

A Reformed theologian on a journey on a surpassing road

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Research Project Registration:**Project Leader:** A.G. van Aarde **Project No:** 2334682**Description:**

This research is part of the research project, 'Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics', directed by Prof. Dr Andries van Aarde, Post Retirement Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Dean's Office, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Received: 01 July 2023

Accepted: 01 Sept. 2023

Published: 01 Dec. 2023

How to cite this article:

Van Aarde, A.G., 2023, 'A Reformed theologian on a journey on a surpassing road', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a9263. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.9263>

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The article aims to discuss facets in the formation of the Covenant of Faith of Reformed Congregations in January 2013 against the background of the views of these conservatives on my theological disposition considered to be representative of a 'strange theology', 'new gospel' and 'heretical views'. The article demonstrates that this church schism is related to other pivotal events in the history of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NHKA). One such historical event is when a new Church Order was adopted in which the NHKA no longer utilised the racist ecclesial self-definition of 'ethnic church' [*volkskerk*]. In practice this meant membership for whites only and the rejection of interracial marriages. Other pivotal events occurred when the General Church Assembly declared apartheid to be a 'sin', and when it decided that sexual orientation should not prevent anyone from the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) community to remain or be ordained as a minister in the NHKA.

Contribution: The article is written in the genre of autobiographical biblical criticism and hermeneutics of suspicion, and represents a reworked and shortened version of existing published autobiographical notes.

Keywords: autobiography; Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa; ecclesial schism; gender justice; sexual orientation; apartheid as sin; doléance.

Introduction¹

At the opening ceremony of the Reformed Theological College at the University of Pretoria on 15 February 2023, Professor Wim Dreyer told me of a church history book project in which he aims to capture 'pivotal moments' in the history of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Afrika (NHKA).² An example of such a pivotal moment is the recent schism in the NHKA. A number of congregations and ministers who call themselves '*steedsHervormers* (2013)' [still or remaining Reformed] formally broke away from the Church on 11 June 2013 by forming the '*Geloofsbond van Hervormde Gemeentes*' [*Covenant of Faith of Reformed Congregations*] *steedsHervormers* (2013). This schism is related to other 'pivotal events' in the history of the NHKA.³ One such historical event occurred when a new Church Order was adopted wherein the NHKA no longer utilised the racist ecclesial self-definition of 'ethnic church' [*volkskerk*]. In practice, this meant membership for whites only and the rejection of interracial marriages. Such marriages were even deemed a 'dangerous threat' to faith, church and society. Another pivotal event was when the General Church Assembly (GCA) in 2010 declared apartheid to be a 'sin'. This resolution paved the way for NHKA to once again become a member of ecumenical movements.

The departure of politically conservative congregations and ministers is also related to the resolution by GCA that sexual orientation does not prevent anyone from the LGBTQ+ community to remain or be ordained as a minister in the NHKA. The formal resolution was

1.A reworked, shortened version of Van Aarde (2020a).

2.The official English name of the NHKA is 'Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa'.

3.Chronologically, the schism represents a trajectory of a number of steps in a developmental process: 12 November 2011 – the establishment of the 'confessional covenant' [*belydenisverbond*], called '*steedsHervormers*' at the NHKA congregation Premiermyn; May 2012 – the beginning of secession from the NHKA by some congregations; 02 June 2012 – the '*steedsHervormers*' declared a status confessionis at the NHKA congregation Meyerspark; 21 June 2012 – A. Botma, F.N.S. Marais and P.R. Schoeman resigned as NHKA ministers; 17–25 July 2012 – these three ministers, represented by 'societies' which functioned as 'legislative assemblies' of their respective NHKA congregations, began to issue a subpoena against the NHKA; 11 June 2013 – the establishment of the '*Geloofsbond van Hervormde Gemeentes*' [*Covenant of Faith of Reformed Congregations*] at the NHKA congregation Pretoria Tuine (see <http://www.steedshervormers.co.za/verklaring.html>, viewed 25 August 2023).

Note: Special Collection: Wim Dreyer Dedication, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

taken by the GCA at the 71st GCA in 2016. However, the 'steedsHervormers' describes the unprejudiced view on 'homosexuality' as the primary ethical reason for their breakaway during the period 2012–2013 (Geloofsbond van Hervormde Gemeentes s.a.).

I assume that these 'pivotal moments' will be included in Professor Dreyer's anticipated book. I was intimately involved in these core events in the history of the church. Telling my life story can serve two purposes. The first is to conscientise church leaders and members about the harmful effect of the rejection of people who pleaded these causes and the wounds that were inflicted on them. The second is an attempt to heal from these personal emotional wounds. This is the narrative of a journey where many obstacles had to be overcome. To tell the story requires seeing and acknowledging the stormy depths of the Rubicon that had to be crossed (Van Eck 2017). Individual events can be interpreted in their connection to one other. The aim is to comprehensively sketch the recent history of the NHKA which in many respects is a similar journey to that of the other Reformed churches in South Africa. My life story of being marginalised began in the 1990s, but is rooted in religious-political events of the 1960s. This article focuses mainly on the events related to the schism caused by the 'Covenant of Faith of Reformed Congregations'.

In a letter addressed to the Executive of the General Synod of the NHKA, dated 18 August 2008, I formally expressed my concern regarding the actions of my colleague and previous teacher in Church History at the University of Pretoria, Professor A.D. Pont. This was because of his continuous use of venomous and undermining statements directed towards fellow theologians within the NHKA, teaching at the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the University of Pretoria. In the letter, I mentioned that I had personally spoken to Professor Pont and asked him to refrain from engaging in this form of communication, yet my efforts were unsuccessful. His insinuations, particularly regarding Jesus studies, were clearly aimed directly at me. I found Professor Pont's direct personal derogatory comments unsettling. For example, his intense personal hostility towards the outcomes of biblical scholarship within the NHKA, as evident, for example, in his publication on the history of the NHKA Congregation Pretoria-Oos (pp. 47–48), published by SENTIK, under the auspices of the NHKA.

I also expressed my disapproval of Professor Pont's involvement in the publication of SENTIK ([2008]), *The Story of Our Church*, volume 2, where he in a non-judgmental manner referred to 'Auschwitz and German National Socialism'. I noticed a distinct tone of defamation in his writings, particularly aimed at 'current ecclesiastical ideologues', myself included. These 'ideologues' were criticised for not acknowledging the perceived threat of 'English-American socialism and Stalinist communism'. These remarks are to an extent a replication of the context which led to the Supreme Court case Geyser & Naudé v. Pont in the 1960s. His criticism of the so-called 'ideologues' was in

relation to our opposition to the maintaining of the racial-ethnic conceptualisation of the church, as outlined in the erstwhile official Church Order's Article 3. In my letter to the Executive, I indicated that it would be possible for me to demonstrate scientifically the connections between Afrikaner nationalism-socialism and the ethnic-church concept, as presented in Professor Pont's recent articles in the HCM Fourie Foundation's publication 'Doctrine and Life Issues' [*Leer-en Lewenskwessies*].

