

Ecumenical dissent from Christendom to Christian nationalism: The testimony of a South African Congregationalist dissenter¹

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Abstract

This essay on Dissent within Christendom is a contribution to the celebration of significant ecumenical anniversaries in 2025: the Nicene Creed (325), the Anabaptist movement (1525), the *Kairos Document* (1985), and the Voluntary Act in the Cape Colony (1875). Within that framework, I celebrate the eightieth anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death in 1945 and consider its significance for responding to the current resurgence of Christian Nationalism. Woven into the narrative are reflections on my own journey as a Nonconformist Dissenter and the way in which the Congregational tradition as represented by the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, (UCCSA), of which I am a minister, has evolved within the context of South Africa.

Keywords

Congregationalism; Anabaptism; prophetic witness; Christian Nationalism; Orthodoxy; Bonhoeffer

“The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy Word.” Pastor John Robinson³

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- 1 Dedicated to Keith Clements, fellow Nonconformist Dissenter and friend. A British Baptist theologian, Clements was General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches, Geneva, 1997-2005.
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 - 3 Horton Davies, *The English Free Churches*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 56.

A dissenter's testimony

The year 2025 is auspicious for ecumenical anniversaries. But while many will celebrate the seventeenth centenary of the *Nicene Creed*, the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Anabaptism in Zurich in 1525, and the fortieth anniversary of the publication of the *Kairos Document* in South Africa, I suspect very few will remember the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the passing of the Voluntary Act by the Cape Parliament in 1875. I will, because my journey as a Congregationalist is connected to that footnote in South African history.⁴ And I highlight it because Phillippe Denis, a Catholic historian, has said that too little scholarly attention has been given to Congregationalism in South Africa despite its “rich and in some ways unique ecclesial tradition.”⁵

But what is this unique ecclesial tradition, and who represents it in South Africa? As Denis wrote in honour and memory of our son Steve, I assume he has in mind the congregational tradition as represented by the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) of which Steve was also a minister and theologian. However, if Congregationalism is only or even primarily understood as an ecclesial polity in which local congregations are autonomous and democratic, then I suggest it would be better represented today by some independent churches that now inhabit the ecclesiastical space. This is because while still recognizably Congregational, the UCCSA has evolved over the past century within the context of southern Africa. Unique as its ecclesiastical tradition may be, it has not remained static.

As I have personally been involved in this evolutionary process for more than sixty years, as well as being a past president (1980–81) of the UCCSA,

4 See T.R.H. Davenport, “The Consolidation of a New Society: The Cape Colony,” in *The Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 1, *South Africa to 1870*, eds. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 28–56. For documentation and commentary on the role of Christianity in the shaping of modern South Africa, see John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa: A Documentary History*, vol. 2 (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2009).

5 Philippe Denis, “The Historical Roots of Southern African Congregationalism,” *Living on the Edge: Essays in Honour of Steve de Gruchy: Activist & Theologian*, eds. James R. Cochrane, Elias Bongmba, Isabel Phiri, and Des van der Water, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2021), 305.

my account is autobiographical, complementing what I narrated ten years ago in *I Have Come a Long Way and My Life in Writing*.⁶ The latter began when, as a graduate student at Rhodes University, I wrote a dissertation entitled *The Congregational Way* (1960) to better understand the church I was preparing to serve.⁷ A few years later, I wrote a second dissertation, *The Local Church and Racial Identity in South Africa* (1964), to better understand my role as a pastor in a racist society.⁸ A third dissertation followed on *The Dynamic Structure of the Church* (1972) as I became involved in the church struggle in South Africa and engaged in a conversation with Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This conversation has continued throughout much of my life as a Christian seeking understanding in difficult times.⁹ And central to I have attempted to answer Bonhoeffer's probing questions "who is Jesus Christ for us today?" and therefore "what is the church?"¹⁰ These questions also prompt this essay. But let me begin at the beginning.

1. Nonconformist dissent, Cape Town (1875)

Congregationalism emerged during the Protestant Reformation in England as part of a long dissenting tradition within Christendom, which followed the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine early in the fourth century. This epochal event soon led to Christianity becoming the official imperial religion under Emperor Theodosius, transforming a persecuted sect into a state institution. But it also generated a dissenting tradition whose origins are found in the Hebrew prophets, the pre-Constantinian

6 See John W. de Gruchy, *My Life in Writing*, (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2015)

7 John W. de Gruchy, *The Congregational Way: A Historical Study of the Congregational Doctrine of the Church*, BD, Rhodes University, 1960.

8 *The Local Church and Racial Identity*, MTh, Chicago Theological Seminary, 1964; *The Dynamic Structure of the Church: A Comparative Study of the Ecclesiologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, DTh, University of South Africa, 1972.

9 See John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: theology in dialogue*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); *Bonhoeffer's Questions; Faith Facing Reality: Stirring Up Discussion with Bonhoeffer*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022). See also John W. de Gruchy, *Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist*, (London: SCM, 2006) and *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death*, (London: SCM, 2013)

10 See John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer's Questions: A Life-changing Conversation*, (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2017)

church, and primitive monasticism.¹¹ Dissent is not heresy or schismatic, nor is it necessarily a withdrawal from public responsibility; it is an attempt to obey Christ rather than bend the knee to the powerful who demand total allegiance. This is the legacy I unknowingly inherited while growing up in Cape Town.

