



Nelson Mandela 1918-2013

Now that Nelson Mandela has been buried, the time has come for another look at his role in South African politics during the last sixty years. Predictably, the accolades awarded to him during the days of mourning were somewhat over the top. He was eulogized by many as the man who single-handedly saved South Africa from the brink of disaster – a statement that ignores the role of other leaders such as Bishop Desmond Tutu, President F.W. de Klerk, and the constituencies they represented. Some went even further: The British newspaper *The Telegraph* compared Nelson Mandela to Jesus Christ. When the author of the article was mocked and criticized, he wrote another article stating that there were "*many Christ-like qualities in Nelson Mandela that are not present in the rest of us.*"¹

On the other side of the spectrum there have been very negative evaluations of the former president. Mandela has been described as a communist and terrorist who was responsible for the deaths of many people in South Africa. Other detractors have called him a socialist who introduced laws allowing abortion and prostitution in his country: in short, a man with blood on his hands. Again, some took these criticisms to the extreme. Quite a few people in South Africa believe that Nelson Mandela was an instrument of the devil. If you are interested, do a Google search with the combination "Mandela" and "Antichrist" and you will get more than 200,000 hits!

Unsurprisingly, Christians in North America struggle to make sense of these differing opinions. What are we to make of Nelson Mandela? Didn't he come out of prison with a remarkable spirit that caused him to seek reconciliation with his enemies rather than revenge? Or should we assume that he outwitted everyone by just pretending to be forgiving? Was it all part of some devious and diabolic plan to grab power and then destroy Christianity in his country?

It is indeed hard to get a handle on Mandela. He was the son of an African chief, received his basic education at Methodist mission schools, joined the ANC and became involved in political resistance against apartheid, joining forces with communists along the way. All these experiences influenced Mandela and should be taken into account when we seek to understand him.

In his famous "An Ideal for Which I am Prepared to Die" speech in 1964, Mandela described himself as someone who admired the Western ideal of democracy as well as the communist ideal of a classless society. He stated that he had been influenced in his thinking by both West and East, adding that he wanted to borrow the best from both sides.

While Mandela has been quite open about the political influences that shaped his thinking, he has never said much about his religious beliefs. Perhaps, now that he has passed away, we will get to hear more about this from people who were in his inner circle. In the meantime, we can only work with the few statements he made on the subject and with the way he conducted himself in his private and public life.

A man of faith?

Was Nelson Mandela a Christian? When journalists asked him this question he never gave a straight answer. He would simply say that faith is a private matter. Mandela often praised the church for its role during the apartheid struggle, but as far as I know he never made a clear positive affirmation of his own faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not a good sign, of course. A true Christian is one who professes the name of Jesus Christ.

At the same time there are indications that he considered himself part of the Christian community. Speaking at the 1994 Easter conference of South Africa's largest church, the Zion Christian Church, Mandela referred a few times to "*our risen Messiah*" and "*our resurrected Lord*."² But he always remained the politician. In his keynote speech at the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, Mandela praised the major books of religion (explicitly mentioning the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Quran*, and the *Bible*) for teaching fundamental principles of human behaviour.

Some have argued that Mandela was a "*closet Christian*," a Christian believer who kept his faith to himself. South African media reported that a Methodist minister administered the last rites to Mandela shortly before his death. A minister who was very close to him said that Mandela loved to hear the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24-26) recited to him.³ It is also striking that many Christian hymns were sung at Mandela's funeral, including the favourite hymn of Mandela's mother.

We must keep in mind that Christianity in Africa is often syncretistic. This is true for Mandela's church, the Methodist Church in South Africa, as well. Many members of this church still venerate the ancestral spirits. In a display of such syncretism, Mandela's funeral was a mixture of Christian and pagan rituals. When Mandela's body was transported to Qunu for the burial, a tribal elder came along to talk to the "spirit of Mandela" and keep him informed about where he was going. On the morning of the funeral, before the ceremony, an ox was slaughtered and a family elder kept talking to the spirit of the deceased. These things are typical signs of African traditional religion.