Additionally, I published articles in 'Die Hervormer' on 15 April 2007 and 01 May 2007, where I pointed out the well-known links between the establishment of the HCM Fourie Foundation and the Supreme Court case involving 'Albert Geyser and Beyers Naudé v. Pont'. In this court case, Professor Pont was found guilty of *animus iniurandi* because of damaging remarks he made about Albert Geyser and Beyers Naudé, implying they were communists. His subsequent appeal to the Appellate Division was unsuccessful. Despite these events, Professor Pont was not subjected to disciplinary actions by the Executive of the General Synod; rather, he appeared to be shielded (see 'Geyser v. Pont 1968 4 SA 67 [W]' and 'Geyser v. Pont 1968 4 SA 67 [W]', in Mukheibir 2007:304–305). One outcome of this legal case was the establishment of the HCM Fourie Foundation, which later became a hub for right-wing clergy within the NHKA.

My articles of 15 April 2007 and 01 May 2007 led to another legal dispute, this time involving Professor Pont and myself. On 27 July 2007, Professor Pont, represented by lawyer Dr P.J. Du Plessis (the same legal representative of Professor Pont in the 'Albert Geyser – Beyers Naudé v. Pont' case), initiated legal proceedings against me for defamation of his character. This legal matter was eventually resolved through ecclesiastical processes, following the guidelines set forth in the Church Order. At these proceedings, Professor Pont received personal support from two ministers, Dr Johan Steenkamp and Dr Malan Storm, both of whom had completed their doctorates under his mentorship.

Dr Johan Steenkamp, along with Dr Hendrik Breytenbach, had previously lodged formal ecclesiastical complaints against me in the early 2000s because of my research on historical Jesus studies. Steenkamp was also among those who accused me and four other theologians of heresy in 2009 for publishing an anti-apartheid declaration. Dr Malan Storm, during the 'Pont v. Van Aarde case' in 2007–2008, served as the Secretary of the Executive of the General Synod. His public statements in the media and on television on behalf of the Executive prompted me to take a leading role in organising the anti-apartheid declaration in March 2009 (see later). These actions eventually led to the historical split within the NHKA, with right-wing clergy and congregations breaking away. The schism gained momentum after October 2010 when the 69th General Church Synod passed the resolution unconditionally retracting the NHKA's historical support of the theological grounds for apartheid. The process acquired a formal nature after the founding of the so-called 'steedsHervormers' on 12 November 2011, the 'declarations of

independence' by some congregations of the NHKA and the accompanying resignation of their ministers from 21 June 2012, and the publication of the *Status Confessionis* on 02 June 2012.

The main concerns that led to the right-wing's resentment are connected to matters of gender justice and race. I formulated the foundational memoranda for the Church's debates on gender justice, same-sex relationships ('homosexuality'), and the quest to remove racial elements from the Church Order. In 2008, with the unanimous endorsement of the lecturers of the NHKA at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, I compiled a memorandum for the GCA on the issue of the ethnic identity of the Church. In the same year, I published an article on the biblical and theological inappropriateness of an exclusive ethnic church in the official newspaper of the Church, *Die Hervormer*. At the 69th GCA, I had the task to introduce the resolution with regard to *volkskerk* [ethnic church]. Six years later at the 71st GCA, a resolution was finally passed and the concept was deleted from the Church Order. In 2009, I also took the initiative to compile a public declaration on apartheid as a sin, which was officially supported by theologians of the Church Johan Buitendag, Yolanda Dreyer, Ernest van Eck, and James Alfred Loader. This became Resolution 54 at the 69th GCA (October 2010) and was passed with a large majority (see Dreyer 2013). The result was the *doléance* of a minority of right-wing conservative ministers and elders who opposed the anti-apartheid resolution. They also added a list of grievances which included their concern about the ordination for ministry of sexual minorities and my historical Jesus studies which demonstrate absolute inclusivity with regard to gender, sexual minorities, race, children and foreigners. To disguise their main issue of race and politics, the *doléance* focused on the unacceptable 'liberal and social theology' of myself and my colleagues.

In support of these conservative voices, '*Leer-en Lewenskwessies*', Letter 48 of December 2007 protested against the fact that I was awarded the HCM Fourie Erepenning (medal of honour) for achievement in church and theology by the GCA. The author put it as follows: 'I cannot remember one instance in which Van Aarde, in his speeches or writings, defends the *status quo* of any facet of the church. He always argues for change' [authors translation]. When I initiated the Albert Geyser Commemoration Lectures at the University of Pretoria the right-wing group responded on social media by saying that this is a way of propagating Marxist ideas in the theology of the Reformed Church.

On the official website of the 'Covenant of Faith of Reformed Congregations',⁴ under the 'Timeline' [*Tydlyn*] section, the '*steedsHervormers*' pinpoint 1960 as the starting point of the schism. They attribute it to what they term the 'liberal voice' [*vrysinnige stem*] of A.S. Geyser. The protest against the NHKA being labeled an 'ethnic church' in 1961 and extended into the year 1980, is interpreted as the persistence of this

4. See <https://www.geloofsbond.org.za/omtrent-ons/tydlyn>.

'liberal thought'. Additionally, they designate the period from 1975 to 1980, referring to A.G. van Aarde, as the time when the 'forerunner of liberal theology' was 'appointed as a professor and later joined the Jesus Seminar' [*Die voorloper van liberale teologie word hoogleraar en sluit later aan by die Jesus Seminar*] (<https://www.geloofsbond.org.za/omtrent-ons/tydlyn>). Under the heading 'History' [*Geskiedenis*], and the subheading 'Historical run-up' [*Historiese aanloop*], the first paragraph (<https://www.geloofsbond.org.za/omtrent-ons/geskiedenis>) begins with (my translation):

On a theological level, the shift in the Church can be indicated on two fronts. On the one hand, there was an increasing liberalism [*vrysinnigheid*], with the book by A.G. van Aarde being the clearest landmark of a theology that undermines faith ... On an ethical level, the new theological direction is brought to the fore in the way marriage is put at risk. Many examples could be given, but the clearest example is the protection offered by the Reformed lecturers to a homosexual student. (n.p.)

Humanism which allegedly manifested in liturgy and 'changed worship models' [*erediens*] is described as the other front (Geloofsbond of Hervormde Gemeentes s.a.).