From the time that the Cape of Good Hope was colonised by the Dutch East India Company in 1652, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) was in its employ under the watchful eye of a political commissar. Whatever benefits accrued to the church and no matter how devout its ministers and members, the church was a functionary of a globally expanding trading company.¹² When the Cape became a British colony in the early nineteenth century, the Church of England (CofE) became responsible for the spiritual well-being of a new cohort of settlers, officials, and soldiers subject to a colonial government whose reason for being at the Cape was to protect British imperial ambitions. In short, the planting of Christendom at the Cape was a colonial project, just as it was from the Americas to India and beyond.

The colonial project at the Cape became more complex under British control, for it opened the door to increasing numbers of European missionaries, who in the late eighteenth century began to trek into the interior to “take Christ to the nations” and establish indigenous mission stations.¹³ At the same time, the colony became home to Scottish Presbyterians and British Nonconformists (Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, and Methodists), the descendants of those who rejected the Act of Uniformity adopted by the British Parliament in 1603, which required all citizens, except Jews, to be members of the Church of England.¹⁴ There was also a growing Roman Catholic presence at the Cape, which the strongly Protestant authorities

11 See John W. de Gruchy, *This Monastic Moment: The War of the Spirit & the Rule of Love*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 14–15; 114–116.

12 See Jan Nieder-Heitmann, *Christendom at the Cape: A Critical Examination of the Early Formation of the Dutch Reformed Church*, PhD dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2007.

13 The classic account is J. du Plessis, *A History of Christian Missions in South Africa*, (Cape Town: Struik, 1965)

14 See James Munson, *The Nonconformists: in Search of a Lost Culture*, (London: SPCK, 1991). See John W. Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England 1870-1940, with Special Reference to Congregationalism*, (London: Independent Press, 1955).

regarded with considerable reservation. But irrespective of denomination, all were under the watchful eye of the Governor General, though none had the same political or social status as the dominant DRC or the established CofE.¹⁵

In 1854, however, Saul Solomon, a Congregationalist member of the Cape Parliament, introduced a private member's Bill in which he proposed that all churches in the colony should be independent of the state. This was strongly opposed by the DRC and the CofE, who even discussed uniting to form an established colonial church.¹⁶ Solomon's proposal was soundly defeated, but he persisted, and in May 1875, the Voluntary Act was narrowly passed when the Speaker cast his vote in support. One reason for the support now given by Anglicans was the growing resistance among "high church" Tractarians to state interference in church affairs that reached a boiling point in the heresy trial of the bishop of Natal, John Colenso.¹⁷ Even so, voting for the Voluntary Bill meant that some Anglicans had done the unthinkable and sided with Dissent.¹⁸

Saul Solomon was a member of Union Church in Cape Town, a congregation established in 1820 by Dr John Philip to serve Congregational and Presbyterian settlers and soldiers. Philip, a Scot by birth, was the superintendent of the London Missionary Society (LMS), which was pioneering missionary work in the colony. Founded in London in 1795 largely by Congregationalists, the LMS was an outcome of the Evangelical Revival led by John Wesley that launched the Methodist movement. This not only changed the face of Britain, but also breathed new life into the Nonconformist churches, awakening both a social conscience and enthusiasm for the evangelisation of the world. Indeed, the stated purpose

15 See de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa*, 7.

16 John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, second edition, 1986), 17.

17 See Peter Hinchliff, *The Anglican Church in South Africa*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), 87–100.

18 On the Church of England and Dissent in England during this period, see Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part I, (London: A&C Black, 1966), 60–100.

of the LMS was to take Christ to the nations, not to export denominations to foreign lands.¹⁹

For that reason, settler Congregational churches, such as Union Church, eventually formed the Evangelical Voluntary Union in 1859 as a home for all Nonconformists and only became the Congregational Union of South Africa (CUSA) in 1877.²⁰ These developments, and those that followed later, indicate that Congregational polity has always been a work in progress, as can be seen from the names used to describe the tradition in Britain. Early on, some were called Separatists because they separated from the “ungodly” CofE, but by the seventeenth century, most were Calvinist and Puritan²¹ in theology, in common with Presbyterians, but Independent in ecclesiology.²² Independence did not mean that congregations were free to do “their own thing”, for they were under the authority of Christ and the gospel, but that they refused to accept the interference of political authority (not least state-appointed bishops) in the life of the church.²³ A corollary of Independency was the need for a theologically informed lay leadership, resembling in some ways what Latin American liberation theologians would later call “base communities.”²⁴

The establishment of foreign missions by the London Missionary Society at the end of the 18th century, although dominated by Congregationalists, required a significant modification of Independency. Dissent from political authority remained fundamental, but congregational autonomy on the

19 See John W. de Gruchy, “Remembering a Legacy,” in *The London Missionary Society in Southern Africa: Historical Essays on the LMS in Southern Africa, 1799-1999*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000), 1.

20 See George P. Ferguson, *CUSA: The Story of the Congregational Union of South Africa*, (Pretoria: CUSA, 1940), 4–75. The Congregational Union of England and Wales were established in 1832, and then in 1972, joined with the Presbyterian Church in England to become the United Reformed Church.

