

IN PURSUIT OF JUSTICE: ALBERT GEYSER'S STORY AS TOLD BY THE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This contribution was delivered as a paper at the 2015 Conference of the South African Society for Church History. It reflects on the life and contribution of Prof. Dr A.S. (Albert) Geysler, with specific reference to his leading role in the struggle against apartheid. Geysler was very active in the 1960s, but soon forgotten and erased from public memory. In this contribution Geysler is described as a well-known public figure and theologian, a view based on a large number of newspapers articles from this period. The reader is also presented with some reasons why Geysler's legacy is either ignored (being a controversial figure) or forgotten. It could be regarded as a 'contested' or 'forgotten' memory.

Keywords: Albert Geysler; apartheid; struggle; public theologian; justice; NHKA; media

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INTRODUCTION

Albert Geysers is one of the South African theologians whose struggle against apartheid is rarely mentioned or remembered.

Recently, this started to change. On 3 November 2011 Prof. Casper Labuschagne, professor emeritus of the University of Groningen gave a memorial lecture in Leeuwarden (Netherlands), in which he discussed the role Albert Geysers, Beyers Naudé and other Afrikaner theologians (himself included) played in the struggle against apartheid. One quote from this lecture will suffice to highlight the important role Geysers had played:

In de oecumenische studiegroepen bestond al lang de behoefte aan een instituut om onze activiteiten te coördineren en een tijdschrift om onze idealen van de eenheid van de kerk en een vreedzame samenleving uit te dragen. Daartoe is als eerste stap op initiatief van prof. Albert Geysers en dr. Ben Engelbrecht het christelijke maandblad *Pro Veritate* in het leven geroepen. Op voorstel van Geysers werd ds. Beyers Naudé uitgenodigd om het redacteurschap op zich te nemen. Hij ging akkoord en het eerste nummer verscheen in Mei 1962. (Labuschagne 2011, 13)

On 17 February 2014 the first annual *Albert Geysers Memorial Lecture* was presented at the University of Pretoria by Prof. J.A. Loader, dean and professor emeritus of the University of Vienna. It was published in *HTS Theological Studies* (Loader 2014). In another contribution in the same journal we read the following tribute to Geysers:

Unlike many of his compatriots, known for their iconic role in the struggle against apartheid, the name of Albert Geysers (10 Feb. 1918–13 June 1985) has faded from the collective memory of the public, ecclesiastical and theological discourse in South Africa and abroad. Other than with a political leader like Mandela and church leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naudé, Geysers is not often, if at all, remembered in church and public life as one of the icons in the struggle against apartheid...A fitting and overdue gesture was made when the first memorial lecture in honour of Prof. Geysers was held on 17 February 2014 by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. This memorial lecture highlighted the intellectual legacy and theology of Geysers that sought greater unity, compassion and reconciliation among groups and peoples, that rejected attempts to separate people because of their race. He needs to be remembered for more than his activism. Apart from being one of the giant figures in the struggle against apartheid, he was an esteemed New Testament scholar. (Van Aarde, De Villiers and Buitendag 2014)

As recently as 2015, from a most unexpected source, the legacy of Geysers was recalled. In the University of Cape Town (UCT) *Legacy Society Newsletter* Peter Silverman recounts:

The second lecture again at Jameson was by a person of incredible courage, Albert Geysers, a man whose Afrikaner credentials were by any definition impeccable, but opposed to Apartheid, a stance which cost him dearly. His own community disowned him, he was cast

out as a traitor, and his personal safety questioned. I never got to meet him personally but I admired his courage. He ended his speech with words I have never forgotten: "It is not that South Africa has taken a moral step backwards. It is that the world has taken a moral step forward regarding the policy of Apartheid". (Silverman 2015, 17)

In the *Christian Institute* archives there is much evidence of the role Geysers played in the struggle against apartheid as chairman and driving force behind the *Christian Institute*. Published material normally attends more to the life and contribution of Beyers Naudé. Whereas Naudé had streets, academic centres and schools named after him (Labuschagne 2011), Geysers drifted away into oblivion, especially in the Afrikaner community. Some students of yesteryear are still able to tell anecdotes about Geysers or would recall with some admiration his outspoken criticism of church, government and society. However, as a public figure, Geysers disappeared.