Was Mandela a Christian? Ultimately, the Lord knows what was in the heart of Mandela and we know that the Lord is gracious and just.

Mandela influenced by Christianity

There is more to say, however. As mentioned earlier, Mandela received his childhood education at Methodist mission schools. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he describes how the church played an important role in his early life.

When he was seventeen years old, Mandela became a student at Clarkebury Institute, a Wesleyan high school. The principal was a certain Rev. C. Harris, a man respected and loved by the Thembu people. Mandela commented: "*As an example of a man unselfishly devoted to a good cause, Reverend Harris was an important model for me.*"⁴ After that, at age nineteen, he enrolled as a student at the Wesleyan College in Fort Beaufort. The principal of the school was a Methodist clergyman named Dr. Arthur Wellington. In this case, Mandela's evaluation was less positive. He described the principal as "*a stout and stuffy Englishman who boasted of his connection to the Duke of Wellington.*"⁵

Obviously not everything that Mandela experienced at the Christian schools was positive, but the Christian education which he enjoyed and the Christian examples which he saw had a profound influence on him. In later years, when people asked him why he did not take revenge on his former enemies after he came out of prison his answer was, "*The Methodist missionaries taught me forgiveness.*"⁶ Think about that comment as a background for the peaceful transition of power in South Africa! Contemplate what would have happened if Mandela had received his childhood training at a communist or Islamic school! South Africa would be a different place today.

God's providence

This leads us to reflect on God's providence in the peaceful transition of power that took place in South Africa in the 1990s. I lived with my family in South Africa during those years and I remember how many whites feared a bloodbath. There were casualties, for sure, but in general things were peaceful. After the 1994 elections Mandela became president and many people feared that he would use his new-found position of power to oppress the whites in the country. Only when Mandela publicly supported the South African rugby team during the World Cup of 1995 (it was still a mainly white team at the time) did people start to realize that the man really wanted peace and reconciliation. The picture of Mandela warmly congratulating Francois Pienaar, captain of the Springboks, memorializes a symbolic and emotional moment.

God's Word teaches us that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases (Proverbs 21:1). A striking example of this was Cyrus, king of Persia. In Ezra 1:1 we read that "*the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation*" that allowed the Jewish exiles to go back to Jerusalem and Judah. Later in the same book the Lord "*changed the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in their work on the house of God, the God of Israel*" (Ezra 6:22, see also 7:27).

What the Lord did in the days of the Old Testament, He can still do today. We believe that the Lord heard the prayers of many Christians, both black and white, and that he moved the heart of Nelson Mandela to seek peace and reconciliation for his country after he came out of prison. In the Lord's providence this already started during his childhood. Mandela's mother was a member of the Methodist church, and he enjoyed all his early education at Methodist schools and colleges. Even though he embraced socialism and flirted with communism later in his life, he nevertheless acknowledged the influence of the Methodist missionaries on his thinking. Whatever the mix of convictions in Mandela's mind and heart, God used him to protect his people (black and white) in South Africa from a bloody revolution. While the world may credit Mandela for the peaceful transition of power in South Africa, as Christians we thank and praise God for using Mandela as an instrument in his hand.

Looking back on the political developments in South Africa during the 1990s, there is much reason to praise the Lord. He heard the prayers of his people. He provided leaders on both sides of the political spectrum who were influenced by Christian principles and thus able to steer the country through a difficult process of transition of political power. For that we praise the Lord. May he continue to protect and bless his people in South Africa also in the years to come when the country is governed by lesser minds.

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¹ *The Telegraph*, December 11, 2013. <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/peteroborne/100250173/of-course-nelson-mandela-wasnt-jesus-but-his-suffering-brought-him-closer-to-christ/>

² Text of speech available at South African History Online. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/speech-nelsonmandela-zionist-christian-church-easter-conference-0>

³ Verashni Pillay, "Mandela and the confessions of a closet Christian," *Mail and Guardian*, December 13, 2013.

⁴ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 18.

⁵ Mandela, *ibid.*, 33.

⁶ See, for example, Raymond Heard, "Farewell, Madiba." *National Post*, Dec. 5, 2013