21 Puritan originally referred to all Calvinist Protestants in England. Puritans within the CofE would later become the Evangelical wing of the Church.

22 See especially article XXIV of *The Savoy Declaration of Faith 1658*, ed. A.G. Matthews, (London: Independent Press, 1958), 108–109.

23 See especially article XXIV of *The Savoy Declaration of Faith 1658*, ed. A.G. Matthews, (London: Independent Press, 1958), 108–109.

24 See Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology, the Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986)

mission field was not feasible. John Philip, as the LMS superintendent in the Cape Colony, was, by necessity, a Nonconformist “bishop” though not one appointed by the state. In fact, according to Lord Charles Somerset, the Governor General at the time, he was a notorious or “arrant dissenter” like all those who refused to be co-opted by the government.²⁵

Somerset’s dislike of Dissenters was shared by most Anglicans in England, for whom they were radicals and heretics bent on controlling the House of Commons and disestablishing the Church of England. But Philip was no radical or heretic; he was a dogged Scots Calvinist like his colleague John Read,²⁶ both of whom challenged Somerset’s racial policies and worked for the emancipation of slaves in support of William Wilberforce, an Anglican evangelical, back in England. It was impossible for Philip to “take Christ to the nations” and save the souls of the “heathen” without working for their liberation from slavery. This is a reminder that evangelical Christianity, as expressed by Wesley, Wilberforce, and Philip, and behind them Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian movement in Germany, was in the forefront of the struggle for social justice long before much evangelical Christianity in modern-day America was hijacked in the interests of Christian Nationalism.²⁷

In 1839, following the Act of Emancipation, Philip, the founder of Union Church, founded a congregation for freed slaves in Cape Town’s District Six while his wife, Jane, as doughty a Dissenter as her husband, established a school for their children.²⁸ Perhaps it was Jane’s legacy which later inspired

25 See Tim Keegan, *Dr Philip’s Empire: One Man’s Struggle for Justice in Nineteenth Century South Africa*, (Cape Town: Random House, 2016), 81–95.

26 John Read was a Congregationalist, LMS missionary and anti-slavery activist. In 1800, he founded the “Calvinist Society” in Cape Town. See Steve de Gruchy, “Dissenting Calvinism: Reflections on the Congregational Witness in South Africa as part of the wider Reformed Tradition,” *Theologia Viatorum*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2004, 1–23.

27 See inter alia, Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood, *Baptising America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism*, (New York, NY: Chalice Press, 2024); Amanda Tyler, *How to End Christian Nationalism*, (Minneapolis, MI: Broadleaf Books, 2024).

28 See, Charles Villa-Vicencio and Peter Grassow, *Christianity and the Colonisation of South Africa, a Documentary History*, vol. 1, (Pretoria: UNISA, 2009), 56–58; Natasha Erlank, “Jane and John Philip: partnership, usefulness and sexuality in the service of God,” in *The London Missionary Society in Southern Africa*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, 82–98.

Emilie Jane Solomon, Saul's granddaughter and a deacon in the Sea Point Congregational Church, to become a leading activist in South Africa for women's rights, irrespective of race, in the 1930s. In 1937, Emilie was also elected chair of the Congregational Union of South Africa, the first woman to lead a denomination in the country²⁹ though the Anglican Dean of Cape Town said that the whole Christian church was indebted to her leadership.³⁰

The fact that I grew up in Union Congregational Church, of which Philip was the founding pastor and Saul Solomon a member, was a matter of convenience for my Methodist parents, who, at the insistence of my maternal grandparents, named me John Wesley at my baptism. But Union Church was the nearest Nonconformist church to where we lived and, as my parents said, we all sang the same hymns.³¹ Convenient it was, but in retrospect I regard their decision as providential for it introduced me to the legacy of the Philips's at a formative stage in my life, though it almost scuppered my marriage to Isobel Dunstan whose Methodist mother objected to her marrying a Congregationalist.

I first learnt the story of the Philips' missionary labours and struggles against slavery from reading their plaques on the sanctuary wall facing the pulpit at Union Church, but I wonder whether the story had much traction on the life of the congregation. Union Church was a typical English-speaking colonial congregation living in a middle-class racial bubble and nurtured on a liberal theology that made few demands beyond moral behaviour. Despite that, no one could easily erase the witness of the Philip plaques, and one day I would appreciate the fact that John Philip was not only a Congregationalist and evangelical Dissenter but also a pioneer of a liberating Reformed tradition that became part of my inheritance.³²

None of this would have happened, however, if I had not accepted the challenge to commit my life to Jesus Christ at a Scripture Union school

29 See J.J. Carson, *Emilie Solomon, 1858-1939*, (Cape Town: Juta & Co. 1941); D. Roy Briggs and Joseph Wing, *The Harvest and the Hope: The Story of Congregationalism in Southern Africa*, (Johannesburg: UCCSA, 1970), 292–293.

