


Reformed spirituality and the spirit of reconciliation: A personal journey

**Author:**Piet Meiring¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Science of Religion and Missiology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Piet Meiring,
pgjmeiring@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 15 Feb. 2018

Accepted: 18 July 2018

Published: 31 Oct. 2018

How to cite this article:

Meiring, P., 2018, 'Reformed spirituality and the spirit of reconciliation: A personal journey', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(4), a4934. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i4.4934>

Copyright:

© 2018. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The article represents auto-ethnographical (narrative) reflections about the author's journey towards reconciling diversity with the advent of democracy in South Africa. The author recounts aspects of his participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It focuses on aspects of Reformed theology and spirituality as instruments for reconciling diversity. Local and international theologians opposed apartheid, calling it an unjust and indefensible political system, using their Reformed conviction, often applying the very same notions and principles. The article discusses the opposition to apartheid in the Reformed world, which culminated during the Ottawa meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 when apartheid was denounced as a 'sin and a heresy' – a legitimate cause for a *Status Confessionis* in a classical Reformed manner. The article demonstrates the way in which the TRC took note of all of this and includes testimonies of Reformed theologians and leaders who opposed apartheid, often paying a costly price.

Introduction: A personal reflection on a journey

I was sitting in my office at the Faculty of Theology, in January 1996, when the telephone rang. Answering, I heard the famous voice:

Are you sitting down? This is Desmond speaking. Congratulations! The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is, as you know, in the process of being appointed. Your name has been circulated and has been handed to President Mandela. He approves, and you are to join us on the TRC.

I was flabbergasted, not knowing how to respond. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was very much in the news at the time, and heatedly discussed. Would it work? Wasn't it a pipe dream? How would the people of South Africa react to the findings of such a commission?

Desmond Tutu must have heard the hesitation in my voice:

Listen, I am still the Archbishop of Cape Town, and I speak for the Lord God. And the Lord says you *have* to come – but you have three days to decide!

I immediately rushed to the Dean at the time, Professor Riepies Prinsloo's office, and together we made our way to the then vice chancellor of the university. Fortunately, Professor Flip Smit was able to see us. Both Smit and Prinsloo encouraged me to accept the call. They argued that it could be considered as the university's contribution to the TRC process (Meiring 1999:9). Thus started my journey with my fellow members of the TRC through the often painful history of South Africa to the present, trying to understand the challenges and the hopes of the future.

This is a rather personal introduction. However, writing about spirituality entails personal reflection and remarks. To speak meaningfully about Reformed spirituality and the spirit of reconciliation entails sharing some of my experiences as a Reformed pastor and theologian *en route*.

Looking back at history, it was necessary at the time that the TRC needed to be as representative of the South African community as possible. The different political parties and different racial, language and religious groups needed to be represented. I was there, on behalf of the Afrikaans-speaking Reformed community. From time to time, the Arch (as we had started to call Desmond Tutu) would turn to me, in a meeting or in private: 'Now, you are the Dutch Reformed minister. What is your take on all of this?' Indeed, did my Reformed spirituality have anything to contribute to the process of truth and reconciliation?

Note: Prof. Dr Piet Meiring is emeritus-professor of the Department of Science of Religion and Missiology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria. This article represents a reworked version of a presentation made at the Faculty of Theology, Centenary Conference that took place from 05 - 06 April 2017.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Spirituality

To be able to do this, it is necessary firstly to provide my understanding of 'spirituality'. Spirituality is a diverse and multifaceted notion: 'It appears that spirituality is one of those subjects whose meaning everyone claims to know until they have to define it' (Sheldrake 2000:21). Feminist theologian of praxis, Denise Ackermann (2009), too has emphasised the myriad ways to explain what is meant by 'Christian spirituality', ranging from the broadest understanding, namely that Christian spirituality embraces all of life, to the narrower understanding, that spirituality refers specifically to prayer and contemplation:

My understanding is that Christian spirituality is about a living relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, lived out in the community of believers and in the world. Spirituality draws on and is formed out of prayer, practical Christianity and theology ... [I]n its contextual and cultural particularity, spirituality is no longer viewed as abstract, spiritual theology but as a dynamic, central ingredient for the life of the faithful. (p. 28)

Ackermann is an ordained priest in the Anglican Church. Her wide experience in the South African ecumenical community and her years of dialogue with Reformed theologians as well as teaching theology at the Seminary in Stellenbosch means I can appropriate her definition of Christian spirituality for the Reformed tradition. This definition focuses on a dynamic relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that is lived out in the community of believers as well as in the world. I am of the opinion that John Calvin in Geneva, the man who imprinted on his seal a burning heart in his hand offered to God, would have approved.

