

# **The relevance of life, teachings and ministry of Nicholas Bhengu for contemporary South(ern) African context**

## **Introduction**

Let me first appreciate the Almighty God, who through His Son Jesus Christ I came to know Him through the ministry of Back to God Crusade, whilst I was a teenager in 1974. I extend my greetings to Bhengu family present, the members of any AOG leadership structure present here physically and virtually, special appreciation to my *alma mater*, the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Theology and Religion that shaped my theological career from Honours to Doctoral levels, gratitude to my inspirer who made these annual memorial lectures a reality, Dr Dan Lephoko; and finally, special greetings to all of you, participants in this lecture-physically and virtually.

Without any further details, I would like to present this lecture, **The relevance of life, teachings and ministry of Nicholas Bhengu for contemporary South(ern) African context, basing it on four aspects of Bhengu's philosophy of ministry:**

1. Bhengu: The contemporary man for the contemporary context
2. Bhengu: The evolving methodology of his ministry
3. Bhengu: The futurist thinker (importance of education).
4. Bhengu: The crying man for today (If he was here today).

### **I. Bhengu: The contemporary man for the contemporary context**

- a) *His message for the politics of the time*: Bhengu was born and bred during the political turbulence of Southern Africa. He witnessed the rise of white supremacy, repression of the black majority, and the fine tuning of apartheid ideology. His ministry evolved through restrictive political dispensation when the majority citizens were robbed of basic human rights, especially when oppressive land laws (Land Acts of 1913, 1926, 1936) were implemented. As a converted communist, Bhengu embraced a gospel alternative that salvation through Jesus Christ is the restoration of wholistic human dignity. He opted not to take any affirmative side with any political ideology, hence 'he did not often include political themes in his preaching' (Watt 1992:178). He remained neutral so that he can

access all political people with the message of hope. ‘He would not allow himself to become captive to any political faction. Thus, he kept in a position where he could minister to everybody’ (Bond 2000:100). Bhengu was ‘overestimated by a single vision, the conversion of Africa’ (2000:97).

However, throughout his ministry, he was politically conscious and aware, he applied his mind in political issues. ‘He abandoned his political involvements because he perceived them as being motivated by hatred, and he allowed his attitude to be shaped by love’ (Watt 1992:178). The remaining historical fact is that ‘Nicholas Bhengu always avoided political involvement. He warned his people to clear off it’ (Bond 2000:99).

Some scholars label him an Africanist (Bond 2000:97), others label him African Christian Socialist (Lephoko) while others refer to him as Pan Africanist (Mochechane). All three subscriptions fit Bhengu. As an Africanist, he believed his calling to be to save Africa, hence his evangelistic emphasis on Africa Back to God. As an African Christian Socialist, he was a man among his people. Lephoko (2018:245/6) points out to this that Bhengu ‘lived among his people in four-roomed houses (called match boxes), ate what they ate and was buried among his people...’ He opted to be ‘Immanuel’ dwelling amongst the people, taking after the character of Christ – the *Logos* who dwelt (tabernacled, tented) among us. He practised the African principle of *ubuntu*... which means interdependence among the people of a community of society.’ As a Pan Africanist, he coined his evangelistic goal as From Cape to Cairo. Mochechane (:220) points that Bhengu’s Pan-Africanism was signified by his belief that ‘Africa was a strong emphasis in his philosophy of ministry. He was not divorced from the ideological forces that shaped his time, in thinking, at least.’ He knew politics would give him some elevated status to receive some special treatment, therefore retreated from that political celebrity opportunities and possibilities. He opted for servant leadership and adopted incarnational ministry patterned after the Apostle Paul:

<sup>19</sup> Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible

means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. This shows that Bhengu was not an evangelist or a preacher, proclaiming from the distance. He believed that proclamation and presence should intertwine. I agree with this ministry approach that 'There can be no proclamation without presence. The adventure of going to live with others in the world in the name of Christ calls for a verbal expression of one's persuasion' (Resane 2010:88). *Kerygma* and incarnation are intertwined.

But I personally see Bhengu as a Black Consciousness ideologue. This is also expanded by Watt:

Bhengu was motivated philosophically by his understanding of Black Consciousness. He taught blacks by word and example not to be ashamed of their race, that God honours and loves blacks, and that God will use them. He believed that no Christian needs to be servile, for Christ gives dignity. He inculcated self-reliance: he taught blacks to have self-respect and to do things for themselves... (1992:179).