30 Carson, *Emilie Solomon*, 40.

31 See de Gruchy, *I Have Come a Long Way*, 29–30.

32 See John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 42–44.

camp in 1953.³³ Soon after, I was encouraged by a school friend to be re-baptised in a Plymouth Brethren chapel.³⁴ The Brethren, whose origins in England were evangelical Anglican, also tried to convince me to leave Union Church, but I declined. Nonetheless, by being re-baptised, I had become an Anabaptist long before I knew the word or discovered its connection to Congregationalism or its radical challenge to the churches of Christendom. The Brethren also introduced me to the dispensationalist eschatology of John Darby, who claimed that Jesus would return shortly to save those of us who believed. I had never heard anything like this from the pulpit of Union Church, where I learnt that the kingdom of God is within us and that our task was to spread God's reign across the world.

Darby's views, which resembled those of the Medieval Franciscan friar Girolama Savonarola and some radical Dissenters in the sixteenth century, have had a powerful influence on Christian fundamentalism in South Africa.³⁵ as they have across the world, and they continue to influence modern-day Christian Zionism and Nationalism.³⁶ In fact, evangelical fundamentalists, all of whom appeal to the same Bible they consider infallible, are divided between those who believe that the world will get far worse before Jesus returns and so withdraw from politics to await his coming, and those who believe that Jesus will only return when the gospel is preached to all nations and Christians dominate the political arena. Intrigued as I was by Darby's teaching, I did not follow that path, but I now understand why dispensationalism has such an attraction for people living in uncertain and fearful times, and how, in tandem with Christian

33 See de Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 36–37.

34 On the Plymouth Brethren, see Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism*, (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1968), 161–172.

35 Alan Lance Jansen, *The Influence of Fundamentalism on Evangelicalism in South Africa with special Reference to the Role of Plymouth Brethrenism amongst the Cape Coloured Population*, PhD University of Cape Town, 2002.

36 See Stephanie McCrummen, "The Army of God comes out of the Shadows," *The Atlantic*, February 2025. See also George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982).

Nationalism, it currently and dangerously influences local and global politics.³⁷

My parents were perplexed by my youthful religious zeal, and my re-baptism caused them some consternation, though later I would discover that some great Reformed theologians also had reservations about infant baptism.³⁸ But Basil Brown, the minister at Union Church, who by all accounts was a devoted pastor, took no steps to discipline me; on the contrary, he sensed that I had a call to the ministry. Discovering this, my parents asked me if I would not prefer to become a Methodist rather than a Congregational minister, to which I replied, “I prefer to stick with what I am despite my baptismal name!” The truth is, I did not know the difference, whether in polity or in doctrine, and Brown had made me at home and was ready to support me going further.

Brown had studied at the University of Cape Town before going to Mansfield College, Oxford, which was then a major Congregational theological college. It was there that he experienced the tension between those Congregationalists who were liberal Protestants influenced by the likes of the German church historian Adolf von Harnack (one of Bonhoeffer’s illustrious teachers in Berlin), and a post-First World War generation who were attracted to the theology of the Swiss Reformed Karl Barth (Bonhoeffer’s unofficial mentor).³⁹ For the former, the focus was on following the “Jesus of history” in daily life; for Barth, who had been nurtured on liberal theology, this was totally inadequate for the crisis that faced Christendom on the outbreak of the First World War. For that reason, he went back to the Bible and Calvin to discern how the church should respond.⁴⁰

37 See John W. de Gruchy, *The End is not Yet: Standing Firm in Apocalyptic Times*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2017)

38 See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1968), 637; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 78–194.

39 See Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England*, 374–376; Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986); Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: an Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence 1923*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972)

40 Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1976), 81–108.

Brown, my pastor, undoubtedly thought Barth's Calvinism was much the same as that which supported Afrikaner nationalism, and, of course, Calvinism is a much misunderstood term.⁴¹ But all genuine Calvinists share Calvin's, and behind him, St Augustine's, understanding of the world as "the realm of God's sovereignty" that awakens reverent awe and a profound sense of human brokenness, together with the conviction that God is providentially involved in human affairs and that Christians are called by God to be responsible agents of God's will in society. While this worldview is not distinct to Calvinism, Calvin located it within a majestic interpretation of the core themes of Christian faith, earning him a place among the Fathers of the ecumenical Church.⁴²

Afrikaner Calvinism certainly had its roots in Calvinism, but its interpretation of God's sovereign will was premised on the conviction that the Afrikaner nation or *volk* was chosen by God for the purpose of establishing Protestant Christendom in southern Africa.⁴³ As such, it was a perverted form of Calvinism, a folk-ideology with a "thin veneer of Calvinistic terminology and theological content" fashioned on the hostile frontiers of Dutch expansion in South Africa.⁴⁴ At the same time, despite its own particularities, it was not unlike the theological ideologies that were used to justify the colonial expansion of other European colonial powers, whether Catholic or Protestant, and by those English Congregational Puritans who settled in New England in the 17th century. Nonetheless, the Afrikaner Nationalist victory in 1948, though clinched by the promise of white supremacy and security, would not have happened without DRC advocacy or this conviction. Similarly, today, Christian Nationalism is informed, not only by a popular evangelical fundamentalism that

41 See John T. McNeil, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1954); de Gruchy *Liberating Reformer Theology*, 4–8; de Gruchy, *John Calvin: Christian Humanist & Evangelical Reformer*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 28–34, 219–228.