The disappearance of Geysers in public memory is probably due to the fact that he became less involved in the struggle against apartheid because of personal circumstances. A positive assessment of Geysers's role in theology, church and society appeared in three scholarly contributions (Van Aarde 1992; Van Aarde et al 2014; Van Eck 1995). Details of Geysers's life and his theology can be found in these contributions. It is repeated here in a few sentences, just to establish some context. This contribution, however, attempts to tell the story as it unfolded in the newspapers of the time. The irony of it all is that Geysers, due to extensive media coverage, became one of the most famous academics in South Africa, a public theologian *par excellence*, invited to lecture to capacity crowds of students on various campuses – only to fade away in public memory.

The sources used in this contribution are three volumes of newspaper clippings collected by Prof. Casper Labuschagne, co-activist, colleague and friend of Albert Geysers. The collection starts in 1960 and ends in 1968. Prof. Labuschagne entrusted his collection to me in 2014 when I visited him in Groningen. On my return I deposited copies of these volumes (totalling 400 pages and approximately 900 newspaper articles) in the archives of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as well as the Ned. Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA).¹

Because of the large volume of newspaper articles available as well as the fact that Geysers's pursuit of justice and struggle against apartheid can be divided in two clear periods (1955-1962 and 1963-1968), this is the first of two articles. In this article I will discuss Geysers's contribution between 1955 and 1963, as told by the newspapers of the time.

1 The unpublished volumes of newspaper clippings will be referenced (in example) as 'Labuschagne 2014 Vol. I:' with page number and if known, the original author. In most instances the author is indicated only as 'Staff Reporter'.

WHO WAS PROF. A.S. GEYSER?

Albertus Stephanus (Albert) Geysers was born on 10 February 1918 on a farm close to Naboomspruit (Mookgophong), the heartland of Afrikaner conservative politics and a typical farming community. His father and mother (Petrus and Nina Geysers) were devout members of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA). He was one of three children.

After he matriculated in 1935, Geysers and his brother (Hendrik Johannes) started their theological studies at the University of Pretoria. In 1938 Geysers completed his BA *cum laude* majoring in Greek and Latin. At the end of 1940 he completed his BD, also *cum laude*. He continued his studies and completed a MA (Classical Languages) in 1942 (Oberholzer 2010, 45). He had a sound knowledge of Hebrew, Syriac, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, French, German, Dutch and English. Including Afrikaans, he could read 10 languages.

In 1941 Geysers was ordained as minister in the NHKA Heilbron, a small town in the Free State. In 1944 he was called to a congregation in Pretoria where he served until 1946. At various periods he took leave to assist a congregation in Cape Town.

Geysers started with doctoral studies in Church History. He changed his doctoral studies to New Testament during 1944, primarily to be able to fill the position of Prof. J.H.J.A. Greyvenstein who retired in that time (Oberholzer 2010, 44-45). Within a year Geysers finished the doctoral exams and on 15 March 1946 he received the degree *Doctor Divinitatis Cum Laude*. His external examiner was Prof. J. De Zwaan of the University of Leiden. His thesis was titled *Die geslagsregister van Jesus Christus volgens Matteus 1:1-17 en Lukas 3:23-38*.

At the beginning of 1946, at the young age of 27, Geysers was appointed as lecturer in the Department of New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria. Later that same year, he was promoted to full professor and Head of the Department. He served in this position until 1961, a period of 15 years. After he had accepted a position as professor of Theology at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1963, he first resigned as a minister of the NHKA and later (1968) as a member of the NHKA.

From the research which Geysers had published, his ability as theologian becomes quite apparent. In 1951, during the 175th meeting of the Utrecht Theological Society, he was elected as one of five international members on the committee. In the same period he was invited to lecture at the University of Utrecht for a period of six months. At a later period (1959) he also participated in research at the University of Paris and the Vatican. During these periods of study he had contact with well-known scholars like Unnik, Rengstorff, Aland, Vielhauer, Cullmann, Barth, Berkelbach van den Sprenkel and Stauffer (Van Aarde 1992, 159). He served on the editorial boards of *Novum Testamentum* as well as its *Supplementa*.