Embarrassment and encouragement

I found my position as Reformed pastor, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), embarrassing from time to time. For many years the DRC – my church denomination – not only approved of apartheid, but asked for it! Many of the atrocities of the past, the shocking and very painful events and episodes that were to be brought to the TRC's attention, were perpetrated by members of Reformed Churches in the South African context. Through the years, the church enthusiastically accepted the National Party government's legislation and practice of what was euphemistically called 'separate development'. The DRC, like the other Reformed Churches, provided an argument for apartheid, creating a 'Theology of Apartheid', basing their arguments on the theology of Abraham Kuyper and other Reformed thinkers, as well as freely using Reformed notions and principles to underpin their arguments (cf. Fourie 2011:228–237).¹ Two early professors at the Faculty of Theology, E.P. Groenewald and A.B. du Preez, were heavily involved in this.

1. In this regard, Fourie (2011:228–237) refers to the notions, 'kingdom of God', 'covenant and federal theologies', 'theocratic ideals', claims to be 'a prophetic church' as well as 'religion and comprehensive philosophical worldviews'.

Fortunately, quite ironically, a growing number of Reformed church leaders and theologians – local as well as from abroad – opposed apartheid, calling it an unjust and indefensible political system, using their Reformed conviction, often applying the very same notions and principles. In the Reformed world, opposition to apartheid grew steadily through the years, climaxing when at the Ottawa meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1982) apartheid was denounced as a 'sin and a heresy', a legitimate cause for a *Status Confessionis*, in a classical Reformed manner (Fourie 2011:228).

The TRC took note of all of this, also of the testimonies of Reformed theologians and leaders, who did oppose apartheid, often paying a price for their convictions. Ben Marais, professor at the Faculty of Theology who had voiced his strong opposition against the theology of apartheid since 1948 was marginalised and criticised; Beyers Naudé was banned for his part in the struggle and Johan Heyns, also from the Faculty of Theology, was assassinated. The role played by others, such as Allan Boesak, Sam Buti, David Bosch and Nico Smith, was placed on record as well. Various statements and publications from the Dutch Reformed family, calling for an end to apartheid and for reconciliation and justice in our land, were mentioned, namely the Reformation Day Witness,² the publication of the book *Stormkompas* (Smith, O'Brien Geldenhuys & Meiring 1981), the Open Letter from 123 ministers (cf. Bosch, König & Nicol 1982:13–20) and above all the Confession of Belhar (cf. Naudé 2010:219–223). Willie Jonker's (1998:192–218) apology for apartheid and the DRC's subsequent confession that the church's theology of apartheid indeed amounted to a sin and a heresy were tabled as well. All of this made it easier for me to be the Reformed *dominee* (minister) on the Commission.

A secular versus a religious process

Within the first weeks of the TRC process, a heated debate ensued among the commissioners, concerning the way in which Tutu conducted the victims' hearings. Tutu unashamedly presented himself as a religious leader. He wore his archbishop's cassock. Every hearing was opened with prayer and with the singing of hymns. This was not to the liking of some of Tutu's colleagues. The TRC process was a secular process, not a religious event, they contended. The Commission was installed not by a religious body but by an act of Parliament. And Tutu was not acting as the Archbishop but as chair of a government-appointed institution.