On 02 June 2012 the '*steedsHervormers*' declared a *status confessionis* [Staat van Belydenis] against the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NHKA) (Geloofsbond of Hervormde Gemeentes s.a.). On 16 June 2012 they decided to begin with a charge of heresy against me. Three days later the decision was implemented. They formally initiated a process to have me excommunicated from the church as a heretic. A society, the '*Hervormde Kerkvereniging*' was established to facilitate the breakaway and obtain the church properties of the congregations who were leaving the church. One of their legal spokespersons, Advocate Renette du Plessis informed the Executive of the NHKA on an official letterhead of the *Pretoria Attorneys Association* and Brooklyn Advocates' Chambers in Pretoria, where Advocate Du Plessis was employed, that if I am not excommunicated by the church, they would extend the charge of heresy to the Moderator and the individual members of the Executive.

When this group officially left the NHKA they declared that the anti-apartheid Resolution 54 of the Church represents a 'foreign theology' and a 'new gospel'. To substantiate their statement, they cited my term of 'a gospel of compassion'. Such a gospel is, according to them, devoid of a vertical divine rootedness and is simply 'horizontal and humanistic'. My exegetical and hermeneutical research on the *Sayings Gospel Q*⁵ was deemed to be not relevant to the Christian faith. Similarly, my historical Jesus studies in which I demonstrated Jesus' compassion for the marginalised from a Christian ethical perspective, were seen as heretical. They were opposed to the idea that persons of a same-sex orientation could be seen as 'normal' and as 'Christian believers'. Ecumenical relations were disparaged as superficial and could lead to a distortion of the gospel

5. In South Africa, within the discipline of New Testament Studies, I have been the mentor and supervisor of almost all the doctorates who have produced studies on Q. See Howes (2019).

[*Ekumeniese oppervlakkigheid kan die Evangelie onherkenbaar vervorm*].

This provides an illustration of how, in the recent history of the church, conservative fundamentalists from the break-away group and others who remain part of the NHKA, specifically targeted my person, my integrity as an ordained theologian, and the authenticity of my spirituality. According to this group, 'A.G. van Aarde is a clear beacon of a theology that undermines faith' [*duidelikste baken van 'n teologie wat geloof ondergrawe*]. Recent articles by Wim Dreyer on these events (see, e.g., Dreyer 2006, 2011, 2013, 2014) only refer in passing to discussions on my publications on the church and racism and the church and sexuality. There is only a brief discussion on the charges of heresy brought forward on 16 June 2012 by Advocate Renette du Plessis on behalf of the group which later became the 'Covenant of Faith of Reformed Congregations'.

The break-away conservatives based their charges of heresy mainly on my historical Jesus book. In a particular way these charges were ironical. My book *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God* was published in 2001, but the grievances by the right-wing formulated in their *doléance* only gained momentum after our anti-apartheid declaration in 2009 and their failure in the attempt to succeed with a charge of heresy. The formal charge was grounded in their political differences disguised with 'theological' reason. During the so-called 'brotherly conversation' on 11 August 2009, which is mandated by the church Order, I suggested a course of action. I proposed that the concerns be discussed at an upcoming GCA. This involved that the GCA should decide on the legitimacy of the grievances and divergent political (theological) viewpoints of either the five theologians responsible for the anti-apartheid declaration or those of the individuals who had filed complaints of heresy against the five. This suggestion found agreement from both the complainants representing the right-wing perspective and the Executive of the GCA.

This eventually resulted in the so-called Resolution 54 according to which the GCA approved our anti-Apartheid declaration and its biblical and theological motivation without any amendments in principle with a large majority vote. This happened in 2010 and was confirmed by an extraordinary GCA in 2011, which pushed *the doléance forward to a formal schism. Ten years after the publication of Fatherless in Galilee, this book became the 'theological' raison d'être* of the existence of the 'Covenant of Faith of Reformed Congregations' [*Geloofsbond van Hervormde Gemeentes*].

At request of the Executive of the GCA, I was compelled to explain at various venues to ecclesial audiences throughout the country the 'main principles of my faith' expressed in *Fatherless in Galilee* and especially the reason why I published the book. At one of these occasions, at the initiative of the Reformed Theological College at the University of Pretoria, I addressed a large *audience* in a packed lecture hall on 31 October 2012. My academic paper was published in the

accredited journal *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Van Aarde 2013). In this paper, I addressed my position and my understanding of the ecclesiastical dispute triggered by *Fatherless in Galilee* with regard to confessional affirmations about the virginal conception of Jesus, his resurrection from the dead and his ascension to heaven. I discussed the circumstances which led to the writing of the book, the exegetical and theological insights which influenced me and my view on the continuing relevance of historical Jesus research. I emphasised the political background of the almost hysterical criticism against my book and my views on Jesus' radical inclusivity regarding gender, sexual orientation and race.

On 11 January 2025, I will be celebrating 50 years of ordination. For more than 30 years of these 50 years, my career as theologian could be characterised as that of a 'wounded and victimised minister'. What follows is a short autobiographical reflection based on the final section of my two works on *Jesus, Paul and Matthew* (2020b, 2020c) published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing (CSP) and which were awarded the Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu Prize in 2022. The volumes were dedicated to my children. This shortened version I dedicate to Prof. Wim Dreyer, the current Moderator of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa, on the occasion of his retirement as Professor in Historical Theology at our alma mater, the University of Pretoria. Through this dedication, I express my appreciation for his leadership during moments of turmoil in the recent history of the church.

Autobiographical notes

Telling my life story gives 'closure' to my academic career at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. My association with the University of Pretoria began more than 50 years ago. In 1969, I registered as a first-year theology student. Ten years later, at the age of 28, my teaching career began, first as a lecturer in Hellenistic-Greek. The following year, this was extended to also teaching Old Testament to Biblical Studies students and New Testament to Theology students. In 1984, I was appointed as Professor of New Testament Studies and served as Head of Department from 1989–99. In this, I followed in the footsteps of J.H.J.A. Greyvenstein (born 1878), the first professor to be appointed in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria in 1917. I also inherited the legacy of Albert Geyser who, also at the age of 28, succeeded Greyvenstein in 1945. In 1964, Geyser left the University of Pretoria under a cloud. He was charged with heresy. It was a politically driven bid to oust him. He was subsequently accommodated by the University of the Witwatersrand (see Van Aarde, De Villiers & Buitendag 2014; Van Aarde 2017). In the interim, before a permanent appointment was made, Sarel van Rensburg filled in. Gert Pelser, my immediate predecessor as Professor in New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria, was earmarked by the right-wing to counteract the 'liberal' influence of Geyser. However, Pelser was the one to introduce the critical theology of Rudolf Bultmann to South Africa (see Van Aarde 2023).

I was ordained in the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika in November 1974 by the Executive of the General Synod and been installed as pastor in January 1975. My journey as an ordained pastor has completed a full circle with the departure of the politically inclined right-wing clergy and their followers. It has become evident that one of the key reasons why the 'steedsHervormers' broke away was because of their understanding of the impact of my theological perspectives on the Reformed tradition in South Africa. In their formal statement of objection, they likened me to a revived Albert Geysers.