In Europe, Geysers engaged with the growing international ecumenical movement. After his return from Europe, he became more and more outspoken in his criticism of apartheid. In 1955 he and Prof. S.P. Engelbrecht, his colleague at the

University of Pretoria and professor of Church History, were two of the 13 Afrikaans academics who published a protest against the extended powers of the Senate and the removal of Coloured voters from the common voters roll. The involvement of two theologians in this action sent shock waves through the Afrikaner establishment.

In the period leading up to 1960 Geysers became quite outspoken against the ecclesiology of the NHKA, criticising the concept of a nationalistic church for Afrikaners as articulated in Article III of the NHKA church order (Van Eck 1995, 829). This was not only a question of political opposition to apartheid, but based on his fundamental understanding of the church as one, universal and holy church (Geysers 1960, 14-18; Van Aarde 1992, 160). He also engaged in debate with theologians from other churches, especially the Dutch Reformed Church, criticising their theological justification of apartheid (see Van Eck 1995 for an overview and theological analysis of the discourse).

During 1960, Geysers's opposition to apartheid became radicalised and outspoken, especially in light of the Sharpeville massacres and upcoming Cottesloe Consultation. During 1960 Geysers and 10 other theologians published a booklet with the title *Vertraagde Aksie* (Delayed Action). In this compilation of theological essays, direct or indirect criticism was directed against government and church policies. The 11 authors who contributed to the publication were from the NHKA, A.S. Geysers, A. van Selms, M.J. Redelinghuys and J. Stutterheim; from the DRC, B.B. Keet, B.J. Marais, G.C. Oosthuizen, J.A. van Wyk and G.J. Swart; from the Reformed Churches (GKSA) H. du Plessis and C. Hattingh.

What is remarkable in Geysers's introduction to his article in *Vertraagde Aksie* is the definitive influence of Karl Barth, although he does not mention Barth *expressis verbis* (Geysers 1960, 12-14). I am of the opinion that Geysers articulated Barth's views in a new context. There are clear similarities between Geysers's views and those expressed by Barth in a public lecture which he delivered on 22 July 1933, just before the important church elections in Bonn which determined the direction of the German church at the time of Hitler's assumption of political power in Germany. Barth pleaded with those present not to jeopardise the freedom of the gospel by voting for a direction which would enslave the church to nationalistic ideals (Barth 1933, 7). He points out that neither nature, history nor culture:

...macht die Kirche zur Kirche und nicht von daher ist die Kirche als Kiche zu verstehen. Evangelium heist ja nicht: der Mensch für Gott!, sondern ganz und gar und allein: Gott für den Menschen. Will die Kirche Kirche sein und bleiben, dann muss sie zäh und eifersüchtig über dieser Verkündigung wachen als über ihrem Wesen. (Barth 1933, 6-7)

If 'the church wants to be church' it has to protect the freedom of the gospel which proclaims Jesus Christ as the only head and king of the church. In his contribution to *Vertraagde Aksie* Geysers echoes Barth's words: The challenge to the church is to be church!

The Barthian influence on Geysers's ecclesiology and opposition to a nationalistic theology and apartheid in church and state also became evident during a debate in the 1961 General Assembly. During the debate which took five days to complete, Geysers mentioned that he showed the documents pertaining to racial segregation in church and state to Oscar Cullman and Karl Barth while on visit in Europe (NHKA 1961, 28). Both rejected it outright. The influence of Barth, more specific the struggle of the *Bekennende Kirche* against Hitler and the German Christian Movement as well as the *Barmen Declaration* were also addressed by Ben Marais in several newspaper articles of the time (Labuschagne 2014 Vol. I: 65).

Towards the end of 1960, while preparations for the Cottesloe Consultation of the World Council of Churches were in full swing, Geysers and Van Selms, an internationally acclaimed Old Testament scholar and Geysers's colleague at the University of Pretoria together with other ministers of the NHKA (see Geysers and Van Selms 1960a), prepared a *Memorandum* in which they criticised the policy of apartheid on theological grounds and rejected any form of biblical justification of apartheid (Geysers and Van Selms 1960b). They presented the *Memorandum* as ordained ministers of the NHKA to the Moderature on 28 November 1960 with the request that it would form part of the documentation to the Cottesloe Consultation (NHKA 1960, 28). It was rejected by the Moderature, although it contains some of the most lucid, well-constructed and theologically sound arguments against the policy of apartheid ever written in Afrikaans.

