



The forgotten struggle of Albert Geysler against racism and apartheid

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Note:

This article serves as introduction to the very first A.S. Geysler Commemoration Lecture held on 17 February 2014 at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria. Prof. Dr Johan Buitendag, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, concluded with a word of gratitude which is added as the epilogue of the article. Prof. Dr Pieter de Villiers participated as an attendee and his reflections are inserted as the main section of the article. Prof. Dr Andries van Aarde was the organiser and his introduction serves as prelude to the article.

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Albertus (Albert) Stephanus Geysler (10 Feb. 1918 – 13 June 1985) was a South African cleric, scholar and anti-apartheid theologian. On 17 February 2014 his alma mater, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria, presented the first commemoration lecture in tribute to the legacy of A.S. Geysler. This article portrays the décor of this commemoration. The article addresses the need to recall his contributions by discussing his prestigious career as a young academic, his transformation into an opponent of apartheid, the opposition against and persecution of him and his protest against apartheid. It discusses Geysler's conviction that apartheid could not be justified on the basis of the Bible and theological grounds. His activism is rooted in his biblical thought. The article reflects on Geysler's view that the church could be a powerful presence in the state and world while not compromising its message and preaching of the gospel of peace and love.

A prelude to the first A.S. Geysler Commemoration Lecture

Albert Geysler was appointed as professor in the Department of New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria when he was a young, 28-year-old Afrikaans academic.¹ Fifteen years later he had no other option but to resign from his post and to accept the professorship that the University of the Witwatersrand had offered him. Prof. Ben Engelbrecht, who in 1983 followed Prof. Albert Geysler as head of the Department of Divinity (later known as the Department of Religious Studies) at the University of the Witwatersrand, made a remarkable comment in his tribute to Geysler in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* on the occasion of Geysler's retirement. Seen from his own as well as the perspective of the University of Pretoria, Engelbrecht regarded Geysler as an 'anomaly' in the Faculty of Theology (Section A) of the University of Pretoria (Engelbrecht 1988:4–5). The anomaly did not exist by virtue of theology as a scientific discipline, but as a consequence of tension within the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika) because of socio-political issues, specifically the theological and biblical justification of apartheid (cf. Hartin 1988:20–33). Eminent theologians could not agree with the position of the church in this matter. The tragedy was that most of them were forced to leave the Hervormde Kerk in the 1960s. Among these dissenters were Profs. Adrianus van Selms, Cas Labuschagne, Berend Gemser – and Albert Geysler. Some resigned from the University of Pretoria and in November 1967 Dr Labuschagne emigrated from South Africa. Cas Labuschagne was lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities, teaching Semitic Languages during 1959–1962. He was also responsible for the teaching of Biblical Studies in the Faculty of Theology. However, his lectureship was abruptly terminated because of his support of Prof. Geysler. He had to hear from a news bulletin on public radio that he had been replaced in his position by Dr J.I. de Wet. Others remained in a critical relationship because of their solidarity with the Hervormde Kerk but continued to let their prophetic voices be heard. The price they had to pay was just as steep. They were denied academic positions in the Faculty of Theology, as Prof. Dr James Alfred Loader, the first presenter of the A.S. Geysler Commemoration Lecture on 17 February 2014 attested to. Others, such as Profs. Johan Buitendag and Andries van Aarde, were incessantly stigmatised and harassed with disciplinary actions by church people both inside and outside the circles of the Hervormde Kerk.

Albert Geysler was driven by necessity to vacate his chair from the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria under tense circumstances. Investigation shows that the conflict was in principal not caused by his understanding and teaching of Paul's theology regarding Jesus Christ (see Van Aarde 1992:159–182), as was alleged when he was accused of heresy in the 1960s (see later). Yet his interpretations of Paul – including both the Letters to the Romans and the Philippians

1. Geysler became lecturer at the age of 27 years and was promoted to professor a year later.

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– remained consistent from 1946 to 1961. One of his students, a lifelong member of the Curatory for Theological Training, Dr André Dreyer, had testified about this in writing to the General Commission of the Synod. Van Aarde, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, pointed this out in an academic article (Van Aarde 1992:164–165). Heresy, therefore, was not the stumbling block, neither was it about disloyalty. After all, Geyser had on countless occasions demonstrated his loyalty towards the Hervormde Kerk. At the core of the issue was a deeper problem: Geyser and other like-minded people were firmly convinced that the intention and praxis of apartheid could not be justified either biblically or theologically.

The ideological power of apartheid, to which the majority of theologians in the Faculty of Theology during the ‘Verwoerd’ era of the South African political and ecclesiastical scene subscribed, caused serious loss and trauma. Not only did it lead to the tragic severance of ecumenical ties and to the exodus of outstanding theologians, but it also led to a schism within the Hervormde Kerk during the period of apartheid’s dying days, and most recently, between 2009 and 2014. This rupture was instigated by the leaders of the ‘H.C.M. Fourie Stigting’. The origin of this so-called ‘circle of friends’ was a direct result of the tension between the theological-political conviction of Albert Geyser and the then leadership of the Hervormde Kerk. Their pro-apartheid theological ideology is today assigned a place within the breakaway faction they themselves called ‘Steedshervormers’ which formally declared a *status confessionis* against the Netherdutch Reformed Church after the church passed a formal resolution at its synod in 2010 (reconfirmed at an extraordinary synod meeting in 2011) that apartheid cannot be justified theologically and biblically. This resolution followed on a public anti-apartheid declaration in March 2009 by five theologians of the Hervormde Kerk, namely Profs. Johan Buitendag, Yolanda Dreyer, James Alfred Loader, Andries van Aarde and Ernest van Eck.