At the first Johannesburg hearing (29 April 1996 – 03 May 1996), things came to a head when Fazel Randera, chief of the local office, at the onset of proceedings on the first day, appealed to Tutu to refrain from his religious handling (prayer and the singing of hymns) of the event. It was suggested that if Tutu wanted to open the hearing in a solemn fashion, that he should allow a minute for meditation, as was

2. *Die Kerkbode*, October 1980, p. 1.

the current practice in Parliament. Tutu accepted the ruling and started the proceedings by asking for a moment of quiet meditation. The first witness was sworn in, ready to tell her story. But Tutu, to everyone's discomfort, could not bring himself to go ahead. He shifted his papers on the table, and himself in his chair, and then almost in despair looked at the audience and said, 'No! This is no way to begin. Close your eyes, we *will* pray'. After a heartfelt prayer to God to lead us in our quest for truth and to sustain the victims and their families during the days to come, he smiled and intoned a hymn. The audience rose and sang from their hearts. The matter was settled. Tutu's critics, among them Rander, accepted the fact that for the audience as well as for the South African community, the vast majority of whom saw themselves as religious, it was proper to conduct the business of the TRC *coram Deo*. The commissioners realised that in the South African context the issues of justice and reconciliation, of truth, forgiveness and healing were very much intertwined with religious understanding and therefore that it would be impossible to conduct the process in a 'secular' way.

I was of the opinion that Tutu's argument had merit and I silently applauded Tutu's conduct. From a Reformed perspective, separating the world's 'secular' and 'religious' spheres was improper as it is the conviction that the whole world belongs to God. In the Reformed tradition, spirituality is not confined to the domain of the church or family – and personal devotions, leaving the rest of the world to its own evil devices. Reformed spirituality entails that all of life should be lived in submission to the Lordship of Christ. Tutu merely seemed to be walking in the footsteps of John Calvin. I was not the only one to appreciate Tutu's approach. Jorge Heine, Chilean ambassador to South Africa, was present at the Johannesburg hearing. His observation was later reported in a local newspaper:

Sitting at the hearings held at the Central Methodist Church in downtown Johannesburg ... watching archbishop Desmond Tutu say a prayer ... I could not help but reflect that this would have been unthinkable in many countries where the separation of church and state is taken seriously. Yet it seems to have worked in South Africa, where there is a great religious diversity but where the strongly Christian subtext of repentance and forgiveness that pervades the Commission's proceedings conveys the right message as to what reconciliation is all about. It manages to put at ease humble, profoundly decent South Africans who had been offered, often for the first time, the opportunity to state their case. (cf. Meiring 2005:171)³

This does not mean that the TRC excluded South Africans of other religious persuasions. The vast majority of South Africans do belong to the Christian faith, but strong and influential minorities of Muslims, Hindus, Jews, African Traditionalists, et al. exist in the country. Many of them have, in the past, suffered not only from the pain and the injustices of apartheid but also have had to find themselves marginalised and alienated in what was for centuries regarded as a 'Christian country'. On many occasions, Tutu would invite spokespersons of these communities to join in the debate in

3. *The Sunday Independent*, 02 August 1988.

order to refer to the deepest sources of *their* religious traditions and beliefs, not only to find a *modus operandi* for the process but also to help the TRC to define the true meaning of reconciliation as well.

Defining reconciliation

It was an important aspect of the process to discern the nature and content of the notion 'reconciliation'. What did it really mean? Different groups had different concerns or definitions when it comes to 'reconciliation'. There were lawyers and politicians, on the one hand, who warned against being too starry-eyed when reconciliation was on the agenda (cf. Meiring 2013:3). They argued that when the dust settled in the streets, and the shooting has ceased and people let go of one another's throats, one should be grateful, they argued. That was enough and should be considered as reconciliation (cf. Meiring 2013:3). In the context of the moment that might often have been as far as one might expect to go. Desmond Tutu and the *baruti* [pastors] who served on the TRC were in favour of a grander definition of reconciliation (cf. Meiring 2013:3). For them, the notion of 'reconciliation' was clothed in religious terminology (cf. Meiring 2013:3). Tutu often referred to the apostle Paul's words, found in 2 Corinthians 5:18:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

In my opinion, this is the heart of Reformed Spirituality, namely conciliation by God through Jesus Christ. In the classical statements of the Reformed faith, much attention is given to this. In developing a theology of reconciliation, we have a unique contribution to make. That is, indeed, what the TRC in its final Report asked the faith communities to do, to help define and promote the concept of reconciliation.⁴