I personally benefitted enormously from his ideology, and my self-reliance attitude towards life has shaped me into embracing myself that I CAN. My few interactions with Bhengu always articulated into believing in myself. One morning in 1980 while studying at Johannesburg Bible Institute, I happened to go via our local assembly in Orlando, Soweto before boarding a train to Roodepoort at the college via Langlaagte. As I left the church building, there came from downstairs, Rev Nicholas Bhengu and Jacob Moumakwe, his then Personal Secretary and his interpreter. After some exchange of African pleasantries, they asked me where I was heading to and they offered me a lift to Johannesburg station. That trip from Orlando to the city was inspirational and impactful as Rev Bhengu was encouraging me to take theological studies and my Youth for Christ career seriously. The remaining tone was: 'please indigenise Youth for Christ. It has long been a white English missions organisation.' What surprised me was to see how conversant and knowledgeable he was with YFC. He did not shy away from statements such as 'it is now time for blacks to lead, not to follow.' I was taken aback as the conversation reignited my Black Consciousness conviction. Indeed, he engrained in most of us self-determination by exerting ourselves into social concerns that were based on the strengthening of the self-confidence and dignity of blacks in relation to whites, addressing the needs of both traditional and modern Africans' (Balcomb 2005:339). I can easily associate myself affirmatively that from Bhengu, not

only Black Consciousness was ignited, but could be traced in the methodologies of doing ministry with and through his own people. He taught us to make the best of our situation. He continued to light the fire in our hearts as the youth of the era that political situation is an opportunity to prove that we could do things ourselves. 'He believed the future would be harnessed by self-reliance' (Watt 1992:179).

It is well-known of his proximity to some politicians such as King Sobhuza of Swaziland, some homelands leaders such as K.D. Matanzima of the Transkei, Lennox Sebe of the Ciskei, and many tribal chiefs in some. As for homeland leaders, notably Chief Lucas Mangope of Bophuthatswana whose their symbiotic relationship no knife could cut through its edge. This relationship was based on spiritual connection as Mangope was an avowed member of Assemblies of God and a prayer warrior of indescribable stature. There were no hidden intentions by either of them, hence I disagree with Mochechane that Mangope turned AOG into a state church (:204/5). In fact, Mangope abhorred the notion of the state church as I was on two occasions personally invited by him to come and listen to the two churches delegation that vouched for 'national church status' in Bophuthatswana, and he flatly refused their proposals. For Bhengu, 'Human relationships can be forged even under the most deprived circumstances' (Krog 1998:282).

Generally, Bhengu manoeuvred through political situations of the time wisely, without any bias, in order to reach Africa for Jesus. He believed that facing the *status quo* is taking a lemon thrown to you and turning it into a lemonade. This was not a compromise but taking the political marketplace and turning it into wisdom platform to advance God's kingdom to fulfil his dream of Africa for Jesus.

- b) ***His methods for the social life of the time:*** It is very easy to criticise Bhengu for national salvation without learning the man's heart for social transformation. Although he was incessant on salvation by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, Bhengu was a social transformationist. He believed in the transformation of the community through the power of the gospel. In the midst and at the climax of racial segregation in South Africa, Bhengu impressed on his followers the importance and the power of education as the tool that could transform the society. When people repented under his preaching ministry, the stolen goods were brought to the evangelistic rendezvous, the *tsotsis* (rascals) confessed their sins, runaway murderers came forward and be willing to be escorted or accompanied to give

themselves to the law enforcement authorities, those living in immoral life confessed and turned to God. In fact, the community would be transformed as crime rate will be significantly lessened. Roy (2017:128-9) mentions what McGee (1993:57) penned that ‘In some areas where he ministered, the crime rate dropped by as much as a third, and it was not unusual for people to respond to his messages by leaving their weapons and stolen goods in piles at his feet.’ Social transformation came as a result of national redemption coming from God through His servant, because as Watt asserts: Bhengu ‘believed that a spiritual salvation provides the moral fibre required for people to begin to rise up from their social and economic degradation’ (1992:178). In his quest for justice and social harmony, he frequently involved himself in upliftment of others’ debase by providing finances for education, food and clothes.