Since the 70th General Synod of the Hervormde Kerk in September 2013, this tension has largely dissipated. The Hervormde Kerk confirmed (by more than 80% of the 2010 and 2011 synods) that apartheid in its intent and praxis could neither biblically nor theologically be justified. The challenge is now to try and regain the loss that the past has caused. It is thus almost self-evident that the ‘anomaly’ of Prof. Geyser be put to rest.

On 16–17 January 2014 the Moderature of the 70th General Synod took note of the initiative of the Department of New Testament Studies and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria to establish the A.S. Geyser Commemoration Lecture and that Prof. Dr James Alfred Loader (University of Vienna) was to be invited to present the very first lecture on 17 February 2014 in light of the consideration of the Faculty of Theology’s international affiliations and Loader’s historical affinity with Geyser.

James Alfred Loader is Emeritus Dean of the Evangelical Theological Faculty of Vienna and Professor Ordinarius for Old Testament Studies and Biblical Archaeology. He is also an alumnus of the University of Pretoria, as well as a former lecturer at the University of Pretoria and the University of South Africa and at present Professor Extraordinarius of both these universities. The Moderature of the Hervormde Kerk took note that the chairperson of the Moderature, Dr Wim Dreyer, had accepted the invitation of the Department of New Testament Studies to formally participate in the ceremony on the 17th February 2014 by sketching an historical décor of the role Prof. Geyser had played in the church as well as in academia. The Moderature also took note of the following motivation of the Department New Testament Studies for the establishment of this commemoration lecture, compiled by Ernest van Eck in consultation with Andries van Aarde:

Prof. A.S. Geyser was one of the first lecturers of the Department of New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria. Between 1946–1961 he was professor and head of the Department New Testament Studies (Section A) at the Faculty of Theology. He was also the first full professor of Theology at the University of the Witwatersrand and head of the Department of Divinity up to his retirement in 1983. Professor Geyser was also one of the first South African New Testament scholars who gained international recognition and was chosen as a member of the most respected *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* (SNTS).

The example, by which Geyser had lived, created a legacy that for many of his students and many others became the conscience to persevere with a prophetic calling and to maintain the conviction that apartheid cannot be justified biblically or theologically.

An outstanding aspect of Prof. Geyser’s life was his critical solidarity with the church and the theological training at the University of Pretoria – even in spite and in the midst of personal attacks and insults by certain colleagues of the Hervormde Kerk. Other outstanding aspects were his evenly-balanced approach to historical criticism as methodology to biblical interpretation; his international, academic and ecumenical involvement and his membership of the SNTS and editorship of the international Supplementum Series of *Novum Testamentum*, as well as his criticism of the violation of human beings as a consequence of the implementation of the political policies of apartheid.

All the members of the Department of New Testament Studies (namely Profs. G.J. Steyn, E. van Eck, J.J. Kok & Dr E. Mahlangu)² unanimously support the opinion that the present juncture in the history of South Africa obliges the Faculty of Theology and the University of Pretoria to give recognition to Geyser’s prophetic voice and heritage. This recognition occurs through the establishment of a memorial lecture under the auspices of the Department New Testament Studies and the Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria.

The Department of New Testament Studies therefore rightly called upon Prof. Loader to be the presenter of

²Dr Mahlangu retired on 31 March 2014 from the University of Pretoria (editor).



the first A.S. Geyer Commemoration Lecture, because he originated this initiative when he informed Prof. Andries van Aarde of the correspondence between Emeritus Prof. Cas Labuschagne of the University of Groningen and the Moderature of the Hervormde Kerk in 2009 after the publication of the anti-apartheid declaration mentioned above. Labuschagne resigned from the Hervormde Kerk and left South Africa in November 1967 after Adriaan Pont made damaging statements about Albert Geyser and Beyers Naudé, insinuating that they were communists, found guilty of *animus iniurandi* by the Supreme Court, failed an appeal to the Appellate Division (the predecessor of the Supreme Court of Appeal)³, and were not disciplined by the General Commission of the Hervormde Kerk. Prof. Labuschagne's recent appeal to uphold Prof. Geyser's honour has been endorsed by Prof. Loader and Prof. Van Aarde. In 2014, according to church polity regulation, Prof. Pont lost his minister's rights in the Hervormde Kerk. What is still outstanding is a formal restitution of Prof. Geyser by the General Commission of the Hervormde Kerk.

The role of Albert Geyser in the downfall of apartheid: In memory of a forgotten, fearless fighter against racism⁴

Introduction

Unlike many of his compatriots, known for their iconic role in the struggle against apartheid, the name of Albert Geyser (10 Feb. 1918 – 13 June 1985) has faded from the collective memory of the public, ecclesiastical and theological discourse in South Africa and abroad.⁵ Other than with a political leader like Mandela and church leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naudé, Geyser is not often, if at all, remembered in church and public life as one of the icons in the struggle against apartheid.⁶ Except for the occasional research about

him or his work in ecclesiastical-theological circles (Hartin 1988; Van Aarde 1992), he has become a forgotten figure.⁷ As well-known and contentious a figure as he was then, his courageous, provocative contribution to the struggle against one of the most notorious eras in human history, is being neglected almost completely in the collective memory of South Africa and the international community.

This article explains why Geyser is regarded as a seminal figure in the struggle, who, unlike most others, contributed decisively to the fall of the apartheid state and that which characterised its opposition. Straight from the heart of Afrikanerdom, in his day one of the best-known activists in the struggle against the apartheid policies with its legalised racism, Geyser was in some respects the biggest thorn in the flesh of the authorities and powerful institutions of Afrikanerdom. The consequences of his activism helped determine the course of history in South Africa and contributed in no small manner to the downfall of the apartheid system more than many realise.