In 2016, I was invited to share my life story with a circle of theologians from the east of Pretoria who call themselves the 'Theology Cafe'. I could not tell the story myself that day at the Isabella Cake and Food Shop in Brooklyn, Pretoria. I was too emotional. I asked my friend, Piet Geysers, who had also completed his doctoral degree under my supervision, to read it on my behalf. Piet passed away on 29 August 2020. The leader, Julian Müller, asked for theological reflection on my story, but that, too, I was not able to do at the time. I will do so now. At the conclusion of my collected works, this is how I contextualise my life story theologically. It is about my own 'Emmaus journey' (Lk 24:13–35) and 'Gaza journey' (Ac 8:26–40). These are 'parabolic narratives' of gender inclusivity (the first)⁶ and the acceptance (not exclusion) of someone stigmatised with 'sexual unwholeness' (the journey of the African eunuch from Jerusalem to Gaza).⁷ When the sojourners recognised their fellow traveller, Jesus, their hearts became warm. He had opened the gospel for them (Lk 24:32). The same with me on my journey.

My journey gained momentum in 2010. As editor-in-chief of the journal, *HTS Theological Studies* and its books, the Supplement Series and HTS Religion & Society Series, I edited the historical chronicle, *100 Years of Theology at the University of Pretoria*, written by the late Professor Bart Oberholzer, previous Dean of the Faculty and Moderator of the church (Oberholzer 2010). One of our discussions was held at a restaurant on the northern slope of the Magalies Mountain in Wonderboom, Pretoria. I had known this part of the mountain intimately since childhood. I knew where to find the wild plum tree, the coconut palm, the wild medlar tree and the red milkwood. He noticed my fascination with the mountain and said: 'Son, you owe it to us to document your biography'. He did not know my entire story, but he did know some of it. I could not answer him right then. Again, a heaviness prevented me from speaking. My experiences at the Faculty of Theology from 1992 to 2005 had left their mark.

6.The two travellers from Jerusalem to Emmaus are probably a male and a female (cf. Dinkler 2017:687–707).

7.New Testament scholar Joseph Grassi (1964:464–465) recognises a parallel between this narrative and that of the journey to Emmaus. The one story is about a journey 'from Jerusalem to Emmaus' (Lk 24:13). The other is about a journey 'from Jerusalem to Gaza' (Ac 8:27). The latter is the story of an 'outcast' with multiple identities, a eunuch. Another New Testament scholar, David Hester (2005:13–14) points out the significance of both the gender and the sexuality of the eunuch character with reference to Matthew and Acts. With reference to Matthew 19:12, the eunuch points to a 'morally dubious "third type of human" embodying the worst fears of masculine vulnerability and sexual transgression'. He interprets this Jesus tradition as an 'explicit rejection of the heterosexist binary paradigm for understanding the role and importance of sex, sexuality and sexed identity in the "kingdom of heaven"' (Hester 2005:13).

From 1992 onwards, tension yet again built up in the Netherdutch Reformed Church. There had been tension previously in the 1960s. At school and later as a university student, I had been aware of it, but now, in the 1990s as a lecturer in Theology, I was more in the thick of things. The conflict was usually described as 'theological'. However, I knew in my heart of hearts that it was politically driven. The impact of Afrikaner Nationalism could be traced throughout the history of the NHKA. After the First World War, there was a renaissance. In Europe, German National Socialism grew into the Nazism of the Hitler regime. In South Africa, the bitterness that resulted from the Anglo-Boer War or the South African War of 1899–1902 with its widespread destruction of land and property, and the internment and deaths of countless women and children, was relived. That war was fought between the British Empire and the Boer Republics in the Transvaal (today Gauteng and other provinces) and the Orange Free State (today Free State province) mostly over the goldfields and the migrants who flocked to the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg area).

The ideology of nationalism that grew among the Afrikaner mirrored the European *Zeitgeist* of white supremacy, though not from the perspective of the conqueror, but of the vanquished. This fostered racist apartheid thought patterns. The post-war leaders, generals Louis Botha (1862–1919) and Jan Smuts (1870–1950), followed a reconciliatory approach towards both the British Empire and British people in South Africa. In 1948, the National Party, under the leadership of the Boer general, J.B.M. Hertzog (1866–1942), came up with an alternative approach. He was prime minister of the Union of South Africa in the period 1924–1939, and known for the phrase 'South Africa First'. This paved the way for legalising apartheid, which was duly justified theologically by some Afrikaner clergy. The apartheid ideology reached its zenith under the leadership of Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd (1901–1966), born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He became the leader of the South African National Party and served as Prime Minister 1958–1966. The Afrikaans-speaking people were politically divided. The National Party of Dr D.F. Malan (prime minister between 1948–1954), a former ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church (N.G. Kerk), opposed South Africa's participation in World War II against Hitler. He was also the first person who used the word apartheid in the South African parliament; that was on 25 May 1944. The South African Party, on the other hand, wanted South Africa to be part of the larger world, even though the British Empire ruled over a very large part of that world. Resistance against apartheid surfaced among some theologians. My predecessor in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, Albert Geysers, exposed the folly of any attempt to justify apartheid on theological grounds. This incensed many in Afrikaner and church circles.

Some decades later in 1969, among others, Albert Hertzog, son of the former Prime Minister, J.B.M Hertzog, along with Jaap Marais, a member of Parliament, broke away from the National Party to form the HNP (Reconstituted National

Party, Afrikaans: *Herstigste Nasionale Party*). Adriaan Point, a Church Historian of the NHKA was a prominent member of the Executive [*Hoofbestuur*] of the HNP. The then Prime Minister, John Vorster, had pursued a policy of rapprochement and détente with African leaders. Vorster also allowed the South African national rugby team to compete against the New Zealand All Blacks who had Maori players in their national team. The aim of the HNP was to counteract the 'liberalisation' among Afrikaner Nationalists. Though not nearly a majority in number, the right wing had a stranglehold on my church, its clergy and theologians.

My critical resistance to this force shaped my life story in the church. During the years 2000–2005, I held the position of Research Manager in the Faculty of Theology. In 2005, I was forced to take early retirement because of a health condition called hydrocephalus. Already since 1997, I had suffered severe attacks of vertigo, though the headaches had begun much earlier. The pain was often so intense that I could not engage with people. My neurosurgeon, Dr Pieter Slabbert, explained that the condition was permanent and irreversible. However, my health did stabilise after a series of operations and the attacks of vertigo disappeared. The change was brought about by the draining of brain fluid by means of a peritoneal bypass and a shunt. The pain is controlled with the aid of medication that I have been using for the past 17 years. Post-retirement, I became and still am today, a senior Research Fellow at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria. The stressful negative experiences in the church and academia undoubtedly contributed to my health problems. An example of what I experienced at the Faculty of Theology between 1992 and 2005 was the way in which fellow lecturers and some editors of the official church newspaper, *Die Hervormer*, responded to my 'social theology' and biblical exegesis. A former Moderator of the church and Dean of the Faculty of Theology (Section A), J.P. Oberholzer and his successor as Dean, J.H. Koekemoer, directly blamed me and my theology for the increasing tension between the church leadership and the faculty.