- c) ***His preaching for the church of the time:*** The preaching method of Bhengu was not methodical or perpendicular to hermeneutical or homiletical rudiments. Conversational narrative of the gospel presentation accompanied by simplicity characterised his *kerygma*. Dubb (1976) observed Bhengu’s preaching and concluded that it ‘was informal and conversational, emphasised by means of mimicry, stories and so on.’ Watt (1992:104) takes it further to mention that Bhengu’s preaching ‘was characterised by clarity of content and structure, a well-modulated voice and, occasionally, a dramatic impact.’ He was a great storyteller, as per Lephoko (2018:108), Bhengu ‘talked to people about spiritual things using earthly examples people could relate with.’ This preaching method made an impact upon African minds of all backgrounds as storytelling is the powerful means of conveying and disseminating truth or facts to Africans. Issues of life, more so, a religio-cultural *paradosis* are always in conversational mode. That’s what made Bhengu’s preaching accommodative and receptive to Africans of all classes whether educated or not. Through his narrative preaching he was realistically engaging inculturation orally. He was in a sense in agreement with Mbiti that ‘African theology is produced in the fields, by the masses, through song, sermon, teaching, prayer, conversation etc (1979:12). And this oral theology ‘is a living reality...It is the most articulate expression of theological creativity in Africa’ (Mbiti 1978: 49). Therefore, his narrative preaching style would still be relevant today, as through it ‘African proverbs, stories, myths and other cultural examples are used as means of God’s revelation’ (Healey & Sybertz 2012:51).

II. **Bhengu: The evolving methodology of his ministry:** Bhengu's ministry was aiming to plant new churches. The main reason for his Back to God Crusade was to plant new churches in communities where his ministry tents were pitched. He had in mind the churches that were autonomous, and their autonomy driven by what has come to be known as the Three Selves: Self-supporting, Self-governing, and Self-propagating.

a) *His vision for the relevant church in changing society:* These three 'selves' were popularised by two nineteenth century missiologists: Rufus Anderson of Congregational Church's American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM), and Henry Venn of Church Missionary Society (Anglicans). The two were the General Secretaries of their respective missions respectively – Anderson (1832-1866), and Venn (1841-1872). Bhengu had in mind churches that are totally indigenous, existing independently from any foreign missionary paternalism.

From as early as 1955, Bhengu embarked on promoting the idea of self-supporting churches. Lephoko (2018:300) mentions that on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 1955, Bhengu said 'I want to teach our men to raise funds and finance every programme themselves.' His vision was clearly the self-supporting churches.

By self-propagating churches, Bhengu envisaged churches that are autonomous, taking full responsibility of evangelising communities through their own elected church councils in the local churches (Venn 1988:16-20; Anderson 1988:19). Bhengu's churches were set up with elders and deacons. In places where elders and deacons were non-existent, the church committees 'who oversaw the work of the church' (Lephoko 2018:300) were set in place. In this church polity, the local church would be both self-governing and self-propagating.

Bhengu was clearly a missional leader. He believed in self-propagating church. Through Back to God Crusade formed in 1950, he envisaged an evangelistic arm of the Assemblies of God. According to Lephoko (2018:135), Bhengu was determined to build a movement that would be a vehicle to reach out to the continent of Africa by building momentum and multiplication processes through his churches and managing the results.' Anderson (1992:46) agrees that 'The Back to God Crusade was the name given to Bhengu's evangelistic organisation whose main activity was

evangelism and the planting of Assemblies of God churches.’ It was never his intention for the Back to God Crusade to be a separate denomination or a ‘church within a church’ as it looks like today. The vision of ‘Cape to Cairo’ and the rallying call of ‘Back to God’ is in its character missional. ‘Bhengu used Back to God Crusade to plant missional churches... Multiplication was achieved when churches were planted. These churches became the source of support for future mission and evangelistic outreach’ (Lephoko 2018:136). The Back to God Crusade was an evangelistic tool used to give birth to new churches across the sub-continent especially in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique and lately Namibia. It was ‘the means of bringing many thousands of Africans into the church’ (Anderson 2006:109; 2000:89-109). In other words, Bhengu believed that after mass evangelism, through tent crusades, the new local church should reproduce itself. From this initial stage, evangelism should be done through the local church. This resonated with what American evangelical missiologist Kane that ‘the growth of any movement is in direct proportion to the success it obtains in the mobilisation of the totality of its membership for the constant propagation of its beliefs’ (1988:169). This mobilisation, according to Kane, involves four principles: 1) Mobilisation of every Christian in witness, 2) Mobilisation within the framework of the church, 3) Mobilisation by local leadership, 4) Mobilisation with global objectives.

One can sense Bhengu’s heartbeat reverberating through these words. It looks like Bhengu was aware that the methods of evangelism will change, but that change must be prepared for. He did not see mass evangelism as an everlasting tool, but at the end the local church to own a full responsibility of evangelising communities.