Early resistance

The early career of Geyser reflects his imposing intellect and academic insights. He began his studies at the age of 18, completing a BA degree cum laude (majoring in Greek and Latin) 3 years later. Another 3 years later, he added two postgraduate degrees to his record: BD (divinity), MA (Greek and Latin (1943) and, in 1946, DD (also cum laude). He was appointed in 1946–1947 as lecturer and in 1947 as professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Theology (A) at the early age of 27, where he would, for the next 16 years, teach future ministers of religion of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Hervormde Kerk).

This outstanding academic career partially explains why he was appointed to the position. The Faculty of Theology at the University was still young (founded in 1917) with the result that there were not many who had been trained previously and who had obtained doctorates in New Testament Studies.⁸ He was also a good choice from a church and political point of view. During his early years as a minister of religion in two Hervormde Kerk congregations (Heilbron in the Free State; North-Western Pretoria), he still supported the church policy that only white people could become church members. Supportive of his church's official stance on race relations, he was, therefore, the rising star of its post-war youth – someone for whom his church entertained high expectations and an obvious candidate for the position.

(Footnote 6 continues ...)

on his role towards a new South African society.' Further, Labuschagne (2011:2) on Mandela and Naudé as leaders of the struggle against apartheid.

7.Cf. e.g. the remarks in Bekele (2011:48) where Geyser is only described as an 'ardent critic of Broederbond' [*sic*] and as 'an influence' on the well-known missiologist, David Bosch. In the previous remarks, Beyers Naudé is mentioned for his Christian Institute that 'became a thorn, both ecclesiastically and politically, to the structure of apartheid.' The reality is that Geyser established the Christian Institute, was chair of the Institute's Council (cf. Labuschagne 2011:13) and was instrumental in its opposition to the apartheid system.

8.Van Wyk (1992:520) ascribes the lack of promovendi in Theology to the influence of Prof. S.P. Engelbrecht who maintained, that only those who had studied in the Netherlands would be competent to teach in the faculty. Because of the Second World War, no one could study in the Netherlands.

3.In his doctoral dissertation in law at the University of Amsterdam, André Mukheibir (2007:192–193) refers to this court case as follows: 'An article appeared in *Die Hervormer*, a church journal, in which he and a colleague were condemned. The article alleged, inter alia, that the two men were contributing to the murder of South African women and children, that they were traitors of God and the church, that they were communists, that they wanted to turn South Africa into a bloodbath and that they had sold themselves to the devil. Beyers Naudé and his colleague, Albert Geyser, took *Die Hervormer* and the writer of the article, Adriaan Pont, to court for defamation. The court held the defamation to be outrageous and found in favour of the plaintiffs. The defendant appealed but his appeal was dismissed. The court found the seriousness of the defamation and the malice on the part of the defendant to be aggravating factors. Again, what did Beyers Naudé want when he went to court? Was it punishment of the perpetrator? Salvaging his good name in a society that had branded him a traitor and a hypocrite? Beyers Naudé made it clear that the reason why he went to court was because the statements made by Pont in *Die Hervormer* would, if left unchallenged, have had detrimental effects for the work that he and Albert Geyser had done with their Christian Institute. Ultimately he did not want any money and was prepared to forfeit the money if Pont apologised. Pont was, however, unrepentant.' Mukheibir (2007:199) refers as follows to Pont's appeal: 'Thus in *Pont v Geyser* the Appellate Division (the predecessor of the Supreme Court of Appeal) held that in order for it to overturn the amount of damages, it would have to be proven that the trial court had misdirected itself in a number of respects. Although the court below had awarded an extremely high amount in satisfaction, the defamation was so extreme that the award had to stand.' (See respectively Geyser v Pont 1968 4 SA 67 (W) and Geyser v Pont 1968 4 SA 67 (W), in Mukheibir 2007:304, 305 – editor).

4.The section, written by Prof. Pieter G.R de Villiers, was originally published as an article in Afrikaans and is available from <http://www.litnet.co.za/> ('n Afrikaanse kerkman wat apartheidstrukture laat steier het, word weer onthou').

5.An interesting overview of early contributions of church people to the struggle against apartheid, can be found in Hexham (1980), and, more recently, other relevant literature in Mushagalusa (2008:239–240).

6.Cf. the article by Meyer (2006) with the title, 'Beyers Naudé as an icon: reflections



In the light of these beginnings, it is an intriguing question how it happened that things changed so much for him and the church. There can be little doubt about the two predominant factors that led to his dramatic change from supporting the conservative position of his church to a careful critic and, finally, an outspoken dissenter. First of all, he had exposure to some seminal developments in an international context (Engelbrecht 1988:4–5). His social criticism and resistance to the political system of that time and church polity strikingly increased after a teaching stint as visiting professor at the prestigious Utrecht University in 1952. But the stage was set when, already in 1949, he did research on the New Testament church at the Free Protestant Faculty (Faculté de Libre du Protenstantisme) of the Sorbonne in France. This took place in the context of post-war Europe, where the church had to face the catastrophic racist system of Nazism and its tragic part in it. It was also a time where the need for the ecumenical movement rose so strongly, that the World Council of Churches (WCC) was established in Amsterdam in 1948.⁹ Throughout the rest of his career Geyser valued ecumenical movement, finding it necessary, for example, to report in the official church journal of his church (1953:5) to his home constituency about an ecumenical institute in Utrecht.¹⁰ The influence of the Council and the notion of ecumenical theology on Geyser's career can hardly be overemphasised. It would play a major role in the Christian Institute, which was founded on account of his initiative, and he would, during the time of his most intense struggle, enjoy widespread support from communities outside his own.¹¹ More importantly, though, is that during that early phase, when he was exposed to the devastating consequences of the German situation during his studies in Europe, international developments made him realise that the church could not be defined in terms of race and exclusivity.