Before the split, while the right-wing political group were still wielding some power, the national news reported that the *moderation* of my church were not willing to denounce apartheid as 'sin' before an international ecumenical delegation. The church was willing to accept the consequences of international isolation. At that time, in 2009, I realised that this no longer reflected the heart of the church. It rather amounted to 'church capture' by right-wing elements. I took the initiative, along with four theologians of the church, Johan Buitendag, Yolanda Dreyer, James Alfred Loader and Ernest van Eck, to release the press statement, 'Apartheid in church and politics' on 10 March 2009. We declared that apartheid was sin, both in essence and in its consequences. Any attempt at a theological justification of apartheid is misguided. The statement called on the church to admit that it had been wrong to have supported apartheid for so many years on the basis of Scripture (see Van Eck 2017). For a year

and a half after that, the five of us were not popular. Even like-minded people and friends reproached us that it was too much too soon. 'The church was not ready'. We were formally charged in terms of the Church Order by right-wing foes. However, at the 69th GCA our statement was turned into Resolution 54 which was passed with a substantial majority.

The church's official stance is now that apartheid cannot be accepted or justified by Christian believers because it was based on the premise of inequality and, therefore, impedes the ministry of reconciliation in Christ. Apartheid allocated privileges to white people at the expense of black people and perpetrated injustice and oppression. This injustice included the forced removal of people from specific areas, which destroyed the lives and livelihood of countless individuals and families. Apartheid obscured the image of God in people and saddens the Holy Spirit. This was a final catalyst for the split since 2011 when the politically right-wing faction formally broke away from the church.

The essence of my religiosity is my experience that the divine eternity [*pneuma*], in German *Unendlichkeit*, is intertwined with the reality of entrapment in the finite [*sarks*], in German *Endlichkeit und Zeitlichkeit*. The everlasting love of God is infused into a dying existence in which loyalties to religion and future expectations are constantly changing and finally fading (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). Peter Berger (1969a) in his book, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Dutch title [1969b]: *Er zijn nog altijd engelen*) gave me language: 'Before anything, before any decision is made, I first want to speak to the angels'. Since I, as a child, first became aware of God, God has been there for me. I have continued to believe this, even when I thought: This is the end of me! Therefore, I lift the cup and drink a toast to God (Ps 116:10–13).

Many theologians relate their life story of transition from a naive faith, to critical thinking, to a post-critical naiveté as jarring or even traumatic. For me, Karl Barth's view that the Bible is, without question, both word of human beings and word of God, was part of my earliest youth experience in the church. Later, my first academic thesis for a degree in divinity was form-critical, about which beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount could be ascribed to Jesus and which ones not (Van Aarde [1974] 1978).

Even as a so-called 'liberal theologian' today, I treasure my internalisation of orthodox creedal Christianity that was taught to me by three very special elders in catechesis classes. In the first years of formal theological studies, I cannot remember the professor in Systematic Theology (then called Dogmatics) teaching me anything new. I do remember his lectures in Christian Ethics with reference to the Ten Commandments and the 'Our Father' prayer. Had he shown why these two codes (the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer) were so important to formative Christianity as building blocks for their understanding of Jesus' ethics, it would have become a living ethics for me rather than just a set of rules.

Today I know that Clement of Alexandria (150–250 CE), from the Catechetical School of Alexandria, who became a convert to Christianity and was well educated in classical Greek philosophy and literature, was the first person who interpreted the ‘Our Father’ prayer as a guideline for Christian ethics (cf. González 2020). Calvin seems to have gained this valuable understanding from Clement.

Calvin’s *Institutions* was prescribed as self-study material in my fourth year. This was pure pleasure. However, in that same year I was enticed by an offer to become a lecturer in Greek on condition that I discontinue my theology studies. The offer came from Dr At Erasmus who was not partial to the church, especially after the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk) rejected the professor of Greek, C.W. Pistorius on account of his criticism of apartheid. I was tempted. Though I loved Calvin’s theology, I did not appreciate his style and the language he used against his ecclesial and philosophical opponents. I used this as an excuse to depart from Theology. However, Jimmie Loader, professor in Semitic Languages (later my mentor in postgraduate Aramaic studies and supervisor of my MA in Semitic Languages), convinced me not to abandon my ambition to become a minister of religion. For this, I will be forever grateful to Jimmie. He pointed out that Martin Luther used even harsher language than Calvin when confronting his opponents.

In 2011, on my sixtieth birthday, I was presented with a *Festschrift*. Yolanda Dreyer and Ernest van Eck (my successor at the University of Pretoria as Professor in New Testament Studies, later deputy-dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria and currently principle of the John Knox College at the University of Toronto) were the editors (Van Eck & Dreyer 2011). Both, Ernest and Yolanda completed a doctoral thesis in New Testament Studies under my supervision. In the *Festschrift*, Gerda de Villiers, lecturer in the Department of Old Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria, discusses my ‘theological and hermeneutical contribution to the South African scene’ (see De Villiers 2011). Another long-standing friend, Glenna Jackson, Professor at the Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, contributed with an article entitled ‘Seeing the world through the eyes of Andries van Aarde’s radical inclusivity’ (Jackson 2011). At the presentation of the *Festschrift*, Allan Boesak spoke on behalf of colleagues and friends. His contribution to the *Festschrift* was a reflection on my book *Fatherless in Galilee* from a black liberation theology perspective. The title of the essay is ‘The divine favour of the unworthy: When the Fatherless Son meets the Black Messiah’ (see Boesak 2011). Lina Spies, emerita professor in the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at the Stellenbosch University, an eminent Afrikaans poet, presented the commemoration lecture. In it, she recounted her spiritual journey as a ‘religious seeker’ (see Spies 2012:2–27). She also dedicated a poem to me. The poem was originally published in Afrikaans and later translated into English by Yolanda Dreyer for the purposes of *Festschrift*. Lina Spies refers to the poem as an illustration of how my understanding of Jesus touched the lives of others on their

own spiritual journey (see Spies 2011:1). The poem, ‘*Ontdaan*’ or ‘Unsettled’ represents probably the most accurate and condensed account of my construction of the historical Jesus, that extraordinary man from Galilee.