In more recent times, one of the most eloquent Reformed statements in this regard comes from the Confession of Belhar. I was present at the TRC's Faith Communities' Hearing (East London, November 1997) when Rev. James Buys, moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church, presented (read) the Confession to the audience (specifically, Article 3):

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

We believe that God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world. (cf. Naudé 2010:221)

4. TRC Report Volume 5, p. 317.

In 2005 the University hosted an *International Conference on Reconciliation and the Arts*, which attracted wide international attention. One of the contributions of the Faculty of Theology was a special edition of *Verbum et Ecclesia*, which presented a compilation of publications of different academics of the Faculty's views on reconciliation in the South African context (cf. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Issue 16 [1] of 2005). The articles were thought-provoking and challenging and deserve to be read and reread today.

Once again, the Christian churches were not the only players in the field of reconciliation. At the Faith Communities, hearing leaders of the Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and African Traditional communities were invited not only to speak about the painful past but also to discuss *their* convictions and beliefs, to help the TRC to look at the issues of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation through their eyes. They had much to offer. The Muslim representatives brought insights from the Qur'an, the Chief rabbi from the Torah and the Talmud, and the Hindu spokespersons reminded us of the example of Mahatma Gandhi and of the concept of *satyagraha* (South-African Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998:59–92).

It was evident at the time that South African Christians had much to learn from their fellow South African other faith communities. It was equally clear that all people of faith, of all traditions, are able to, and should, take hands on the road to reconciliation. Religion can be a destructive force in the world, tearing communities apart in prejudice and hatred. But it can also be a cohesive factor, binding people together in respect and understanding, working for the common good.

The search for truth

The name selected for the commission was *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. It was chosen in that specific order, that is – truth before reconciliation! In June 1995, when the then Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar, introduced the TRC legislation to Parliament, his plea to his countrymen was 'to join in the search for truth without which there can be no genuine reconciliation' (Meiring 2000:128). But how does one determine 'the truth'?

There were many discussions on this specific subject during that time, which I recall vividly. Listening to the testimonies of the perpetrators and the victims, reading through stacks of documents, the question was how one would establish what *really* happened and what the motives of the people involved *really* were. The quest for truth, we realised, went far deeper than collecting facts and analysing findings. In the traditions of all religions, searching for the truth turns into a spiritual exercise. Finding truth goes beyond establishing historical and legal facts. It has to do with understanding, accepting accountability, justice, restoring and maintaining the fragile relationship between human beings – in the words of Jesus, to be set free by the truth. Even more, it involves the quest to find the Ultimate Truth, God himself.

This indeed is what happened. When some perpetrators confessed to the Amnesty Committee, when they made a full submission of all the relevant facts, after the questioning and cross-questioning came to an end, it was as if a cloud had lifted. For example, on the final day of his appearance before the TRC when he had to testify to his role in the Khotso House (headquarters of The SA Council of Churches) bombing, former Minister of Police, Adrian Vlok, said:

When the final question was asked and when the legal team of the South African Council of Churches indicated its satisfaction ... my heart sang. I got a lump in my throat and I thanked God for his grace and mercy to me. (Meiring 1999:357)

In the years that followed, Vlok devoted his life to making amends. He visited Frank Chikane at his Union Building office. Chikane is the ecumenical leader who was almost killed when security police poisoned his luggage *en route* to New York. Vlok pleaded for forgiveness and washed Chikane's feet. Recently, he met with one of the last victims of apartheid, Father Michael Lapsley at our house. A letter bomb had been sent to Lapsley who was the unofficial chaplain of the ANC in Harare. Lapsley was maimed for life, having lost an eye and the hearing in one ear, both his hands and with deep lacerations across his body. After 25 years, the former cabinet minister was able to look his victim in the eye, asking for – and receiving – forgiveness.

Victims had the same experience of being healed. Thousands from across the country came to the fore with their stories. A large number were invited to share their experiences at open hearings. To the vast majority, it was a cathartic experience. They spoke, and the nation listened. It was often a painful exercise, but in the end, the truth set them free as well. At the TRC's very first hearing in East London, an elderly Xhosa mother described the terrible tortures inflicted on her 14-year old son – a story that had many in the audience in tears. She finally remarked on the relief it was to her to be given the opportunity to put the truth, her truth, on the table:

'Oh yes, Sir, it was worth the trouble (to testify). I think that I, for the first time in sixteen years, will fall asleep immediately tonight. Perhaps, tonight, I will be able to sleep without nightmares.'