42 See Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1987); see also John W. 113–132.

43 See T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); W.A. de Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa: A History of Afrikanerdom*, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1976)

44 J. Alton Templin, *Ideology on a Frontier: The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1652-1910*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 313.

proclaims the gospel of Christ for individual salvation, but also by an exceptionalism based on a sense of divine calling to govern the world. It is precisely this Christendom conviction that has, through the centuries, provided theological support for crusades, inquisitions, and pogroms in the name of Christ. As such, it is a destructive triumphalist heresy.

Whatever his views on Afrikaner Nationalism, to my recollection, Basil Brown seldom mentioned politics in his sermons. But I was proud to see him on the City Hall platform during an anti-apartheid protest meeting I attended as a student at the University of Cape Town. I also remember discussing with him B.B. Keet's *Whither South Africa?* the first critique of apartheid from within the DRC.⁴⁵ At the time, Keet was a senior professor in theology at Stellenbosch University, where, in 1959, I heard him lecture on Reformed theology over the previous century and still recall the positive things he said about Barth's contribution.⁴⁶

A few months later, in March 1960, as I was finishing my dissertation on *The Congregational Way*, South Africa was shaken to the core by the Sharpeville Massacre. In response, the World Council of Churches hastily convened a consultation at Cottesloe in Johannesburg that December for all its South African member churches. The participants included delegates from the two largest synods of the DRC, one of which was led by Beyers Naudé, its moderator and a protégé of Keet, who played a crucial role at Cottesloe.⁴⁷ It was also at Cottesloe that Basil Brown first met Naudé and probably began to appreciate that there was more to Reformed theology than Afrikaner Calvinism, and that only a genuine Reformed theology could counter it. Certainly, a liberal theology stood as little chance in South Africa as it had done in Nazi Germany.

Soon after Cottesloe, Brown was elected president of the Christian Council of South Africa (1961-2), and then its General Secretary before it became

45 B.B. Keet, *Whither South Africa?* (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University Publishers, 1956)

46 de Gruchy, *I Have Come a Long Way*, 46; John W. de Gruchy, "The reception and relevance of Karl Barth in South Africa," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* Vol. 5, No. 1 (July 2019), 1–28.

47 Cottesloe consultation: the report of the consultation among South African Member Churches of the World Council of Churches, 7–14 December 1960 at Cottesloe, Johannesburg.

the South African Council of Churches (SACC) in 1967. In that capacity, he worked closely with Archbishop Joost de Blank, an archenemy of the apartheid government, and drafted many Council documents critical of apartheid legislation. Meanwhile, after Cottesloe, Naudé launched the ecumenical Christian Institute (CI) for which he was defrocked by the DRC.⁴⁸ He had become an Afrikaner dissenter,⁴⁹ but he had also become a prophetic witness and a mentor for many of us. Naudé was, as Bonhoeffer's friend Eberhard Bethge would later tell me, "South Africa's Bonhoeffer."⁵⁰ And, indeed, it was Naudé who encouraged me to continue working on Bonhoeffer on my return from Chicago to South Africa in 1964.

Several years later, Naudé also invited me to join the staff of the CI. I was tempted, but instead accepted an invitation from Bishop Bill Burnett, another participant at Cottesloe, and the first General Secretary of the SACC, to join its staff. I was also asked to be the Secretary of the Church Unity Commission (CUC), which had been established in 1967 to foster union between the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. My new work commenced in April 1986 during the week in which the CI and SACC jointly published the prophetic *Message to the People of South Africa*, which declared that apartheid was a "false gospel".⁵¹

This prophetic milestone was largely the work of white anti-apartheid theologians. As such, it was soon overshadowed by the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement led by Steve Biko and the Black Theology project whose office, incidentally, was located just above mine during 1972. For Black Theology, Christ was unashamedly Black with all that implied,

48 See John W. de Gruchy, "A Short History of the Christian Institute," in *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé*, eds. Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. de Gruchy, (Grand Rapids, IN: Eerdmans, 1985), 14–17.

49 See J.J.F. Durand, "Afrikaner Piety and Dissent," in Villa-Vicencio and de Gruchy, eds. *Resistance and Hope*, 39–51, and Willem Saayman, "Rebels and Prophets: Afrikaners against the System," in *Resistance and Hope*, 52–60; Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984)

50 See John W. de Gruchy, "Beyers Naudé: South Africa's Bonhoeffer? Celebrating the centenary of the birth of Beyers Naudé – 1915–2015," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 2014, vol. 1, no. 1, 79–98.

51 *The Message in Perspective*, eds. John de Gruchy & Bruckner de Villiers, (Johannesburg: SACC, 1969)

both for those under the yoke of apartheid and for their white controlled churches in their search for unity. I shall return to the significance of this development, especially after the Soweto Uprising in 1976. But even before that, it was becoming clear that white-led ecumenical initiatives would not succeed in an apartheid society, and that “white theology” imported from Europe or the United States, the theology on which I was nurtured, had to be critically re-imagined in a post-colonial way as well as in relation to Black and African theology if it was to be relevant in apartheid South Africa.