Geysers's pursuit of justice, opposition to apartheid, rejection of ecclesial exclusivity, exposure of racism in church and state as well as his critical theology provoked hostile reaction from political and ecclesial leadership, as well as fellow theologians at the University of Pretoria. After the 1961 General Assembly, Geysers had become isolated and *persona non grata* in many circles. It is at this point that we pick up the narrative as told by the media of the period.

THE STORY OF GEYSERS AS TOLD BY THE MEDIA, 1960-1963

In this section a small selection of articles will be discussed in which we find some indication of Geysers's views as well as how he was viewed by the public and the media. It is quite impossible to give a complete overview of all the articles in the Labuschagne collection.

Justice versus law

On 22 April 1960, in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre (21 March 1960), Geysers published an article in *Weekblad* (Labuschagne 2014 Vol. I: 1) in which he argues that a plethora of laws had replaced justice in South Africa. In quite a long, full-page

article he gives an overview of 12 years of legislation which gave the government dictatorial powers. He makes the point that the more a government needs laws to govern, the less it is based on justice and conscience. He equates the massive growth in legislation to the situation in Italy and Germany under Fascism and in Russia under Communism. He comes to the conclusion that the violent protest action at Sharpeville was the result of laws which disenfranchised a large section of the population who had no other possible way to voice their opposition to a government which had lost the ability to listen to people.

On 11 May 1962, after Geysers had been found guilty of heresy by the church and removed from office, Geysers told a *Rand Daily Mail* reporter that 'South Africa would be overtaken by a terrible calamity unless human relations were motivated by true Christian values and principles'. Geysers expressed the opinion that a peaceful and orderly life in South Africa could only be found in a common conscience with a common content of moral values, in a society based on justice and respect for human dignity.

Anti-apartheid activism

Hendrik Vorster reported (*Sunday Times*, 20 November 1960) that '350 ministers' of the various Afrikaans churches had been meeting regularly and in secret during 1960, to discuss the government's policy of apartheid, the infringement of the basic rights of human beings and the effects it could have on the church (Labuschagne 2014 Vol. I: 6). There were even signs of 'revolt' against ecclesial leadership. In the article Geysers, as one of the leaders of the movement, is quoted as saying:

Many of the aspects of apartheid as they affect the church have caused deep anxiety among churchmen in South Africa. We have studied them intensively at our various meetings over the past six months in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Now individual theologians have, for the first time, expressed their anxieties and have analysed the problems facing the church as we see them.

Vorster explains that the publication *Vertraagde Aksie* (which has been referred to above) was the culmination of six months of study and secret meetings and must be understood as a public protest of theologians against racial segregation in church and state. He quotes reverend M.J. Redelinghuys of the NHKA, who described the theology supporting apartheid as an attempt to nationalise God and to reduce Him to a tribal god. Redelinghuys described South Africa as becoming a 'police state'.

The very next day (21 November 1960) Geysers published a repudiation of the article in *Sunday Times* in the Afrikaans newspaper *Transvaler* (Vol. I, 7). He denied that the meetings were ever 'secret', that they were planning a 'revolt' against church leadership and mentioned that the organisation/study group which they belonged to was called the *Ekumeniese Studiekring* which had 108 members and was open to anybody. Dr G.J. Swart, secretary of the *Studiekring*, confirmed this. In the next

issue of the *Transvaler* (22 November 1960), the editor took it upon himself to warn Afrikaans theologians not to trust the 'English press', as they will misuse the opportunity to score political points.

Early in January 1961 a massive meeting of ministers and church members took place in Brits, just north of Pretoria. In an article in *Die Burger* (7 January 1961), a report is given of prominent church leaders and theologians who rejected the views expressed in *Vertraagde Aksie* (Labuschagne 2014 Vol. I: 8). Some of the prominent figures were prof. A.D. Pont (NHKA) and prof. A.B. du Preez (DRC). Under loud and enthusiastic applause Pont delivered a scathing attack on the authors of *Vertraagde Aksie*. The meeting concluded (as reported) that 'if the Afrikaner nation would disappear from South Africa, Christ Himself would disappear'. Pont argued that the authors of *Vertraagde Aksie* are promoting the suicide of the Afrikaner nation.

