and authority as apostles to establish churches and give leadership oversight to them. This was anathema to the Americans who wanted to run the affairs of the church in line with the District Council operating in their country. District Council system would have restricted Bhengu to East London where he was operating at the time. However, this was rejected by general executives of the Assemblies of God in

2. AGSA refers to Assemblies of God South Africa.

South Africa which included missionaries from other countries (Bond 2003:192).

African missions churches: Northern Transvaal Dissenters

Bhengu (n.d.) identified a group of African leaders as Northern Transvaal Dissenters. About this group, he writes:

Ignorance can be a sin at times and may lead people, a lot of people into dismay, confusion and perdition. The Northern Transvaal was established by missionaries and governed by them. They never had any knowledge of administration and looked to Missionaries for direction and financial support. (p. n.p.)

Churches in the Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo) were established by missionaries from Canada and America. These are some of the people Bhengu wanted to liberate from the control and subjugation by missionaries, yet they did not recognise their position of servitude. This group seems to have accepted the condition of being led, supported, and directed by missionaries who did not treat them as equals. Bhengu's vision was to develop them to a state of maturity and self-worth.

Spiritual renewal decolonisation of the mind

From Bhengu's perspective, it is clear that any decolonisation project that does not address the spiritual dimension of humans, is bound to fail. This is supported by the retrogression in the moral decline of South Africans (Resane 2020:105). Spiritual renewal begins in the heart of people who imitate Christ through their behaviour (Tuttle 1978:321). This behaviour is wrought by the Spirit (Jn 3:5,6). Spiritual renewal brings new behaviour in the life of the person (2 Cor 5:17) leading the individual to perform or doing good works (Eph 2:10). This is the spiritual renewal proposed by Bhengu.

Bhengu's efforts could be described as an attempt to liberate Africans from the slavery of the mind. In Paul's theology, change begins with a renewed mind:

... and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind and put on the new self which is in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Eph 4:23-24)

The graphic words used by Bhengu show the missionary's perspective of black people having to bend their backs to carry the burden of sin laid upon them, which illustrates that Africans needed to be liberated from spiritual oppression imposed upon them by missionaries.

Bhengu attacks Bond for interfering in his work

Bhengu felt the need to protect his work from missionaries and white churches in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Bond was the leader of the white group of the Assemblies God. He was

also General Chairman of the Assemblies of God of Southern Africa, including Zimbabwe. Bhengu's scathing letter to Bond (2003):

We have been highly misunderstood, misconstrued and misrepresented. We've fought until we were emancipated from the quagmire of foreign Missions of different countries and diversified home policies. We remained with you South African white Christians thinking there is now peace and harmony. (p. 104)

Bhengu was extremely sensitive to anything that would destabilise his work, especially by missionaries and white people both in South Africa and in Zimbabwe. In the case of Zimbabwe, he had established the work from scratch in 1959, albeit at the invitation of Bond. It is also true that even though Bond's churches supported Bhengu's Back to God Crusade, support was cautiously guarded and it would not come with strings attached that would interfere with his ministry.

Spiritual and socio-economic liberation

Watt says, 'Bhengu believed that true liberation would come through the preaching of the gospel, leading to spiritual renewal and liberation from political and socio-economic oppression through the gospel' (1992:112). To Bhengu, sin was the root cause of political, social-economic and other ills facing the human race; the heart is deceitful (Jr 17:9), 'for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders' (Mt 15:19).

The impact of Bhengu's call to the ministry

Dubb describes how God called Bhengu to ministry, as told to him by Bhengu himself. He writes about how God brought Bhengu to an ocean where he saw people with black faces drowning and how they all spoke to him in African languages and dialects calling upon him to rescue them and Jesus appearing to him. Jesus showed him an open Bible and said:

This is the Word of Life; study this Word, and through the words of this Book you will break these fetters and free your people from the chains of sin, in which they have been bound for centuries. I wish you to do this. (Dubb 1976:10)

It is deduced that the force of the vision in which the subjects all had black faces and spoke in African dialects had a strong impression on him. These were African people that needed to be liberated 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor' (Lk 4:18). It is obvious that Bhengu did not interpret the scripture in a spiritual sense only, but the total emancipation of African people by using the Bible to break the fetters and free them from the chains of sin. This mandate became part of his life. His strategy for decolonisation was to build a

united church with autonomous Assemblies, well taught in the doctrines of the Bible, self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating Assemblies with sound financial accountability (Bond 2003:324). Assemblies were to become the financial and human resources support base for his mission to bring Africa back to God.