But it was not only the perpetrators and the victims that needed the truth telling, the *nation* needed it as well: to listen to the truth, to be confronted by the truth, to be shamed by the truth, to struggle with the truth and to eventually also experience the reality of being set free by the truth. Media attention to the work of the TRC was vast. There were daily reports on the radio and television, in the press. This was not always welcomed, especially not by many in the perpetrator community, who often referred to the TRC as a 'witch-hunt'. But they, more than others, needed to open their ears and eyes, to face the truth, albeit an inconvenient truth.

This process is far from over. In South Africa today we are still in dire need of reconciliation. There are still millions of

stories to be shared by victims and perpetrators, by the marginalised and the poor, the destitute and the angry, young and old, by the many for whom the dream of a rainbow nation has paled.

No reconciliation without justice

Many years ago, when Beyers Naudé was standing trial in Johannesburg, he was questioned by the defence advocate about the way he understood the concept of reconciliation. His answer was:

No reconciliation is possible without justice, and whoever works for reconciliation must first determine the causes of injustice in the hearts and lives of those, of either the persons or groups, who feel themselves aggrieved. In order to determine the causes of the injustice a person must not only have the outward individual facts of the matter, but as a Christian you are called to identify yourself in heart and soul, to live in, to think in, and to feel in the heart, in the consciousness, the feelings of the person or the persons who feel themselves aggrieved. This is the grace that the new birth in Jesus Christ gives a person – every person who wishes to receive it. (cf. De Gruchy 1986:171)

Naudé echoed the words of his Reformed forebears. The quest for justice is one of the pillars of Reformed spirituality. To celebrate the 400th anniversary of the birth of Calvin (2009), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the John Knox International Reformed Centre published a book on *The Legacy of John Calvin*, in which the strong commitment of Reformed Theology to justice in all walks of life, also in terms of creation, was once again expressed. De Gruchy's thought-provoking book *John Calvin: Christian Humanist and Evangelical Reformer* stresses the same point forcefully (De Gruchy 2009).

In South Africa all the Reformed Churches have, in the past, stated their commitment to justice. Again, no one put it across more clearly than the authors of the Confession of Belhar (Article 4):

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right; that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. (cf. Naudé 2010:222)

How would the TRC handle the issue of justice? The process was not without controversy. From the start spokespersons from the side of the victims, notably a number of well-known families of victims, inter alia the Biko, Mxenge and Goniwe families from the Eastern Cape, publicly opposed the amnesty process. The TRC was offering reconciliation at the cost of justice, they argued. It was morally unacceptable to allow perpetrators of heinous crimes to walk away, scot-free. They should be charged in a court of law and sentenced! Also, the granting of amnesty, which precluded further civil suits, was costing the victims dearly, they argued. The Biko family took their case all the way to the Constitutional Court, where the judges eventually ruled in favour of the TRC process. The very gracious offer of amnesty for perpetrators would eventually be balanced by proper reparation and rehabilitation for the victims, Judge Chaskalson explained.

The discussion has not abated. Did the TRC's concept of justice in the end do justice to the victims and to the South African community? Allan Boesak (2011) joined in the debate, stating his agreement with the then Deputy Minister of Justice, Johnny de Lange's concern that the idea of a TRC did not arise from any law or from the Constitution; it is the result of:

our morality as a people who want to heal a nation, and to restore the faith of those in our country and in the international community in our common future. (p. 579)

Desmond Tutu (1999) purposefully called for an alternative understanding of justice, for restorative justice instead of retributive justice:

I contend that there is another kind of justice, restorative justice, which was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment but, in the spirit of *Ubuntu*, the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence. This is a far more personal approach, which sees the offence as something that has happened to people and whose consequence is a rupture in relationships. Thus we would claim that justice, restorative justice, is being served when efforts are being made to work for healing, for forgiveness and for reconciliation. (pp. 50, 51)

Restorative justice and reconciliation do not ask for the glossing over of past mistakes and injustices or argue that reconciliation requires national *amnesia*. This would be totally wrong. Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation and the truth. It could sometimes even make things worse. It is a risky undertaking, but in the end it is worthwhile, because there will be real healing from having dealt with a real situation. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing. Forgiveness, however, does mean

abandoning your right to retribution, your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin. But it is a loss, Tutu maintained, which liberates both the victim and the perpetrator (Tutu 1999:218).