Afrikaner Broederbond

Another theme which appeared frequently in newspapers of the time, is the role which the *Afrikaner Broederbond* played in the churches. The *Sunday Times* (22 May 1960) reported that there was a growing resentment amongst influential Afrikaners against the tight grip the *Broederbond* had on politics, economics, religion and even the SABC (Labuschagne 2014 Vol. I: 2, 3). Geysers was outspoken in his criticism of the *Broederbond* and at one stage leaked secret documents to the press in which several prominent leaders of the Afrikaans churches were named as members of the secret society. The *Broederbond* was described as a cancer in the bosom of the church. It was pointed out as untenable that a secret society should influence ecclesial decisions, rather than Scripture alone.

Geysers's father was also a member of the *Afrikaner Broederbond*. In the wake of Geysers's public criticism of apartheid and the role of the *Broederbond* in the church, Geysers senior was asked to resign from the organisation, which he did. Geysers's father, mother and wife supported him throughout, but his brother (also a minister in the church) rejected his views and basically disowned him.

Charge of heresy

Benjamin Pogrud broke the news on 5 October 1961 in the *Rand Daily Mail* that a charge of heresy had been laid against Geysers (Labuschagne 2014 Vol. I: 10). The charges were laid by three senior theological students. Geysers was asked by the Moderature to resign his position as lecturer in New Testament, but he refused due to the fact that the charge of heresy was without 'any basis of fact'. On the same day, Geysers told a reporter of the *Pretoria News* (Vol. I, 11) that he was deeply shocked by the fact that his own students laid a charge of heresy against him. He denied that he was a heretic and made it clear that he wanted to defend himself on the charges and would ask that the proceedings would be open to the public and the press.

In London, the *Daily Mail* (12 October 1961 Vol. I: 13-14) published an article based on telephonic interviews it had had with four well-known Dutch theologians: Prof. P.A. Stampvoort (Groningen), Hendrikus Berkhof (Leiden), J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (Leiden) and B. Gemser (emeritus of the University of Pretoria living in Groningen). They were unanimous in their condemnation of the heresy charge, calling Geysers one 'of the most brilliant theologians of South Africa' whose credentials and credibility was impeccable. They were unanimous in their view that the charge of heresy against Geysers was politically motivated, orchestrated by the *Afrikaner Broederbond* and devoid of all theological substance. Two days later the *Mail* also carried a report on Rabbi B. Isaacson who called Geysers a 'Noah of this generation' during a sermon he delivered in the Krugersdorp Synagogue. He found Geysers's actions 'inspiring and refreshing', a man who did not sacrifice his principles on the altar of expediency.

The heresy charge against Geysers coincided with a vote in the United Nations which censured South Africa (Vol. I, 15). The *Sunday Times* reported (15 October 1961) that a major crisis was looming in relations between the Netherlands and South Africa, under the heading '*Grave crisis in S.A. Holland relations*'. According to the *Sunday Times* reporter, the 'grave crisis' was precipitated by two factors, namely the Netherlands who had been the only European country to vote with the Afro-Asia block in the United Nations to censure South Africa, and secondly the severe and public condemnation by the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk* of the charge of heresy against Geysers. The general feeling expressed by Prof. Hendrikus Berkhof was that normal relations with the NHKA had become impossible. In the same statement the Dutch church expressed its support for the decisions of the United Nations. The Geysers trial again surfaced at the United Nations on 8 November, when the South African minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Eric Louw, was called to address the UN Commission on the issue (*Transvaler*, 9 November 1961 Vol. I: 48).

The heresy trial started on 24 October 1961 under massive public interest. At least 25 national and international newspapers had reporters on standby at the church offices, but they were denied access to the trial. The area around the offices was packed with interested members of the public, who were also denied entry except if they were members of the NHKA. So many members of the church attended the trial that they had to sit on the floor in a hall which could seat 450 people (*Vaderland*, 25 October 1961 Vol. I: 26). On the day the trial started, the Utrecht Theological Faculty sent an official telegram to the Pretoria Faculty of Theology to do their utmost to stop the trial (*The Star*, 24 October 1961 Vol. I: 19). It was followed by a telegram from the Praeses of the Dutch General Synod delivered to the Moderature of the NHKA, imploring them not to take any decisions which would jeopardise the Reformed principles of the church. Telegrams of support were sent to the Geysers home, including from several theological faculties such as Groningen and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, which invited Geysers to apply for a position (Vol. I, 50).