That was not on my horizon however when in 1965, I gave a lecture at the Federal Theological Seminary in Alice in the Eastern Cape, where black students trained for the ministry in the CUC Churches.⁵² At the time, I was contemplating writing a dissertation on the social witness of the church in the theology of P.T. Forsyth, and that became the topic of my lecture. But what had a Scottish Congregationalist theologian of a previous generation, or for that matter, what had Barth and Bonhoeffer, to say to black (or white) Christians in apartheid South Africa? And, more specifically, how did Forsyth help me to understand myself as a Congregationalist within that heady ecumenical, theological and political mix?

Forsyth, as some have said, was a “Barth before Barth.”⁵³ Like Barth, he was schooled in 19th-century German liberal Protestant theology and Idealist philosophy. But then, also like Barth, he found liberal theology inadequate to address the challenges presented by the First World War, and under the influence of Søren Kierkegaard, he turned to the message of the Bible and the Reformers for guidance.⁵⁴ Critical of both liberal theology and fundamentalism, Forsyth’s Christocentric theology was kerygmatic rather

52 See de Gruchy, *I Have Come a Long Way*, 68.

53 See W.L. Bradley, *P.T. Forsyth, The Man and his Work*, (London: Independent Press, 1952); John H. Rodgers, *The Theology of P.T. Forsyth: The Cross of Christ and the Revelation of God*, (London: Independent Press, 1965); Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: The Ecumenical Century, 1900 to the Present*, Book III, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 157-171; S.W. Sykes, “P.T. Forsyth, in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford, second edition, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 231–235.

54 See P.T. Forsyth, *The principle of authority in relation to certainty, sanctity, and society: an essay in the philosophy of experimental religion*, (London: Independent Press, 1952); P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy*, (London: Independent Press, 1955)

than systematic, a theology that could neither be reduced to subjective feelings nor rationalist formulations.⁵⁵ But most importantly for me, like Barth's and Bonhoeffer's, his theology was intrinsically ecclesial and socially engaged and, not least, it helped me to appreciate what Congregational Dissent was essentially about.⁵⁶

A genuinely Free Church, Forsyth insisted, is not a religious club in which individualism rules, nor a voluntary association that exists by the kind favour of the government. For Forsyth, as he put it, "Congregationalism is High Church or nothing."⁵⁷ By this, he did not have in mind his own affirmation of the "real presence of Christ" in the Eucharist and other "high church" convictions, but the freedom of the church to be the church of Christ in the world.⁵⁸ This freedom, he insisted, is a "founded freedom", which, as Bonhoeffer also insisted, is not just the freedom to conduct its own affairs, that is a matter of Congregational polity, but the freedom to proclaim Christ as Lord, and that is a matter of prophetic dissent.⁵⁹ That is why, for Forsyth, Congregationalism is not just Reformed in theology but "Calvinism flushed and fertilised by Anabaptism on English ground."⁶⁰ The distinguishing difference between the two is that while both rejected state involvement in the life of the church, the Congregationalists, as Calvinists, were willing to assume public office and participate in government. The Anabaptists were radical in their dissent, whereas the Congregationalists were Reformed.

55 P.T. Forsyth *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, (London: Independent Press, 1953)

56 See P.T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, (London: Independent Press, 1957). First published 1897. *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, (London: Independent Press, 1955 [1909]); Forsyth, *Socialism, the Church and the Poor*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908); *The Principle of Authority in relation to certainty, sanctity, and society: an essay in the philosophy of experimental religion*, (London: Independent Press, 1952)

57 Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 215.

58 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: from Watts and Wesley to Martineau, 1690–1900*, Book II, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 212–220.

59 See Keith Clements, *What Freedom? The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & 2011), 104–105; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, (DBWE 1) ed. Clifford J. Green, (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress, 1998), 271.

60 Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 30.

2. Radically Reformed dissent from Zurich (1525) to Soweto (1985)

Christopher Rowland describes radical reformers as those who “have refused to become conformed to the world as it is” for if they did, they would lose their hope and motivation “to work for a better, more just and peaceful world”, not a world controlled by destructive “principalities and powers” but one being redeemed in Christ. For this reason, every genuine attempt to reform the church has been “radical”, an attempt to go back to its apostolic roots.⁶¹ And sometimes, as Robert Browne, an early English Separatist, insisted, they refused to wait for permission from civil authority in pursuing that goal.⁶²

While the Protestant Reformation was driven by theological convictions, it was dependent on the support of like-minded princes and magistrates in resisting Catholic Christendom. The word Protestant refers, in fact, to a political agreement reached by German princes and civil authorities who, at the Diet of Speyer in 1529, gave their allegiance to the Evangelicals led by Luther and Philip Melanchthon, and the Reformed, led by Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich – John Calvin was not yet on the scene in Geneva. Because all these Reformers acknowledged the role of civil authority in church affairs, they have been described as the Magisterial Reformers. This distinguished them from the more diverse Radicals – ranging from humanists and mystics to revolutionaries and pietists – who were collectively but inappropriately described as Anabaptists at Speyer and considered a threat to both the Reformation and Christendom.⁶³

There was some substance to this fear. Four years previously, in 1525, a former Catholic priest named Thomas Müntzer, disillusioned with the speed and scope of Luther’s reforms, had led a violent Peasants’ Revolt in Mühlhausen,

61 Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, (Cambridge: Polity/Blackwell, 1988) see *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader*, ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002)

62 Robert Browne, *A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for any* (1582), published in *The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne*, eds. A. Peel and L.H. Carlson, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953)

63 See the Introduction to George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1962), xxiii–xxxi.

in Thuringia.⁶⁴ And, that same year in Zurich, several followers of Zwingli, also a former priest, had decided that Zwingli's reforms were too slow and not radical enough.⁶⁵ But, instead of trying to overthrow Christendom by force, they attempted to undermine it by rejecting infant baptism, a sign of social belonging and cohesion in Christendom rather than, as they insisted, one of faith in Christ and commitment to discipleship.