Secondly, and often unnoticed for its consequences, were his political affinities. Van Aarde (1992:2) quotes the unpublished memories of A.D. Pont, infamous for his support of the apartheid system and for his lifelong opposition to Geyser (see further below), who observed that Geyser was the preferred candidate for the professorship because he was a protégée of Prof. S.P. Engelbrecht and a supporter of the political policies of the United Party.¹² This interesting observation offers an intriguing insight into Geyser's role in the struggle. To understand this, it must be remembered that the post-war period in South Africa reflects a bitter struggle between the supporters of the United Party, who joined the British war effort against Germany and the

9. The Hervormde Kerk was a member of the WCC from the beginning.

10. Wolff (2006:161) illustrates how an ecumenical mindset differs fundamentally from developments in the Hervormde Kerk when its enemies were mythologised as, for example, communists, people of colour, the World Council of Churches, the London Missionary Society. For Geyser's fascinating remarks about the aim of the ecumenical movement, see Van Aarde (1992:167). Even though he denies that the movement aimed to establish a 'super church' he insists that the Gospel teaches the intimate relationship ('brotherhood') of all believers which is the correlate of confessing the biblical motif of God as Father.

11. See in this regard, the remarks of Engelbrecht (1988).

12. Van Aarde (1992:161). See Van Wyk (1992:520) who reports a remark made by A.D. Pont that Geyser was "n beskerming van prof S P Engelbrecht en die keuse van die destydse Sappe [United Party] in die kerk." (A protégée of Prof. S.P. Engelbrecht and the choice of the then 'Sappe' in the church.)

Nationalist Party supporters, who vehemently opposed the war effort. The roots of the opposition of the Nationalists ran deep; these can be traced to the loss of independence of the Boer republics to the British Empire and the infamous Boer war (1899–1902). The stunning and unexpected victory of the Nationalist Party in 1948 over Jan Smuts, Field Marshal on the British side of the Second World War and the then prime minister of South Africa, was the culmination of the decades' long struggle against British rule. It represents the beginning of legalising the apartheid system that existed previously, but was never institutionalised so extensively. Geyser's support of apartheid is not surprising, since a racist lifestyle was firmly embedded in South African social life and accepted as self-evident, tolerated, if not promoted, by the United Party for many years of its history.¹³ But Geyser, supporting a more open nationalism and informal form of racial segregation, was prone to become an opponent of the legalised forms of apartheid that began to be introduced in the early Fifties. With his international experience and ecumenical approach (described above), he gradually learnt to oppose even the informal apartheid policies of the United Party which he had supported earlier on.¹⁴ At this stage, he explained, he understood that the geographical segregation of apartheid (which he had previously supported), had nothing to do with the 'unbiblical segregation' between members of the church of Christ – as was intended by Article 3 of Church Polity (Van Aarde 1992:169). Geyser understood that the legitimate concern for political self-determination, for one's own identity, culture and social life differed from the narrow, ideological nationalism that developed at the cost of other groups in the country after the Nationalist Party solidified its power and began to entrench white privileges in the statutory book in terms of race.¹⁵

Persecution

Six years after his appointment to the chair of the church's influential training institution at the University of Pretoria, the young minister, originally from the conservative community of Naboomspruit, openly began to express his reservations about this system. As he made his doubts known to a wider public, the persecution began.

The impact of the early opposition to him must have hurt him deeply. His later successor at the Faculty of Theology, Andries van Aarde (1992:160), reports how, by this time, he no longer received invitations to preach or to participate in church functions. The devious strategy of denying dissenting pastors such invitations was also used against other well-known figures in those times, especially at his alma mater. Among such figures were Beyers Naudé and the popular

13. For the widespread phenomenon of minority racial rule in other African countries, see Dubow (2014:291). For racism in all South African churches – besides Afrikaans-speaking communities – up to recent times, see De Gruchy (1995:1–5).

14. On the role of the church in establishing and supporting apartheid, see Gilomee (2003:454–457), Van Staden (1994:713–719), but especially Wolff (2006:141–162). On the presence of racism in churches of other groups in South Africa, see De Gruchy (1995:105).

15. See the interesting investigation by Wolff (2006:146), based on Degenaar's understanding of nationalism.



student pastor, Ben Marais, later the affable professor and firm critic of apartheid¹⁶ at the same faculty as Geyser (albeit in its Dutch Reformed Section B).¹⁷ Geyser, the professor and teacher of future ministers of religion in his church, was denied preaching – the most natural function of any professor in theological training of ministers and cleric – and excluded from participating in church events and life, almost never to be mentioned again in the official church journal.¹⁸

What must have been especially hurtful is that he was, ironically, a popular and respected speaker, particularly among church members, who reacted especially positively and with enthusiasm to his public presentations. His popularity must have been one reason why church leaders and colleagues wanted to prevent him from sharing his critical views in order to curtail his influence (see Van Aarde 1992:160). This popularity was a result of his personal, academic and theological convictions. They reveal his passion for the ministry and sensitivity for the needs of church members, as well as his feel for the mystical. All this is evident from his courses in Pastoral Theology – which were part of his teaching responsibility. He taught pastoral psychology, liturgy, youth ministry and spiritual direction,¹⁹ reflecting sensitivity for the faith experience and journey of church members. His listeners recognised in his addresses his authenticity and committed faith that overlapped with their own personal needs.

Geyser was persecuted on other levels as well. In his immediate work context at the university, his fellow academics began to instigate various plots against him. Their active resistance against him was so persistent and continued that it would later end in some notorious court cases to which he had to take recourse, given that he had few who could question and oppose their actions against him.

By the middle of the 1950s the struggle began to intensify as several events took place which isolated him from the church and exposed him to more serious censure. It is interesting that at this stage when the apartheid system was still developing, taking a more deliberate turn as it was being shored up by legislation and by removing other races from legislative structures, Geyser understood what was at stake and spoke more openly than before about his concerns.