Women raise funds for the evangelisation of Africa

Following his vision in New York, USA, God appeared to him and instructed him to go back to South Africa and mobilise women to fund his Back to God evangelisation campaigns. In Bhengu's work, women in *doeks* are the backbone of evangelising and planting of churches in South Africa. God said to him, 'Do you see this African woman? Go back to your country; you will get the money that you need to do my work from people like this woman'. Women raised millions of Rands for the Back to God Crusades to help fulfil the vision of taking the gospel from Cape to Cairo (Mylet Bhengu n.d.n.p.).

Funds raised by women for evangelism are brought in at Easter Conventions. The first convention was in Mangaung, Bloemfontein, in 1962; a total of R2000 was collected. In 2019, the amount increased to R30 million. It is used to pay the stipends of evangelists and purchase trucks, tents and other needs of eight regional teams in South Africa and eSwatini. The same fundraising strategy was followed in Zimbabwe with great success.

Bhengu also empowered women by creating entrepreneurial opportunities for them to earn money for themselves, feed their families and send their children to school. He organised women at local, regional and national levels. These women were taught to use their hands to create wealth by sewing, knitting, baking and cooking. Their spirituality was the reason for producing things and selling them. The Holy Spirit was their teacher; their spiritual community was their support base and the Bible, which is a spiritual book, was used as their manual (Modisane n.d.).

Women were also taught how to look after their families, and how to keep their homes clean and presentable, as befitting Christian women. He integrated the *reds* [unschooled] from rural areas and the (schooled) educated people, creating a bond between the two groups. Furthermore, 'in Bhengu's church a friendly greeting is given to former pagans, and the "school people" do not show them any condescension' (Hollenweger 1972:134). Bhengu's approach to unity was unique in creating harmony and respect between the two groups.

To achieve the maximum results, Bhengu appointed organisers and supervisors to facilitate the success of the programme. The document titled 'Women's Organization' populated every sector of Black society: teachers, lawyers, and traders. The supervisors were allocated multiple

responsibilities, including overseeing all regions in Southern Africa, checking financial records and liaising with chairpersons of quarterly meetings and women's convention committees (Women's Organisation n.d.:1).

Bhengu mobilises prayer for African leaders – *Book of Prayer for leaders in Africa*

Bhengu's (n.d.) spiritual renewal of Africa is aptly illustrated by his commitment to pray and evangelisation of its leaders. In his *Book of prayer for leaders in Africa*, he writes:

Our decree, therefore, is that our Presidents, Premiers, and Homeland leaders should be specially mentioned by names and then followed by prayers for the cabinet members, Parliaments, judges, (sic) Magistrates, civic governments, universities, professors and lectures, schools and teachers, doctors, hospitals and nurses and all denominations and Ministers of One Body – The church of the Living God – that they may be ONE. (n.p.)

Africa was always at the heart of Bhengu's vision of decolonisation. To facilitate the spiritual renewal of Africa, he prepared A Book of Prayer for leaders in Africa, including South Africa, homeland leaders; kings, his Majesty King Moshoeshoe II, His Majesty King Sobhuza II Lion of Swaziland; presidents, prime ministers, governments and their people. He also included praying for Jerusalem and Ishmael.

His heart for Africa is also revealed in his *Farewell Message to the Church*, encapsulating his vision to liberate Africa and its leaders through a powerful message of bringing the gospel to Africa and to its leaders (Bhengu 1975):

Build the nation when you are remembering that you are part of that Nation, and you are in for a specific purpose for God. Pray for all leaders in Africa, support leaders of your Nations and present Christ to them The church should lead the Nation to Peace, Unity and Prosperity. (n.p.)