Newspapers carried reports on a daily basis in which the trial's progress was described. Personal profiles of Geysers, Mrs Celia Geysers (who confirmed her support of her husband's views), his father, the accusers (H.G. van der Westhuizen, E. Engelbrecht and W.C.M. de Beer) as well as the members of the Moderature were published. Geysers was depicted as a staunch *Hervormer* with an Afrikaner lineage going back two centuries. The *Rand Daily Mail* (24 October 1961) writes:

Born and brought up in the fervent tradition of Afrikaner nationalism, the descendent of an early Trekker family, a brilliant and highly-regarded theologian in a conservative church, now a self-admitted crusader against the intolerances and abuses of nationalism...(Vol. I, 18).

It continues to describe how deeply Geysers had been influenced by books he read on the struggle of Christianity against Nazism in Germany and his growing conviction that Christianity, nationalism and authoritarianism could never be reconciled.

Geysers was charged with heresy and insubordination. The insubordination charge was based on his public rejection of decisions taken by the General Assembly regarding segregation in church and state. The heresy charge was based on lecture notes which students had taken down, especially his lectures on the Letter to the Philippians and his exposition of Christ's relationship to God the Father in light of Chapter 2:6-11. According to the students who laid the charges, Geysers taught the subordination of the Son to the Father. This was widely regarded as a smoke screen for the real issue, namely his opposition to apartheid.

After three weeks of trial, with some stoppages due to Geysers's deteriorating health, newspapers started reporting on open revolt amongst church members against the prolonged trial. Individual members who resigned from the church were interviewed: 'Oom Danie, 73, is looking for another church' (*Sunday Times* Vol. I: 50). The article tells the story of a farmer (Danie Naudé) from Naboomspruit who was a founder member of the National Party in the Waterberg, who realised 'God never said serve me by the laws of the church. He called on all men to serve Him together...'. Some members openly discussed and mentioned a split in the church (*Pretoria News*, 16 November 1961 Vol. I: 51) and many simply left the church or transferred their membership to other denominations.

When the first part of the hearings concluded on 16 November 1961, a large part of the recordings of the trial was already transcribed and 409 typed pages were handed to Geysers to prepare his defence (Vol. I, 53). The trial continued until 5 December, took a break for the holidays and resumed again on 30 January 1962. It continued intermittently until April. By that time the typed proceedings covered 3 000 pages. In the meantime Geysers was removed from his position as Bible translator and rumours surfaced that he was offered a position as professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. On 8 May 1962 Geysers was informed that he was found guilty

of heresy, not guilty on the charge of insubordination, and deposed as minister of the church (*Rand Daily Mail*, 9 May 1962 Vol. I: 56). The trial eventually lasted six months, in which the 15 members of the Commission had to attend all sessions taking leave from their regular occupation. The final proceedings cover 4 000 pages and the financial costs, if calculated in today's terms, ran into millions.

The *Transvaler* (9 May 1962) published the verdict *in toto* (Vol. I, 57). In the verdict it was spelled out that Geysers was reckless in the way he confronted the students in class with different interpretations of Scripture, some contrary to the confessions, to such an extent that students' faith was undermined. Interestingly enough, Geysers did not resign as member from the NHKA, even though he was removed from office. The *Rand Daily Mail* (10 May 1962) summed up the events in a main editorial under the heading '*Heretic or rebel?*'

The "trial" of Dr Albert Geysers, Professor of New Testament Theology at the University of Pretoria and minister of the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk*, on charges of heresy and insubordination has been one of the most extraordinary events of recent years in South Africa and the outcome has been equally remarkable...if he had been a political conformist, his theological views would never have been questioned...Dr Geysers has been pilloried for his moral stand on race questions – whatever has been decided against him on theological grounds. (Vol. I, 62)

This was a general view expressed in publications, but vehemently denied by the church which insisted that the trial was about doctrine only.

The conflict continues

After the trial and Geysers's removal from office, he received more than a thousand letters of support from all over the world. He received several invitations to deliver speeches and to preach in various churches. The *Pretoria News* reported that Geysers, during a sermon (on the text of Hebrews 5:8) in the Congregational Church of Pretoria, told the congregation 'that a church which has no compassion with suffering, irrespective of race or creed, has lost its Christianity...' (Labuschagne 2014 Vol. II: 1). Christians needed to be brave in the face of threats and intimidation, probably referring to the fact that he received several death threats, abusive phone calls and letters condemning his views.