16. Marais began his opposition against apartheid with a book *Die kleurkrisis in die Weste: 'n Studie i.s. kleur en kleurverhoudings in die Amerikas*, published in 1952 (see also Dutch Reformed Church, 1997, paragraph 2.4.8, in 'The story of the Dutch Reformed Church's journey with apartheid 1960–1994, a testimony and a confession', (English extract from the Afrikaans document), produced by order of the General Synodal Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk),

17. Wolff (2006:162) indicates how this process of silencing one's opponents, is directly linked to a growing politicising of the church.

18. The bibliography of Van Aarde (1992:176–177) with its informative list of notices about Geyser in *Die Hervormer*, the official journal of the church, shows Geyser's active life in the church from 1948 to 1953. After this period the notices about him are strikingly fewer. After 1953, a single article about a celebration in Lydenburg is mentioned, with only two more (in 1959, 1962) and, finally, a notice about his and his wife's resignations from the church in later times. These dynamics are confirmed by Geyser's own contributions to the *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* (today *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*). They are published regularly up to 1953, becoming more irregular from 1955, with a contribution in 1956, 1958 and 1961. The opposition thus gains momentum after his research in the Netherlands and, especially after his first public opposition against apartheid.

19. Noteworthy are his remarks that the Protestant worship service must not be regarded as missing its mystical elements. See for this, and his teaching of practical theology, Van Aarde (1992:162).

Turn for the worst

A turning point was reached when he, along with 13 academics, issued a public statement – almost unheard of in those times – to protest the notorious removal of the coloured representation in parliament to give full control of the legislative structures to the white group (see the Wikipedia [2014a] article on Albert Geyser).²⁰ He then went even further, daring to criticise the theological justification of apartheid and his church's Article 3 that excluded people of colour from church membership. Thirdly, he openly and vigorously defended the anti-apartheid statement of the international Cottesloe Consultation, organised by the WCC (see Luckhoff 1975), despite the fact that his own church was the only attendee not to adopt the resolutions against apartheid.²¹ He dared to do so in extremely volatile times. How brave he was is only really clear when one considers the times: It was, after all, shortly after the devastating Sharpeville riots in 1960 that caused international uproar and led to the beginning of the armed struggle. What is often forgotten is that Dr H.F. Verwoerd, the prime minister, survived a first assassination attempt – an experience unprecedented in South African politics and, therefore, traumatic for the white population. For months the country was in the grip of marches, protests, resistance and police actions. The economy was hit hard, opponents to the regime were held in custody, many fled the country, many whites emigrated and increasingly harsh legislation was adopted to counter the insurrection. Small symbolic signs of censure, like the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to Albert Luthuli, caused extreme dismay in the Afrikaans community.²² The white community lived in great fear, with little tolerance for anyone who dared to exacerbate the situation through their criticism or dissent.

That Geyser dared to express his dissent in such times, speaks of courage and tenacity. There was little comfort to be found in the fact that Geyser was not alone in his criticism of and struggle against political and church policies. He had well-known supporters, including the brilliant Prof. Adrianus van Selms and the later well-known academic Prof. Cas Labuschagne.²³ How difficult these times were, is evident from the fact that both of them were eventually forced to leave the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria. They fearlessly and courageously continued their opposition against apartheid. But, the gloves were off and the confrontation merciless in what was to follow.

The protesting activist

It is intriguing to note with what determination and conviction Geyser retained his activist role as his situation worsened. It is a hallmark of his career that he not only criticised the system,

20. This article was written by Prof. Geyser's grandson, theologically and historically advised by Prof. Cas Labuschagne (Labuschagne 2014).

21. For a full, informative discussion of this consultation, see De Gruchy (1995:95–97). He describes (De Gruchy 1995:95) the consultation as one of the most significant events in the history of the church in South Africa. See also the remarks of Van Wyk (1992:528).

22. The growing international pressure further alienated and upset this community. How strong the pressure was, is illustrated in the publication of Eriksen (2000).

23. Labuschagne (2011:10) gives insightful comments on this situation.

but actively kept on resisting it. Few could emulate him in this. Why this was possible can be explained by noting, once again, his deeper theological convictions.

Geyser's activism is rooted in his biblical thought. This was evident in many ways. He was a careful, informed reader of biblical texts in their original context. Already in 1949 he argued for the necessity to revise the first Afrikaans translation of the Bible (Geyser 1949/1950). His proficiency in biblical languages made him realise the limitations of the first translation and thus to point out the need for a revision. It shows his commitment to provide the church with the best access to the Bible in its original language. He was a person of clear mind and comprehension, active in the theological and church life from an early stage, spurring on the church and theology to be active in providing for the needs of believers.

His intellectual skills were not limited to his precise reading of biblical texts. He was not interested merely in scripture as a historical document that had to be read precisely. Already in August 1948, he documented in the official church paper some remarkable theological insights that are frequently quoted in research on the history of the Hervormde Kerk. This quotation is a clarion call in the history of theology in this country, representing one of the clearest criticisms of that ideology which teaches that membership of the church should be restricted to people belonging to the same nation ('volkskerk'). He wrote:

*A boerekerk, with its party-political participation, its economical influence, its social excellence, may be the church of a nation, but it has ceased to be Christ's church. The church may be a formidable and powerful presence in the state and world, but it will be compromised and stand embarrassed in its preaching of the gospel of peace and love.*²⁴

With this pronouncement he reacts against the official policy of his church that warned about the dangers that white and black people pose for each other and called for church membership that would not promote equality between them. It was claimed that only such a separation would guarantee racial harmony and promote unity in Christ.²⁵

Such theological insights must have inspired his activism, which is one of his strongest characteristics that elevated him above many other struggle figures in Afrikaans churches. From the beginning right up to the end, he made a difference with his activism that expressed itself on a practical level. He kept on protesting through persistent writing and agitating in official journals, in articles, publications and in private correspondence with others, political leaders included. Even on his deathbed, after his first serious heart attack, he started writing a letter of protest to the then state president, P.W. Botha. That letter stopped in the middle of a sentence; the second, fatal heart attack prevented him from finishing the letter.