My theology revolves around the figure of Jesus. For me, in the words of Friedrich Schleiermacher (see Hertel 1965:205–206) Jesus is the *Urbild* [archetype] and the *Vorbild* [prototype] of existence. His was a real *consciousness of God* [Friedrich Schleiermacher [1821–1822] [1830–1831] 1999]. I see an essential relationship between the historical and the risen Jesus (Rudolf Bultmann [1929] [1933b] 1993:88–213). El Greco’s art work ‘*Cristo abrazado a la Cruz*’ [Christ carrying the cross], painted circa 1600–1608, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York shows this. The painting emphasises paradox: ecstasy in suffering, dying to be alive to God, crucifixion as the gateway to resurrection. Brutal imperial power mocks Jesus as ‘king’. They clothe him with a purple robe. They spit on him. They ridicule him, falling on their knees to ‘pay homage’ to him (Mk 15:16–20). For his thirst they offer him wine mixed with myrrh (Mk 15:23), only to intensify his thirst. They refuse him water. Even in the triumph of being alive to God, the taste of vinegar will remain in the life of a Jesus-follower. As with the historical Jesus, the taste of vinegar remains, also with me. What does this existentially mean to me. To answer concisely: the risen Jesus is the fountain of my life. Resurrection is the metaphor for being crucified with Jesus.⁸ In the words of the poet, Robert Bridges, based on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach: ‘soar to uncreated light’ and ‘soaring, dying round Thy throne, through the way where hope is guiding, striving still to truth unknown’.⁹

It is to rise above everyday life to an altered state of religious consciousness and imagination. This is my experience in life since the formation of my spirituality at a very early age. During my whole life I have been comforted by knowing that God has cared during all these years and is still caring.

Since my high school days and throughout my life I have attended worship services regularly. I was the only one in my family to do so. On my own, Sunday after Sunday, I would walk to church as a child, sometimes running when it began to rain. The church was about 5 km from my parental home. During my last school year, I was elected as deacon. During my first four years at university, I served as sexton. My early childhood, teenage years, and early adult years were marked by poverty. Both our parents were unskilled. For the most part, there was no car or bicycle, no refrigerator or hot water

8. Roman 6:2–4: οἵτινες ἀπεθάνομεν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, πῶς ἐτι ζήσομεν ἐν αὐτῇ; ἢ ἀγνοεῖτε ὅτι οἱ δοῦλοι ἐβαπτίσθημεν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ἐβαπτίσθημεν; συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον, ἵνα ὡς περὶ ἠνέβρη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ Πατρὸς, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν [We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life – New International Version].

9. Bach’s ([1716] [1723] 1999) cantata ‘Herz und Mund und Leben’ (BWV 147 [1716] 1723) was based on the lyrics of Martin Janus (1620 – circa 1682), as arranged by Myra Hess (1890–1965) and rewritten by the poet Robert Bridges (1844–1930) with reference to Johann Scop’s composition (1642) ‘Jesus, meiner Seelen Wonne’, on which Bach based his composition.

from a tap. Often there was uncertainty as to whether there would be sufficient food for the day. Newspaper supplemented the scrap of blanket during the cold winter. The night car came around to service the outhouse. The Chinese brothers, Foley & Law, came by with their mule wagon to sell groceries, flour and soap. In a booklet, they kept record of the debt of the clients to be paid on the day of reckoning at the end of the month.

Our home was devoid of books. The first book I owned was a Bible given to the Sunday school children when our congregation Noordelike Pretoria church celebrated its 25th birthday. This Bible is still precious to me today. The inscription was by the minister, A.J.G. Oosthuizen – a man who radically changed my life after 1967 – however, not for the good. He received an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Pretoria on 18 March 1967, 4 days before my father's 53rd birthday. My mother, Tienie (M.C.) Barnard (23 September 1923 – 14 October 1986), was a gentle soul whose body showed signs of the hardship she endured. I am the middle child of 10. Three sisters and I are the only remaining siblings. My father's older brother, Andries Gideon, died as baby because of fever. When my father was 6 months old, his father died in a hunting accident. He was given into the care of an unknown uncle from the Springbok Flats (now in the Limpopo province, between Pretoria and Polokwane) who had a nomadic lifestyle. He was baptised in an Anglican Church in Pietersburg (now Polokwane). The Afrikaans church had refused to baptise the baby because there were 'no covenantal parents' who could make the baptismal promise. The Anglican priest, who knew nothing of the nomad child or his uncle, was prepared to baptise the baby.

During the years of the Great Depression in the 1930s, my father worked as an 'orange picker' in the orchards on a farm in Letsitele, in what is today the Limpopo province. The farm was the property of Eddie Hamman, Rector of the University of Pretoria from 1970 to 1981. I have in my possession a testimonial he had written for my father, recommending him to other farmers as a reliable 'orange picker'. At the age of 20, my father began working for the South African Railways where he was employed for 40 years. In 1973, he was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer.

My father's grandmother, Adriana Martha van Aarde (1819–1853), was also grandmother to Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870–1950), who served as Prime Minister of South Africa from 1919–1924 and again from 1939–1948. Jan Smuts's sister was also named Adriana Martha (1884–1952), unmarried and most of her adult life major of the town Hermanus in the Western Cape (see Joubert 2023:113).¹⁰ Smuts's great-grandfather was Jacobus van Aarde (born on 15 May 1752). My grandfather's name was also Johannes Jacobus van Aarde (1883–1914). Smuts studied at Christ College at the University of Cambridge. After completion of his law studies, he was offered a professorship there, but did not accept. He served

10. Joubert's 'film biography' on the life of Jan Smuts begins with a Smuts' citation: 'Let us support each other on the journey of our life; leave the past behind and extend a hand of friendship to others ...' [authors translation].

as Chancellor of Cambridge University in 1948, and was 'Ceremonial' Rector of the St. Andrews University in Scotland from 1931–1934. He was Chancellor of the University of Cape Town from 1936–1950.