After lengthy disputations, the leaders of the Zurich dissidents re-baptised themselves in a nearby river, a dramatic act of defiance against Christendom and God-ordained authority. This made Anabaptists heretics and subversives who, like many others from the Montanists in the second century to Savonarola in the Middle Ages, deserved the death penalty. But for the Anabaptists, martyrdom became a badge of honour because they believed they were being persecuted for the same reason as the early Christians: they confessed Jesus as Lord and sought to live according to his teaching in a sinful, nominally Christian world. By refusing to conform, they became prophetic dissenters.⁶⁶

Most Swiss Anabaptist refugees went to Holland, which was a more open, albeit Calvinist society, but they were in disarray and divided by theological disagreements. Fortuitously, another former Catholic priest, Menno Simons (1496–1561), who had joined their ranks and become their leader, began to build a more resilient “voluntary brotherhood of love and non-resistance” seeking to live according to the Sermon on the Mount.⁶⁷ Now known as Mennonites, it was these Anabaptists who met some Independents, also living in exile in Holland, who had fled persecution in Elizabethan England.⁶⁸ Later, after returning to England, it was from their

64 See Eric C. Gritsch, *Thomas Müntzer: A Tragedy of Errors*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989)

65 Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 118–148; de Gruchy, *John Calvin*, 72–77.

66 See John H. Yoder, “The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 93; and Fritz Blanke, “Anabaptism and the Reformation,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, 57–65.

67 See Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Spread, Life and Thought, 1450-1600*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968); Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision”, in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, 28–54; and N. van der Zijpp, “The Early Dutch Anabaptists,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, 76–82.

68 See Horton Davies, *The English Free Churches*, (New York, NY: Oxford, 1963), 20–62.

ranks that the Pilgrim Fathers sailed to America in 1620 and settled in New England, where they established a Puritan outpost of Christendom.⁶⁹ So, by an ironic twist, the Congregational became the established church of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Isobel and I experienced a residue of that status when I served as a summer supply pastor in 1964 at the Stockbridge Congregational Church in Massachusetts. On arrival, we discovered that the second pastor of the church was Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), the famous Calvinist theologian and later the president of Princeton University. But before entering academia, Edwards led the First Great Awakening in America much as Wesley had led the Evangelical Revival in Britain. And central to Edward’s vision was a born-again America that would replace European Christendom after its predicted secular demise.⁷⁰ In this regard, it is worth pondering what Bonhoeffer wrote in 1939 about Protestantism in the United States. “American Christianity”, he said, “remains concealed from those who do not know the beginning of the Congregationalists in New England, the Baptists in Rhode Island, or the revival movement led by Jonathan Edwards.”⁷¹

Just as the Evangelical Revival in England led to the formation of the LMS, so the Great Awakening inspired a missionary zeal that led to the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABM) in Boston in 1810. Twenty-two years later, John Philip invited the Board to send missionaries to work in southern Africa, and in 1835 Philip welcomed them at the Cape before they headed north to establish mission stations in Zululand and elsewhere.⁷² True to Edward’s vision, they were convinced

69 See Roland Bainton, *Christian Unity and Religion in New England*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965); Robert Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1971), viii–ix, 12–13.

70 See Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian, 1963); Robert W. Jenson, *America’s Theologian*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988)

71 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, (DBWE 15) ed. Dirk Schulz and Victoria J. Barnett, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 439.

72 See Arthur Fridjof Christofersen, *Adventuring with God: The Story of the American Board Mission in South Africa*, (Durban: Robinson & Co., 1967)

that their missionary labours would complement the secular mission of a burgeoning United States and so hasten the coming of God's kingdom.⁷³

A century and a half later, the missions established by the ABM had become congregations and collectively part of the Bantu Congregational Church (BCC). In 1967, the BCC united with the Congregational Union (CUSA) and the LMS Churches in Botswana and Zimbabwe to form the UCCSA, which, in an act of inspiration, appointed Joseph Wing as its first General Secretary, a position he held for twenty years. Wing was trained as a minister of the Congregational Union of England and Wales shortly after the Second World War. He was a Reformed pastor in the mould of P.T. Forsyth, a pacifist and conscientious objector in the Anabaptist tradition, and an LMS missionary like John Philip, who came to southern Africa in 1951 to work among the migrant mine labourers on the Witwatersrand.⁷⁴ Quite apart from his remarkable contribution to the ecumenical movement, the church's struggle against apartheid, and to theological education,⁷⁵ Wing's influence on the early formation and development of the UCCSA was immense; he was a mentor to our son Steve, and he knew that the future of the UCCSA lay in its becoming a genuinely African church.