24. Van Aarde (1992:172) quotes a beautiful passage that Geyser wrote in 1948 in which he rejected the politicising of church life. He argues in it that the church is not to be tempted by worldly power or nation building, by political, economical, social power and organisation, but because of its spiritual power, needs to seek Christian compassion, based on love, and is poor amidst social prosperity.

25. Geyser, the analytical thinker, consistently resisted the consequences of such a theological position. He rejected the decision by the Hervormde Kerk not to engage in missionary work among black people in any official manner. See Van Aarde (1992:167–168).

A prime example of his polemical work and activism was the provocative book he edited in 1960 together with the highly respected theological professor from Stellenbosch, Prof. Bennie Keet, another well-known anti-apartheid critic. This book with the title *Vertraagde Aksie* was a protest against the theological justification of apartheid.²⁶ Labuschagne (2011:12–13) notes that this book had the effect of a red rag to a bull on the country. It caused havoc in the Afrikaans community.²⁷ Once again, Geyser was in the news for weeks on end and, once again, his colleagues played a leading role in instigating actions against him. Prof. Adriaan Pont took the initiative in organising two mass meetings in Pretoria to protest against this book.

Hexham (1980) writes about the book:

A significant step forward in Christian criticism of apartheid was taken with the publication of *Delayed Action* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1960) by Professor AS. Geyser and ten other leading Afrikaner churchmen ... So great was the potential impact among Afrikaners that in his New Year's message Dr. H. Verwoerd, then Prime Minister, warned members of the ruling National Party that it was being attacked by 'enemies within'. (n.p.)

Geyser was more than ever a marked target, characterised as a traitor who was in cahoots with the enemies of church and nation. And all this, as was explained above, during the explosive, traumatic times of the general social upheaval and intense political unrest in South Africa. One cannot imagine a more difficult time to be a dissenter.

The last straw

If Geyser at that time was a thorn in the flesh of his church, he would shortly thereafter seriously offend the broader Afrikaans community when he leaked Beyers Naudé's confidential Broederbond documents to an English Sunday paper in 1963.²⁸ It was a calculated action by Geyser, but also the most daring action of his activist career. Though he knew very well what the consequences would be, he nevertheless took the daring step to hand the confidential documents to the journalist. In an article in the then progressive newspaper, the *Rand Daily Mail*, he explained why he did so:

What I read in these documents convinced me in an increasing measure that a man could not belong to the Broederbond and the Church. Among those I read were pieces that contained interpretations of the Scriptures and their application that served the ideology of the Broederbond, but which rendered unrecognisable the demands of the Bible for neighbourly love, justice and humanity. My immediate observation was that these people were making the Church, which is the Bride of Christ, a handmaiden of politics.²⁹

The authorities in the church, in politics and civil society were seething. More than ever before was he labelled a traitor of

26. See Geyser (1961) for the English version of this publication.

27. Labuschagne (2011) also makes the noteworthy claim that Geyser laid the foundation for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through his example.

28. Labuschagne (2011:16) notes that it was a conscious decision by Geyser to unmask the Broederbond and make its activities known to the public. Giliomee (2003:527–530) discusses the influential role of the Broederbond in Afrikaans society and church life.

29. Quoted by Wolff (2006:155).

the nation ('*volksverraaier*') and one of the foremost enemies of the Afrikaner.

The impact of this step was immense. Over several months, the names of well-known members of this secret society were made public, often to the serious dismay and disbelief of the public. At the same time the powerful influence of the society on politics and church life became clear. It was a shock to the social system to see how wide the tentacles of the Afrikaner Bond reached; how they had organised positions of power for themselves, and how strong their influence was on politics and the church. It was also surprising to notice that bright, critical thinkers were part of the Bond. There is little doubt that the disclosures represented a mortal blow for a powerful institution and even contributed in some way or other to the disintegration of apartheid. After these revelations, the Broederbond was never to recover and would eventually become a mere shadow of its previous power and fame.

The sensational disclosures upset not only members of the society, but also brought dissension among Geyser's faithful friends and fellow workers. The incorruptible Prof. Ben Marais (in Maritz 2003:157), felt at the time that Geyser's actions to make public confidential documents was unethical and bordered on betrayal, even though Marais was not a member of the Broederbond.

Geyser's action finally alienated him from the Afrikaner community. He was ostracised from the community. He became an outcast from his own community. He received death threats. His telephone was tapped, his mail was intercepted, his movements were monitored and at some point the brakes of his car were tampered with. More tragically were the effects on his family life: close family and old friends began to avoid him. His Reverend-brother described him as a devil in angel's apparel. His wife was on several occasions treated in an institution and his son took his own life.

The consequences for Geyser were serious. His colleagues and fellow ministers incited his students against him. What followed was one of the two most publicised law suits of the 20th century that involved the church (the other one was against Prof. J. Du Plessis from Stellenbosch, also to seek a remedy against the suspension from his position). For weeks on end, the media reported the case, until such time that the court vindicated him and ordered that he be reinstated.

Geyser, activist that he was, was no victim in this process. During the court case, he actively challenged his opponents and did it so convincingly in that hostile environment, that parts of the complaint against him were retracted after he interrogated his student accusers. After he was found guilty on 04 April 1962 on account of heresy and suspended from his position,³⁰ he had to turn to a civil court to seek justice

30. So enormous were the proceedings of the church hearing that its transcription comprises an incredible 2672 pages. See further Van Aarde (1992:169-170).