Jan Smuts was a general during the Boer War and later served as Field Marshal in the British army. He also served in the British War Cabinet during both the First and Second World Wars. Smuts participated in the establishment of the British Commonwealth of Nations and of the United Nations. In 1910, Smuts took the initiative to procure legal recognition for the University of Pretoria. In 1930, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria.¹¹ A bronze statue of Jan Smuts can be found among the statues of eminent leaders in Parliament Square, Westminster, London. He was honoured in this way as an international statesman and for his academic contribution to the United Kingdom. He was the only Commonwealth leader awarded this honour. In 2007, a statue of Nelson Mandela was also unveiled there. Mandela stands there among General Jan Smuts, Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln. Jan Smuts is known for his philosophy of holism: the parts represent the whole, but retain their own identity; they recognise the identities of the other parts in the whole. This goes to radical inclusivity and a radical respect for the other (see Smuts [1926] 2013).¹²

Smuts and my father bore the same first names, Jan Christiaan. The correct original spelling is actually Johann Christian and their forefather's surname was Tafel (later spelled as Davel) and he came from Bautzen, Saxony in Germany to South Africa in the 1800s. Only one male with the name Van Aarde arrived from the Netherlands in South Africa back in the day. He was Hendrik van Aarde, a Protestant teacher from Antwerp. Many Protestants emigrated to the Cape of Good Hope in order to flee religious persecution. The ships of the Dutch East India Company [*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* {VOC}] regularly passed by the Cape and provided passage. Hendrik van Aarde's eldest son, Johannes (1724–1792), my father's great-grandfather, remained in the Western Cape and farmed in the Swartland area of Riebeeck West. At the time of his death the Dutch East India Company owed him 137 329 Dutch Guilder and he owned 4 farms and 57 slaves. He was a wealthy man. Is this something that I should be ashamed of today? Feminist scholar Luise Schottroff refers to the Berkley New Testament scholar Antoinette Clark Wire's experience when she came across the 1754 will of her American 'forefather' in which he bequeathed 'ten young negros' and 'my great Bible and all my law books' to his son. Wire responded:

What do I do with such a heritage? Change my name? Hide this page and read the rest to my grandson? But what is shameful should be heard. This is family history, mine and that of others

11. Jan Smuts was the first person at the University of Pretoria who was honoured with an honorary doctorate in 1930. In 1945, my predecessor Professor Albert Geyser was the first student at the University of Pretoria who obtained a doctoral degree (see ed. Duncan 2017:88).

12. Albert Einstein, after he studied Smuts's book, he said that 'two mental constructs will direct human thinking in the next millennium, his own mental construct of relativity and Smuts' of holism. In the work of Smuts he saw a clear blueprint of much of his own life, work and personality' Amazon's endorsement on the 2013 cover text of Holism and evolution).

descended from those who were enslaved, and I must go through it rather than around it. Likewise, Paul and the enslaved people whose lives shaped his writings are our collective family history. The shame and the glory are tangled, and this 'mess of pottage' is our precious heritage. (Schottroff [1985] 1999:275–287)

My father's grandfather, Abraham Matthys – the son of Jacobus van Aarde, the great-grandfather of Jan Smuts – was not a Voortrekker (Afrikaner pioneers who trekked to the North to escape British rule). During the time of the Great Trek (1835–1846) he established himself in Inyanga in what was later known as Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) – a self-governing British Crown Colony. He was a big game hunter and dealer in ivory (see Prinsloo 2003:56–83).¹³ He had a son, Johannes Jacobus, born 4 July 1883. This son had two sons, the eldest, Andries Gideon, who died of fever as 9-month-old baby and my father, born 22 March 1914. My grandfather was killed in a hunting accident on 13 September 1914, when my father was 6 months old. This was told to me much later by an old farm labourer who had accompanied my grandfather and his neighbour on the hunt. The neighbour fell, his gun went off, and my grandfather was killed by the shot. Shortly thereafter, my grandmother Magdalena Maria married an Englishman (unknown to us) and left my father in the care of a nomadic uncle, a single man from the Springbok Flats. She disappeared to the Johannesburg Goldfields. As a young child, I remember an occasion when an English-speaking woman from Brixton, Johannesburg, arrived at our house and was introduced as my 'grandmother'. My father's nickname was Chrisjan and one of my older brothers who has since passed away, also carried the name Johan Christiaan.

My father was an unskilled labourer. He did the same work as the black people. They were his friends. They were rail car examiners at the Capital Park railway yards in the Pretoria Moot. I never heard him utter a racist word. His endless grievances against our local pastor, who was also the Moderator of the church, remain engraved in my memory. On the political front, our pastor, the donor of my first Bible, as Moderator of the church had a fair amount of influence. A Consultation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) at Cottesloe in Johannesburg was held in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960. The objective of the Consultation that took place in December 1960 was to meet with member churches in South Africa. Together the representatives of the World Council and the South African member churches would seek divine guidance in order to come to an understanding of the complex problems in South Africa. The outcome was a joint statement that no one who believes in Jesus Christ may be excluded from any church based on race. The spiritual unity among people who are in Christ, should find visible expression in acts of common worship and witness, and in fellowship and consultation on matters of common concern.

13. Prinsloo (2003:56) refers to the 'Van Aardes' as the 'first permanent inhabitants [intrekkers] north of the Soutpansberg ... the Van Aardes from the farms Parma and Ratho'.

The Prime Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, instigated by our local pastor, Reverend Andries Oosthuizen and other church leaders, stopped the WCC Cottesloe Statement that referred to the unacceptability of apartheid. The failure of the Cottesloe Consultation in December 1960 energised the nationalist clergy in my church, but that was the beginning of our ecumenical isolation. It was therefore a great joy to me, many years later, to be instrumental in gathering the leadership of the Faith & Order Commission of the WCC, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the South African Council of Churches, the Chancellor of the University of Pretoria, and the Dean of the Faculty of Theology together to commemorate Youth Day on 16 June 2017 in the Senate Hall of the University of Pretoria on the occasion of the centennial celebration of the Faculty of Theology. A personal letter from the General Secretary of the WCC, Dr Olav Tveit (see Van Eck 2017) was read during the celebration. In it, he expressed his joy that the schism because of the failure of the Cottesloe Consultation in the 1960s could be healed in this way in 2017. To an extent, this event completed the circle of my life story with the church.

However, I will never forget the personal pain of having become 'fatherless' in the 1960s because of that schism. This experience was the inspiration for my book *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus Child of God* (2001). My father left the church when the NHKA took the side of Adriaan Pont against Albert Geyser. My father was shocked and angry when, in 1967, I decided not to study law, but to study theology instead. I was the first in our family to go to university. During my final school year, I had to leave home because of conflict with my father. He was concerned that I would not be 'strong enough' to resist the influence of the 'nationalist and racist' professors at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria. He did concede, though, that there were also theologians at the same faculty who strongly resisted the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism (esp. see Van Aarde 2017). He was particularly worried about the influence of Adriaan Pont who was known for his overt attempts to win theological students over to his right-wing politics. Pont had been the instigator of the 'heresy' charges against Albert Geyser. Probably my father thought that law studies would enable me, like Jan Smuts, to exert some influence on the transformation of the politics of the day. In his eyes, the actions of the local pastor compromised the integrity of the church as an institution. In addition, he probably regarded my decision to study theology as a 'direct' rejection of him as person.