Conclusion: Amazing grace

Reconciliation requires a deep, honest confession – and a willingness to forgive. The *TRC Act* did not require of perpetrators to make an open confession of their crimes, to publicly ask for forgiveness. Yet it has to be stated clearly that lasting reconciliation rests firmly upon the capacity of perpetrators, individuals as well as perpetrator communities, to honestly, deeply, recognise and confess their guilt towards God and their fellow human beings, towards individual victims as well as victimised communities – and to humbly ask for forgiveness. And it equally rests upon the magnanimity and grace of the victims to reach out to them, to extend forgiveness.

It does not come easily. Forgiveness is a risky undertaking, Tutu wrote in his book *No future without forgiveness*. When you embark on the business of asking for and giving forgiveness, you are making yourself vulnerable. Both parties may be spurned. The process may be derailed by the inability of victims to forgive, or by the insensitivity or arrogance of the perpetrators who do not want to be forgiven. But remember, forgiveness and reconciliation are meant to be a risky and very costly exercise. Quoting the ultimate example of Jesus Christ, he explained: ‘True reconciliation is not cheap. It cost God the death of his only begotten Son’ (Tutu 1999:218). Jürgen Moltmann (1994:400) reminds us of ‘a God, who suffers vicariously for our sins, bearing human guilt’ to transform the world, to make reconciliation possible’. To follow Christ on the road to reconciliation, Deist (1998) wrote, asks of one to follow Jesus to the cross:

Forgiveness implies a preceding *via dolorosa* ... To be able to forgive requires the ability to suffer, because forgiveness follows upon suffering. The person who is unable to suffer, seeks revenge. Only those who are able to suffer, are able to forgive. Forgiveness does not come cheap. (p. 30, [author’s own italics])

To my knowledge, Bosch (1988:98–112; cf. 1997:1) was the first South African theologian, already in the 1970s, to refer in this regard to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr who repeatedly warned against the temptation of ‘cheap grace’, which is a mortal enemy to the gospel. In our times and in our context, Bosch argued, we are called to warn against a similar temptation, that of ‘cheap reconciliation’, reconciliation without cost, which too is a mortal enemy to the gospel of our Lord. Costly grace is what Reformed spirituality demands: a burning heart, on an open hand, sacrificed to God.

And it does happen! ‘It never ceases to astonish me’, Tutu wrote in between hearings, ‘the magnanimity of many victims who suffered the most heinous violations, who reach out to embrace their tormentors with joy, willing to forgive

and wanting to reconcile’ (Meiring 2002:56). Allow me to quote a last example from the annals of the TRC 2002 (cf. Meiring 1999):

On April 21, 1997 former police officer Eric Taylor faced the people from Cradock. He had requested a meeting with the family of a much admired ANC activist, Matthew Goniwe, to publicly ask for forgiveness. Goniwe’s widow refused to be present. She would not meet the man who arrested, tortured and then brutally killed her husband and his three colleagues. Their bodies were burnt and the ashes thrown into a nearby river. Taylor, after a gruelling session, answering many angry questions of the crowd, told them how he, recently, had made his peace with the Lord Jesus, how he really believed that Jesus had died for him, too, at the cross and had paid for his sins. ‘But I need your forgiveness as well. I cannot live and I cannot die if I have not made my peace with you. Please forgive me!’ After a long silence, one man came from the back of the hall with an extended hand. ‘I will forgive you!’ In his footsteps followed more and more, till seemingly everyone from Cradock reached out to him. Last in queue was the elder son of Goniwe. He embraced the policeman: ‘You are right. I do not have a father any more. But I will be your brother!’ The evening that had started in anger, ended in joy. (pp. 123–127)

When I received the news in Johannesburg, it was my turn to phone Tutu. But he spoke before I could. ‘Have you heard the wonderful news? Ms Goniwe phoned me just now to tell me the story. And she promised, next time she will be there!’ Before we ended the conversation Tutu asked me to pray with him. I will never forget his words: ‘Oh God of surprises, we praise you. You continuously surprise us by what you are doing in our land.’