(see later Johan Buitendag's reference to the unpublished 'Memoirs' of Judge Frik Eloff).

Geyser's tenacity is evident in subsequent events. In 1967 Geyser again approached a court of justice after an article in the church journal, written by his colleague, Prof. A.D. Pont, in which he was described as a communist who propagated revolution and sabotage in South Africa. Geyser won the case and was awarded compensation for defamation.³¹

Finally, his activism is confirmed by his visionary involvement when he founded the Christian Institute (Christelike Instituut) and invited Beyers Naudé to work there.³²

The inglorious end

Geyser died at the relatively young age of 67, on 13 June 1985, mourned and respected by only his faithful fellow crusaders and by his colleagues in the academic world. Other than with his comrade-in-arms, Beyers Naudé, who passed away in 2004 at the golden age of 89, after he was reconciled with his own church and was highly praised, Geyser was never reconciled with his church after his resignation from it. He did not receive any accolades or recognition from his own community. However, at his own request, he was buried from the Dutch speaking Hervormde Kerk in Johannesburg (Van Aarde 1985), not having attended a Hervormde Kerk service for 20 years.

The other side of the picture

Yet, this story is not all that there is to be told. A fitting and overdue gesture was made when the first memorial lecture in honour of Prof. Geyser was held on 17 February 2014 by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. One of the well-known theologians of our time, Prof. Andries van Aarde, played a major role in the recognition of Geyser's theological and ecclesiastical legacy and in paying him the homage that he deserves.³³

This memorial lecture will pave the way to remember his intellectual legacy and his theology that sought greater unity, compassion and reconciliation among groups and peoples, that rejected attempts to separate people because of their race. It seeks to recognise others as fellow human beings, created by God to live just and humanely towards all people.

He needs to be remembered for more than his activism. Apart from being one of the giant figures in the struggle

31. Van Wyk (1992:531), in an article full of praise for Pont, describes him nevertheless as an inflexible person who, especially as a writer, tended to be aggressive, even petulant, who attracted serious conflict and enmity.

32. See De Gruchy (1995:96) for the context in which the Christian Institute was established. He does not refer to the role of Geyser in this. The Wikipedia (2014b) article on Beyers Naudé also suggests erroneously that Naudé was the founder of the Christian Institute.

33. At the lecture, my impression that Geyser was a forgotten figure, was sadly confirmed when a senior theologian, who now holds a managerial position in one of the universities, told me that he did not know anything about or had ever heard of Albert Geyser. Albert Geyser, one of the pivotal figures in the struggle of the church against racism, is within one generation after his death, unknown, even to a senior group of people of the church and theologians that share his critical thinking.

against racism, he was a respected New Testament scholar. At a time when the discipline of theology in our country was in its infancy, he became an internationally esteemed colleague. He was the first South African to be invited by the international *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* to become a member and the first to be elected to the board – long before other South Africans would be invited. He was also editor of the esteemed journal, *Novum Testamentum*.

He must also be remembered for the high standards that he set for his own academic career. He obtained three master's degrees in classical languages (Greek and Latin) as well as in French. At the same time, one needs to honour him for being a theologian with a love for the church. Few people know that he translated Thomas á Kempis's classical work *The imitation of Christ (Die Navolging van Christus)* into Afrikaans already in 1952. He introduced the book with a foreword in which he explained his motivation for translating one of the greatest spiritual texts of all time – the most-read work besides the Bible – and making it available in Afrikaans for an Afrikaans audience.

Finally, the memorial lecture will hopefully underline the importance of listening to the prophets that speak the truth. To understand this, one needs to take a step back and reflect on the history of New Testament Studies as a discipline – of which Geyser was one of the most prominent teachers in our country. Biblical Studies is not a popular discipline. Its exponents are often accused of destroying the faith of believers. This may indeed be so in some cases. At the same time though, Geyser's struggle against those who accused him of heresy, was based on his scholarly insights and understanding. Already during his years of persecution, his New Testament colleagues and fellow academics showed appreciation for his competence and understanding for his position.

It says a lot that he, during the time that he was considered the enemy of the people, was accepted in the influential and large body of New Testament scholars as a respected and valued colleague. It makes me proud to think that in those days the New Testament Society of South Africa was probably one of the few places where, in a largely Afrikaans circle, he could feel at home. Often we engaged with him about these matters, reflecting on the role of our discipline in the academy, the church, in politics and life in general. During all these discussions he was the perfect gentleman, but always the father figure, who passed on to us the wisdom of many years. He told us how people had united against him, but at all times we were made aware that he had kept his dignity during a time when people like him – who were regarded enemies of the nation – were destroyed and annihilated. We came to know him as an empathetic man, who was even prepared to exempt his opponent in the libel case from the fine he had to pay, if only he would apologise for his deed (which he was not prepared to do). With this gesture he fulfilled the spiritual truth that the confession of guilt is accompanied by forgiveness.

Already as far back as 1983, when I was the editor-in-chief of *Neotestamentica*, a scientific journal for the *New Testament Society in South Africa*,³⁴ I proposed that a particular volume of the journal should be published as a *Festschrift* for Geyser. In an unparalleled move the university, where he had spent his last years of service, agreed immediately to sponsor the expensive edition in recognition of his work. The proposal to honour Geyser was unanimously accepted by the society – and that at a time when apartheid reigned supreme and public enemies like Geyser were popular targets. He, the prophet and fellow-academic was our colleague and friend to whom we listened and whom we honoured.