- b) ***His church structure to reach all people (men, women, youth, children)***. Bhengu organised his churches. From the late seventies, Bhengu ‘started to organise his Back to God churches, generally known as Assemblies of God Movement’ (Resane 2022:4). In 1990, this section adopted the name Assemblies of God – Back to God ‘in recognition of its Back to God Crusade genesis’ (Nkomonde 2021:125). Resane (2022:4) continues that ‘it is organisationally structured along the local and district structures, and age group regimentally. There were and still are women or mothers, men or fathers, youth, girls and children operational structures within the church.

III. **Bhengu: The futurist thinker (importance of education).** There is no doubt that Bhengu had some foresight about one united country composed of diversities of races, tribes, cultures, etc. The man himself once retorted: ‘There are no traces of native or tribal or traditional customs in our great work’ (Dubb 1976:61). He worked tirelessly to unite different tribes and ethnic groups when the apartheid government was enacting laws to divide Africans along tribal lines. This is confirmed by Roy (2017:129) that ‘from the time of his conversion to Christ, he had a passionate desire to see people of all races, cultures, and classes come to an experience of salvation, peace and unity in Christ.’ In this regard he learned to speak most of the African languages, including English and Afrikaans in his efforts to unite the people of God. As a futurist, Bhengu ‘encouraged his followers to be economically active during the years of apartheid because he anticipated a South Africa that will be free from apartheid’ (Lephoko 2018:224). A real futurist is a hoping person. He foresees the light at the end of the tunnel. Balcomb (2005:338) captures this that ‘He believed that a ‘new nation’ would emerge ‘born from above with the likeness of God’.

a) ***Preparing leaders for future (ethical teaching).*** He modeled this by teaching to prepare leaders for future. His ethics on accountability in areas of finances, morals and faithfulness was above description. Bhengu was unashamed to exhort his followers that although they live under the oppressive regime of apartheid, ‘they need to live full lives as active citizens of the current place where they are held captive’ (Lephoko 2018:224). He prioritised the raising of leaders to lead the church in the future. His mission in eSwatini and Zimbabwe was more on developing leaders than just conflict resolutions, as it was in South Africa. Lephoko (2018:301) highlights the fact that in Zimbabwe, Bhengu ‘groomed young leaders who served as organisers of youth work.’ He emphasized to them the importance of personal holiness in leadership. Balcomb (in Ranger 2008:212) is correct that ‘he bequeathed a moral and social legacy affecting the future of democracy indeed, one that helped prepare the way for democracy is clear.’

Bhengu was concerned for future sustainability of the ministry he toiled for. He embraced and promoted theological education, for he himself received some formal theological training and learned under Fred Suter (Bond 2000:59). In 1950 he planted Pilgrim Bible School in Port



Elizabeth. Resane (2018:3) states that ‘It looks like this school was short-lived and did not contribute significantly to theological education or ministerial formation in AOG. He picked three key men and sent them to USA to study at Christ for the Nations Institute. These men are all late now. Isaac Hleta from Swaziland, Jeffrey Mkhwanazi from Zimbabwe, and Fred Shabalala from South Africa.

- b) *Educating leaders for future (Bursary Fund)*. Bhengu’s historical ministry points out clearly that he held education with a very high esteem. He believed that education is the emancipation tool for youth and women. From the early 1960s Bhengu established a bursary fund for the youth to enter tertiary institutions (Lephoko 2018:246).

Apart from educating the youth, Bhengu also embarked on empowering women. Women’s ministry in AOG-Back to God is nationally structured and organised. They like other gender groups are organised weekly, monthly, quarterly and annually. Whenever they meet, the focus is the ministry of the Word, prayer, training in skills, arts and crafts (Watt 1992:111). Women are empowered to teach young girls on matters of personal management such as hygiene, finances, marriage etc. The funds collected are coordinated nationally and accounted at the Easter Convention that is held over an Easter weekend.

There is no doubt that Assemblies of God in South Africa is leniently patriarchal. Despite the AOG women’s economic power, women’s leadership is still male biased. Even during the democratic dispensation, Bhengu’s movement is still battling with harmonising and harnessing the leadership of women in the church. Women ordination into pastoral or ecclesial leadership is unheard of and abhorred in Assemblies of God South Africa. However, when coming to bursary allocation for youngsters to acquire education, gender is not considered. So, from younger age, the females are empowered to access or achieve education, except in church leadership area, hence in South Africa we do not have any women theologians from Assemblies of God in the academia, not to mention churches led by ordained female pastors. As a futurist thinker, he invested a lot in teaching men to be fundraisers for evangelisation of communities, capacity building for women to model Proverbs 31 by becoming economically active in the sustenance of families and communities.