The farewell message is proof of his vision and commitment to liberate the people of Africa through the preaching of the gospel of Christ. He urges national churches and Christians to pray for their countries for peace and prosperity. They are also encouraged to present Christ to them.

The impact of Bhengu's ministry on South Africa

In South Africa, Bhengu did not enter politics but his preaching and teaching had a profound impact on the South African society. Regarding his impact, Balcomb writes (ed. Rodger 2008):

Although Bhengu did not enter the struggle against apartheid on a political level, it is clear that his ministry had profound effects on apartheid. That he bequeathed a moral and social legacy affecting the future of democracy is clear. Individuals (*sic*) converted to evangelical Christianity through the Back to God movement populated every sector of black society: teachers, lawyers, traders,

clerks, businessmen, gardeners, and even politicians. Bhengu's teaching emphasises the pre-eminent existence of a transcendent reality that relativises the material realm, centralises spiritual values, exalts the dignity of the individual, and compels political reflection to imagine radical alternatives. (p. 212)

Balcomb correctly captures the power and influence of spiritual impact on individuals, politicians and society. This impact challenges politicians and the government to seriously consider the spiritual renewal advocated by Bhengu (see the impact of the Crusades further in the text).

The impact of Back to God Crusade campaigns

Back to God Crusade campaigns were impactful, and hundreds of thousands of lives were changed wherever he pitched his marquee, whether it was in Soweto, Durban, East London or rural areas. The Johannesburg *Star's* staff reporter, reporting under the title 'A black Billy Graham' (Mission News 1958), wrote:

Since he began his religious campaigns around South Africa in 1945, this preacher has been responsible for thousands of pounds worth of stolen property, guns and other arms being handed over to the police, as well as the wholesale conversion of native gangsters. He is now campaigning in Orlando where his fireproof tent is packed each night with up to 4000 people There were some spectacular healings performed by Bhengu. (n.p.)

The fact that *the Star* published the above article which describes Bhengu as the 'black Billy Graham' indicates the colonial mind that does not recognise the achievement of a black person as equal or even above a white person. This mindset was perpetuated by the apartheid regime which confined black people to townships and male hostels which created inhumane conditions and which became a fertile ground for crime.

Bhengu spent his time in ministry, bringing the message of God's love and salvation in Christ. His impact can be judged by the tributes paid to him by some individuals and organisations. Dr Roger S. Greenway of Calvin Theological Seminary, MI, USA, places Bhengu above Billy Graham in that Bhengu '... included three things: evangelism, instructions, training of leaders and planting of churches'. Africa Enterprise, ... he launched the BTG crusade in Duncan Village, East London ... established one of the largest churches on the African continent and having been awarded the title: 'The World's Greatest Soul Winner by an American' (Lephoko 2018:3).

Bhengu called criminals to lay down their arms and turn in their weapons of crime. *Time* magazine (1956) reports on Bhengu:

'Ubugebengu abukhokheli luth' (crime does not pay). There is movement in the crowd, especially among the young toughs in ducktail haircuts, dungarees and safari jackets. 'Nilekani izikhali nani kuNkulunkulu' (surrender your arms and yourself to God). 'He continues, and a pile begins to grow at his feet,

knives, blackjacks, brass knuckles (blacks were forbidden to own fire carted arms), and quantities of stolen goods. At one meeting police carted away three van loads, and it is not usual for Evangelist Bhengu to end up by walking down to the police station hand in hand with someone on the wanted list. (p. 56)

Conclusion

The study shows that the decolonisation of South Africa and the rest of Africa can be approached in more than one way, including the one advocated by Bhengu. Bhengu's method of spiritual renewal brought tangible results in South Africa and neighbouring countries. The article challenges African leaders (political, church), educators and business people to work for spiritual and socio-economic freedom in the development of Africa. This can only be achieved through preaching the gospel and mobilising resources, praying for Africa and sharing the gospel with its leaders so that they can experience a change in their personal lives that can be lived out in their vision and leadership for peace and prosperity in their countries.

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