On 16 May 1962 the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that Prof. Adrianus van Selms resigned his position as professor of Old Testament at the University of Pretoria as a protest against the verdict against Geysers. In his letter of resignation he states: 'Conscience forbids me to allow any human being to dictate to me what the Divine Word says' (Vol. II, 2). The theme of justice, human dignity and conscience was also the main focus of a lecture which Geysers delivered to a packed hall of between 1600 and 2000 students on the campus of the Witwatersrand University (*Pretoria News*, 16 May 1962). Geysers pointed out that the lack of human dignity in South Africa

was leading it to its destruction. South Africa, he said, was prepared to hang a man because he tries to protect human dignity. Without the concept of justice and human dignity there is no civilisation. South Africans have become 'mental acrobats', turning justice into self-righteousness, love into self-love and respect for life into self-preservation.

Following the conviction of Geysers and the resignation of Van Selms, other lecturers also came under fire. The *Sunday Times* reported (30 September 1962) that Dr Casper Labuschagne, a 'new deal' theologian, had been dismissed as lecturer in Biblical Studies at the University of Pretoria because, it was believed, he was an ally of Geysers and a critic of apartheid. Labuschagne challenged the decision but was informed that it was a 'practical' arrangement due to the change in the structure of the theological curriculum (*Dagbreek*, 14 October 1962 Vol. II: 7). Labuschagne relocated to Groningen where he was appointed as lecturer and later professor of Old Testament. During this period Geysers also received an appointment at the University of the Witwatersrand in the Department of Divinity. However, he remained a member of the NHKA.

Geysers appealed his conviction in the Supreme Court of South Africa. The case started on 1 May, 1963. Geysers asked the court, under presiding judge J.F. Ludorf, to set aside his conviction of heresy (*Vaderland*, 1 May 1963). Geysers's argument in court was that the findings of the heresy trial should be set aside because the members of the commission were biased, acted *male fide* and the process was fraught with irregularities. During the trial Geysers recited the Articles of Faith and confirmed that he had always believed in the church as the Trinity. On 14 May the hearing was postponed, to give the parties an opportunity to come to some agreement. On 15 May 1963 the trial ended dramatically, when the court heard that Geysers had been restored to his office as minister of the NHKA. The church undertook to pay all legal fees. The Commission of the General Assembly (Moderation) also declared publicly that it had made a 'bona fide and unintentional mistake' in the interpretation of Geysers's viewpoints. It is clear the church realised it would lose the court battle.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This very short overview of events surrounding Geysers as told by various newspapers between 1960 and 1963, makes it clear that Albert Geysers was regarded by many as a leading figure in resisting the destruction of justice, human dignity and equality in South Africa. What made it remarkable was the fact that he came from a very conservative political and ecclesial background. His ability to transcend racial, cultural and religious boundaries made him a credible voice in the resistance against apartheid.

Geysers was by no means easy to get along with. He was highly intelligent, well-educated and well spoken. He used his ability as public speaker to arouse emotion.

He could be scathing in debates and demolish opponents' arguments. He did not back away from confrontation. Many regarded him as arrogant. The negative or positive evaluation of Geysers depended mostly on the eye of the beholder – in the Afrikaans and church press he was often criticised, even maligned; in the English press he became a national hero of resistance and a true prophet. Internationally he was regarded highly as a man of integrity.

Geysers could be regarded as the most influential public theologian of the early sixties. This makes it even more remarkable that he was so quickly forgotten and erased from the collective memory. The skewed or even complete lack of knowledge of Geysers's life and work in the church which he loved and was buried from, is probably the result of church historians who underplayed or gave a specific interpretation of the events. Geysers was a controversial figure and his is a 'contested' memory. Because of the massive loss of credibility the church suffered during the whole Geysers debacle, he is rarely mentioned or discussed and very often presented in a negative light.

In a next contribution the story must continue, because Geysers soon became involved in a new wave of controversy when he and Beyers Naudé established the *Christelike Instituut*, attended meetings of the World Council of Churches and published *Pro Veritate*. He was branded a 'communist who will be responsible for the murder of Afrikaner women and children'. This also ended in court, which awarded him the biggest libel claim in the legal history of South Africa.

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