IV. **Bhengu: The crying man for today (If he was here today).** Bhengu was a progressive man. He was not afraid or ashamed of changing his mind whenever the proposed plan could not be workable or implementable. He always wanted to be on the cutting edges of the society – politically, socially or economically.

a) ***Socio-political situation:*** If he was here today, he would be an Elijah confronting Ahab the populist, Jezebel the state capturer, by modelling dialogue as a way of dispute resolutions. He would be unashamedly prophetic against weak ecclesial leadership affairs, corruption in politics, and moral degradation of our current democratic dispensation. Bhengu denounced apartheid, not as a political activist, but like Apostle Paul, as a Stoic who fights evil systems with convictions instead of weapons of war. Just as much as he countered politicians from all walks of life- those who were for and those who were against the political *status quo*, Bhengu would be doing the same with political leaders of Southern Africa. As a pacifist, he would be promoting the *dunamis* (power) of the gospel to counteract societal decays and decadences. Because he was a progressive man, always retracting from previous decisions when they seemed unworkable, he could have turned his political docility into stoical confrontation. He would continue to maintain the principle of contact without contamination.

b) ***His own church today:*** As for his church, he could have changed methodologies and structures to suit the new dispensation's realities. He could change because 'Pentecostalism has demonstrated, throughout its history, a flexibility and openness to change that could well occur again as the situation of people becomes even more desperate' (Shaull & Cesar 2000:158). Bhengu was a pioneer, so could not get stuck in the mud of immobility when the Spirit bade him to move. The church he pioneered had become parochial and rigid, though he himself was an ecumenist and a being among beings. He could have imposed servant-leadership which is a missing ingredient of African leadership in both politics and church today. Bhengu could have re-examined his church polity and made the church accessible and self-directing. He would condemn the commodification and commercialisation of the gospel that is rampant within the current Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement. This is demonstrated by his insistence of not taking even the freewill from non-believers. He never took offerings in his tent crusades. He taught us not

even to take freewill offering during our cottage meetings that were the outreach of the day.

Bhengu as an ecumenist, could have worked together with those of like mindedness, and cooperate with other denominations to ascertain maximum achievement of reaching Africa for Christ. He could have asked AOG to break itself out of a shell and become incarnational to bring healing to the masses devastated by political corruption and socio-moral degradation, including the pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and COVID-19. For him, the international or national borders are just like denominations invented by humans for smoother administration. His ministry could have broken the walls of these borders and taken deeper into the continent to impress Pan-Africanism even in and through religious activism. He would cry for the current gospel of selective geographical focus where the poor rural masses in villages and squatter camps are neglected because there is no commercial gain from their ministry. Remember, Bhengu's ministry in the Eastern Cape was tough as he embarked on reaching people of both classes and statuses. Both Dubb (1976:8) and Balcomb (2005:341) capture the reality that one of the remarkable features of Bhengu's ministry was that it reached both the modern ('school') and traditional ('red') people. Dubb (1976:8) describes these categories:

Reds are traditionalists: they value the preservation of and adherence to the tribal way of life, and are opposed to Christianity, schooling and European culture generally. They regard School people — who are, ideally, Christian and educated and value 'European ways and things' — as traitors to Xhosa survival. School people return this contempt and scorn the conservatism of the Reds.

For Bhengu, the message of salvation was for all people since he believed that Christ is the only reconciler of people both horizontally (with people to each other) and vertically (with God and people). That was his burning passion, as asserted by Mokhoathi (2016:33), that 'Bhengu sought to reach out to sinners through the gospel of Christ and to rebuild the society.'

c) **Remedial actions?** Bhengu spoke his remedial actions in 1986, just few weeks before his passing on. This is a famous *Farewell Message to the Church*:

Build the Church of God. The names of our Churches are our own inventions and not God's! Let the Christians come together as God's children. Build the nation where you are remembering that you are part of

that nation and you are in it for a specific purpose for God. Pray for all leaders in Africa, support leaders of your nation and present Christ to them. The Church is the light of the world. The Church is the salt of the earth and the Church should lead the nation to peace, unity and prosperity (McGee 1993:130-131; Mochechane :7; Lephoko 2018:268).

Let me put my head on the block to conclude this lecture by quoting the first apartheid Prime Minister, Daniël François Malan (not to say I agree with his ideology or philosophy), but to tap into his wisdom on hearing about the death of Jan Smuts:

South Africa's wealth did not lie in gold and diamonds... but in the production of men and women who by their personal qualities and deeds were able to leave deep footprints in the sands of time, and on their country's history' (Steyn 2015:4).

Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu is one of those who made this history and his footprint will remain visible on the African sand, even for eternity to come!

I thank you!!!!

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