A year or so later, shortly after his retirement, he passed away. The struggle of many years claimed its toll. The warm, restless and passionate heart stopped beating – far too early. In 2018 Albert Geyser would have been 100 years old. The time has come to honour him further. Not even a posthumous honorary doctor's degree (*doctor honoris causa*), the naming of a street after him, or any other award can compensate for what he has suffered. Yet, such gestures could highlight his exceptional contributions, make us aware that the struggle against discrimination and injustice never ends, and help us preserve his special decisive spiritual insights for future generations.

Ultimately, and perhaps even more importantly, the memorial lecture for Geyser especially reminds us how careful a community must discern the prophetic messages that come to them. This should be welcoming to the critical and courageous thinkers, even when they bring an unwelcome message. Throughout the centuries, but also by the life of Albert Geyser, we are reminded: Where prophets are silenced, unbridled evil reigns.

A word of gratitude by the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Prof. Johan Buitendag³⁵

When Prof. Andries van Aarde first approached me 2 years ago about the idea of establishing an A.S. Geyser Commemoration Lecture, my immediate reaction was positive. The Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) now has three memorial lectures as part of its face and fibre. The annual *Johan Heyns Commemoration Lecture* had been established by the faculty section of the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk) before the fusion with the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Hervormde Kerk) became a joint theological faculty at the University of Pretoria. I wanted to see the Johan Heyns Lecture as a *Faculty Lecture* – neither of only one partner nor of only one department. Both Prof. Geyser and Heyns have invested into the Faculty of Theology and co-determined the current character of the University of Pretoria and its Faculty of Theology. The third commemoration lecture is the *Dawid &*

34. Prof. P.G.R. de Villiers, the then editor-in-chief of *Neotestamentica*.

35. See note at the beginning and the end of the article: 'Professor Johan Buitendag, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, was "responsible for the epilogue" which was the "word of gratitude" at the occasion of the commemoration lecture on 17 February 2014.'

Etienne de Villiers Lecture, in collaboration with the University of Stellenbosch.

I can hardly contribute to what has been said in appreciation of Albert Geysers published in this article. One point that I would like to share and make perfectly clear, was the agreement reached between Prof. Geysers and the Hervormde Kerk during the Supreme Court trial. I have read a copy of the unpublished 'Memoirs' of Judge Frik Eloff, who had advised Geysers in the case of heresy that the Church brought against him, and who also later represented Prof. Geysers in the High Court. It is clear to me that we ought to understand the reinstatement of Geysers' ministerial office in much more radical terms than we have done so far. I present you with a quote from Judge Eloff (n.d.):

Na ongeveer twee weke van verhoor was dit redelik duidelik dat die Hervormde Kerk op die afdraande pad was. Op 'n dag nader Adv Tienie de Kock ons om te verneem of die verhoor vir 'n wyle kan oorsaak sodat 'n skikking bespreek kan word. Ons het ingewillig, en Tienie versoek regter Ludorff om tyd af te staan sodat 'n broederlike samespraak' kan geskied. Die Regter het ingestem, en ons het in die kantore van die Hervormde Kerk vergader. Sy eerste voorstel was dat Geysers as predikant herstel word. *Ons antwoord was 'n duidelike 'nee', Geysers moet nie herstel word nie; die Kerk moet instem tot 'n bevel dat Geysers se skuldigbevinding aan kettery van meet af nietig was.* En die Kerk moet al sy gedingskoste, op die skaal van prokureur/kliënt, betaal.

It is quite clear: Prof. Geysers was not reinstated in his office as if he were the recipient of a favour, but in the sense that he had never been found guilty. It is not a question of a post hoc reinstatement, but rather an *ante hoc* reinstatement.

The defence was successful in showing that the Hervormde Kerk was biased in its examination and trial of Prof. Geysers and that the suggestion to 'scrum' him out of the Faculty came from as high a level as that of the rector.

I cannot think of a worthier person to present this first A.S. Geysers Commemoration Lecture than Prof. James Loader. To try to map the instances of interface between the works of these two theologians, their immaculate exegetical expertise, their honest listening to and hearing of the Word of God, their undaunted dissemination of that Word and the eventual solidarity with the church are easily recognisable. Prof. Loader communicates on many levels, often paradoxical and even satirical. He is a gifted orator and artist with words, indeed addressing those with 'ears to listen'. Everyone can hear, some just hear more clearly!

The title of this first A.S. Geysers Commemoration Lecture, 'Understanding failure and failure to understand', emphasises two totally different matters, yet so interwoven. Both the histories of Geysers and Loader could be typified with this slogan. It is challenging, it is rewarding, and it is dangerous.

In conclusion, all recognition goes to Prof. Andries van Aarde. This commemoration lecture is his vision and, today, a cornerstone has been built into the ecodomy of this Faculty! Ecodomy is the intra-disciplinary research

theme of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria. Andries, you deserve more than just a closing sentence today. Like Geysers and Loader, you have also been the victim of misunderstanding, often on purpose. You accomplished what few people would have been able to do in these circumstances, namely to remain loyal to your mother, the church, while in the midst of misunderstanding, even inability to understand. There is no uncertainty in my mind that the continuous and undaunted proclamation of the gospel in the Hervormde Kerk produced only three truly great names from its own ranks: *Geysers, Loader and Van Aarde*. It is of no small significance that these three names are combined in a triple helix on this occasion as a *sine qua non* of the ethico-theological fibre of the Hervormde Kerk.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

P.G.R.d.V. (University of the Free State) is, as principle author, responsible for the section 'A forgotten Afrikaans churchman lets apartheid structures fall'. A.G.v.A. (University of Pretoria) is the organiser of the A.S. Geysers Commemoration and his section, 'Prelude', serves as introduction to the first commemoration lecture presented by Prof. James Alfred Loader. J.B. (Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria) is responsible for the 'epilogue' which was the 'word of gratitude' at the occasion of the commemoration lecture on 17 February 2014.

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