After having completed my school education, I worked long hours at Iscor, a steel company. Later, I worked for a bus company to pay for my tuition and help to support my mother. I began work between 03:00 and 04:00 and literally burnt the candle at both ends. In my third year, I was assistant to the professor in Greek, C.W. Pistorius. For the last 3 of the 6 years of study, I was also a research assistant to Professors Andrie du Toit and Gert Pelsler at the University of Pretoria and Willem Vorster at the University of South Africa. During the first year of my studies, residence culture was an unpleasant shock, even to the extent that my emotional

identity was threatened. I left the student residence as soon as I could and went to live in the basement of the house of an elderly couple in Riviera, Pretoria.

After retirement, my parents lived on a piece of land near Vaalwater, a small town on the Mokolo River in the Limpopo province, which they could buy from the pension money my father had received from the railway company. A month before his death, as a reconciliatory gesture, he requested to hear me preach. He listened from the vestry where he was attended to by paramedics and my mother. During the service, he slipped into a coma. On 16 December 1974, my friend, Christo van der Merwe and I, jointly conducted a worship service for the Day of the Covenant (now Day of Reconciliation) at the Bulge River grounds in the north of the country. After the service, we went together to visit my parents. My father was still in a coma. When I arrived home later that evening, my mother called to inform me that my father had died. My friend Christo conducted the funeral service at Vaalwater. Both my parents are buried in Vaalwater. My grandfather Johannes Jacobus and the little boy Andries Gideon were also buried in that area along the Limpopo River.

When I was a student, there was a rugby after-party at the Fountains Circle, a resort in Pretoria. A first-year theology student was too intoxicated to find his way back to residence. I was the one to bring him back. Years later in 1992, he, as the pastor of a church, was the one to bring an official charge of heresy against me. This was the beginning of decades of 'more of the same'. In 1998, the church council of the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), Witbank, with the support of the Curatorium of the N.G. Kerk, attempted to have my professorship suspended because of my views on the historical Jesus. In 2017–2019, it has been the church council of the NHKA congregation of Standerton that formally charged me. Their charge of heresy related to the question whether Jesus is 'eternally God' and my view on myths in the Bible. Once I was charged because I had compared Satan with the holes in a Swiss cheese. The right-wing group, the '*steedsHervormers*', embarked on a *doléance*. Their grievances were, among others, about my views on the virgin conception and the resurrection of Jesus.

For more than two decades, 1992–2013, at almost every official meeting of the Executive of the church I was summoned for a disciplinary hearing. On one occasion, because of an almost endless agenda, I had to wait outside the council chamber at demand of the Executive till they were ready to begin my disciplinary hearing. At 13:30, I was summoned to enter. These hearings seemed not to end. On 06 June 2019, the Executive again had to take note of the ongoing charges by the church council of Standerton and they officially informed me about it on 14 June 2019 – the very day when I was busy writing the autobiographical notes as the last chapter of my two-volume CSP books. At one GCA's meeting, there was an attempt from the right wing to get me excommunicated. The attempt failed.

The GCA appointed a committee to investigate, but it produced no results. The convenor was a theologian who had completed his doctoral studies on the historical Jesus under my supervision. The process was utterly exasperating to me, given my rather tight work schedule. I was expected to travel across the country, from Cape province in the south, to Limpopo province in the north and to Mpumalanga province in the east, to meet with the people and discuss their concerns.

The last national GCA I attended was particularly traumatic. It was in September 2013. Yet again, charges were unexpectedly brought against me from the floor. The accuser was a former Moderator of the church whose *Doktorvater* I had been in every sense of the word. It was this same person who had headed up the committee that investigated my theological convictions, but had come up with nothing. I experienced this last event during my last attendance of a GCA as an *et tu Brute* suffering. Only in the aftermath of the GCA meeting could I gain the necessary insight into what had transpired. Only then could I experience something similar to the travellers to Emmaus and the African slave who journeyed back to Africa. In spite of it all, they were filled with joy when they recognised how the Spirit of God was at work in their lives. It was the Spirit who revealed to them the meaningfulness of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. Only then was I able to drink a toast to God and cross the Rubicon, never to return. Only then, could I see the bigger picture, the tangible results of the contributions that like-minded theological colleagues and I had made over the years. The NHKA finally rejected racism and apartheid, rejected homophobia against sexual minorities, and decided to re-join the international ecumenical movements.

My mission in life has always been to raise awareness – at the university, in churches and in society – of the gospel message of unconditional acceptance and inclusion, also of people who have been and still are disadvantaged because of gender, sexual orientation or race. Conversion to God and the transformation of our world are two sides of the same coin, to my mind. Both manifest in a life of radical inclusivity. My understanding of the Bible is multidimensional: it is the meditative book of believers, the book of authority for the Christian faith community and the book that is researched by theologians. These three facets overlap. I share Rudolf Bultmann's view that robust historical criticism brings faith (undivided loyalty to God and Jesus Christ) into sharp relief. It fosters my coming into unison [*einheimisch*] with the Jesus narrative in the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament and in any text, artwork, music or film originating from whatever religion or spirituality.

Johann Sebastian Bach's cantata '*Herz und Mund und Leben*', puts this spirit into words. It articulates my own desire to rise above earthly limitations of being, ensnared in a world that is often hell rather than heaven; soaring

(from the 'Old French' word *escorer*) to high plains of imagination, thought and feeling; the heart and soul that struggles in a world often overshadowed by darkness and longing, aspiring to be in unison with divine light already created, but often not yet seen. It is a song of impassion (from the Latin word *impassionare*), a song that stirs a longing for wisdom, justice and mercy, to receive and also to share. As the song rings forth, I hark (from the Middle English word *herkien*) and return to where I began. This source is my confiding (from the Latin word *confidere*), that is to share with everyone a secret, namely the truth that has already gained trust, Jesus of Nazareth who unlocked for believers the gateway to an unwavering connection with God. In the most fair, beautiful, prejudiced and promising way, Jesu, joy of my life rekindles the certainty that God will never let you down – even if the joy is yet to come. Bach's ([1716] [1723] 1999) cantata about the 'heart, mouth and life' of Jesus sings my life story and theology:

*Jesu, joy of [one's] desiring,
Holy wisdom, love most bright;
Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring
Soar to uncreated light.*

*Word of God, our flesh that fashioned,
With the fire of life impassioned,
Striving still to truth unknown.
Soaring, dying round Thy throne.*

*Through the way where hope is guiding,
Hark, what peaceful music rings;
Where the flock, in Thee confiding,
Drink of joy from deathless springs.*

*Theirs is beauty's fairest pleasure;
Theirs is wisdom's holiest treasure.
Thou dost ever lead Thine own
In the love of joys unknown.*

Acknowledgements

Single Blind Peer Review

The identity of the author was known to the reviewers from the outset, and a single blind peer-review process was followed for this article. The editor agreed to the exception to the journal's current policy of a double-blind peer-review process. The editor confirms the originality of the research recorded in the article and that it contributed to the production of new knowledge in the field of theology and gender studies.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

A.G.v.A. is the sole author of this research article

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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