Looking back on the journey, this is what it is all about. This is the spirit of reconciliation: We are called by grace. We live by grace. We are saved by grace. We can reach out to others, wounds can be healed, by grace. Justice may roll down like waters, reconciliation may be attained in our fractured and divided land, by grace. We may (to quote Desmond Tutu for the last time) ‘stride into the glorious future that God’, the God of surprises, ‘holds before us as the Rainbow people of God’ (Meiring 1999:379).

Amazing grace, indeed.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he or she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him or her in writing this article.

References

- Ackermann, D., 2009, ‘Metaphor, mystery and paradox: Orientations for Christian spirituality’, in E. Conradie & C. Lombaard (eds.), *Discerning God’s justice in church, society and academy, Festschrift for Jaap Durand*, Sun Press, Stellenbosch.
- Boesak, A., 2011, ‘...The doing of a little righteousness – The ongoing search for justice after the TRC’, in L. Hansen, N. Koopman & R. Vosloo (eds.), *Living theology. Essays presented to Dirk J. Smit on his sixtieth birthday*, pp. 559–583, Bible Media, Wellington.
- Bosch, D.J., 1988, ‘Processes or reconciliation and demands of obedience: Twelve theses’, in K. Nürnberger & J. Tooke (eds.), *The cost of reconciliation in South Africa*, pp. 98–112, Methodist Publishing House, Cape Town.

- Bosch, D.J., 1997, *Polarization or reconciliation – Which way?* Unpublished document.
- Bosch, D.J., König, A. & Nicol, W., 1982, *Perspektief op die Ope Brief*, Human and Rousseau, Cape Town.
- De Gruchy, J., 1986, *Cry justice!*, Collins, London.
- De Gruchy, J., 2009, *John Calvin. Christian humanist and evangelical reformer*, Lux Verbi BM, Wellington.
- Deist, F., 1998, *Die son het vlerke*, Tafelberg, Cape Town.
- Fourie, W., 2011, 'Can we still be reformed? A tentative consideration of the reformed tradition and South African modernity', in L. Hansen, N. Koopman & R. Vosloo (eds.), *Living theology. Essays presented to Dirk J. Smit on his sixtieth birthday*, pp. 227–238, Bible Media, Wellington.
- Jonker, W., 1998, *Selfs die kerkanverander*, Tafelberg, Cape Town.
- Meiring, P., 1999, *Chronicle of the truth commission*, Carpe Diem, Vanderbijlpark.
- Meiring, P., 2000, 'The *baruti* vs the lawyers', in C. Villa-Vicencio & W. Verwoerd (eds.), *Looking back, reaching forward. Reflections on the TRC in South Africa*, pp. 128–129, UCT Press/Zed Books, Cape Town.
- Meiring, P., 2002, 'Unshackling the ghosts of the past', *Missionalia* 30(1), 56–58.
- Meiring, P., 2005, 'Truth and reconciliation in South Africa: The role of faith communities', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26(10), 146–173. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v26i1.217>
- Meiring, P., 2013, 'Ukubuyisa and Ukuhlanza: Reconciliation and the washing of the spears. The role of the faith communities in the quest for healing and reconciliation', *NederduitsGereformeerdeTeologieseTydskrif* 54(3/4), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.5952/54-3-4-380>
- Moltmann, J., 1994, *Jesus Christ for today's world*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Naudé, P., 2010, *Neither calendar nor clock. Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Sheldrake, P., 2000, 'What is spirituality?', in K. Collins (ed.), *Exploring Christian spirituality*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Smit, N., O'Brien Geldenhuys, F.E. & Meiring, P. (eds.), 1981, *Stormkompas. Opstelle op soekna 'n suiwerkoers in die Suid-Afrikaansekonteks van die jaretagtig*, Tafelberg Publishers, Cape Town.
- South-African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998, 'Institutional hearing: The faith community', in *Truth and reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 4, TRC, Cape Town.
- Tutu, D., 1999, *No future without forgiveness*, Rider, London.