Wing was fully aware that long before 1967, many African converts to Christianity had become disillusioned with the white control of the missionary societies, not least the ABM and LMS, and had established their own independent churches.⁷⁶ This was the beginning of what became the African Indigenous Church (AIC) movement in southern Africa.⁷⁷

73 See Marty, *Pilgrims in their Own Land*, 186; Norman Etherington, "Kingdoms of this World and the Next: Christian Beginnings among Zulu and Swazi," in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social & Cultural History*, eds. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 91.

74 See Steve de Gruchy, "A Remarkable Life: The Story of Joseph Wing," in *Spirit Undaunted: The Life and Legacy of Joseph Wing*, (Cluster: Pietermaritzburg, 2005), 1–127. *Spirit Undaunted* also includes essays by a range of authors on Wing's contribution to the ecumenical church in South Africa.

75 See Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane's Foreword to *Spirit Undaunted*, vii–viii.

76 See *Changing Frontiers: The Mission Story of the UCCSA*, ed. Steve de Gruchy, (Gaborone, Botswana: Pula Press, 1999).

77 See Bengt G.M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, (London: Lutterworth, 1948), 44–46; Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 40–50; *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa*, 12–18.

Labelled “Separatist” by the South African government, like the radical dissenters in 17th-century England, they were considered a threat to political stability. But their chief aim was to restore primitive Christianity free from European patronage, and many of them did so through rebaptism. Given this affinity with Anabaptism, it is not surprising that, many years later, American Mennonite missionaries in southern Africa entered a partnership with some AI Churches, as I discovered when, early in 1973, I was the guest speaker at a conference in Swaziland of Mennonite mission workers from across the region.⁷⁸

That brief encounter led to an invitation to spend a month teaching at Bethel College, a Mennonite institution in North Newton, Kansas, in January 1975, and a further invitation to give the Menno Simons Lectures there in 1977.⁷⁹ These lectures on the church’s struggle against apartheid evoked considerable interest because they were given shortly after the Soweto Uprising, the state murder of Steve Biko, and the banning of Beyers Naudé gained global media coverage.⁸⁰ Two years later, the lectures reached a wider audience when they were published as *The Church Struggle in South Africa* in the US, South Africa and Britain.⁸¹

This, my first major book, was generally well-received, but it also received some pertinent criticism to which I responded in a postscript to the second edition.⁸² But, then, twenty-five years later, our son Steve, who, as a high-school student, had heard the lectures at Bethel College and had since become an accomplished historian and theologian, suggested that we jointly publish a third anniversary edition in which some criticisms could be more fully addressed.⁸³ We also decided to replace the final chapter on

78 See Thomas A. Oduro, Jonathan P. Larson, James Krabill, *Unless a Grain of Wheat: A Story of Friendship between African Independent Churches and North American Mennonites*, (Langham Creative Projects, 2021)

79 de Gruchy, *I Have Come a Long Way*, 86–87, 101–111.

80 See *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1990*, vol. 5, eds. Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, 551–595, 741–748.

81 John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979)

82 John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, second edition, 1986), 239–244.

83 See John W. de Gruchy with Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th Anniversary 3rd edition, (London: SCM, 2004), xxi–xxvi. Steve, who also became a

“The Kingdom of God in South Africa” with two new chapters to bring the narrative up to date. In the first, I discussed the church struggle during the final years of resistance and the transition to democracy; in the second, Steve related the struggle in South Africa to the global struggles facing the church in the post-apartheid era.⁸⁴ Steve also contributed a historiographical evaluation of the original edition and concluded that it was neither theology nor history as generally understood, but “a contribution to the struggle and an invitation to others to participate in it.” It was, he said, as much a sermon as it was history and theology.⁸⁵

The only criticism I received of this third edition came in a doctoral dissertation on my theology in which, referring to the exclusion of the original concluding chapter on the Kingdom of God, I was accused of reneging on my previous commitment to pacifism and giving tacit support to the armed liberation struggle in South Africa.⁸⁶ The chapter was excluded for reasons of space rather than substance, but I now regret that we excised it, for it relates to the resurgence of Christian Nationalism and the need for active resistance to war. But had I reneged, as was said, on pacifism?

Many of my Mennonite friends find it difficult to reconcile Bonhoeffer’s exposition of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in his book *Discipleship*⁸⁷ with his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. This has led to some robust conversations between us and made me rethink my own position.⁸⁸ In 1984, I discussed this with Franz Hildebrandt, one of Bonhoeffer’s closest friends during the Church Struggle in Germany, who spent several weeks

Congregational minister and theologian, was influenced by the Mennonites. See *Living on the Edge: Essays in Honour of Steve de Gruchy: Activist & Theologian*, eds. James R. Cochrane, Elias Bongmba, Isabel Phiri, and Des van der Water, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2021).

84 See de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 3rd edition, chapters 5 and 6.

85 Steve de Gruchy, “Locating the Church Struggle in South Africa in the Wider Historiography of the Church in South Africa,” *The Church Struggle*, 3rd edition, xxvii–xxx.

86 See Rebecca Baer Porteus, *Seeking the Dawn: A Critical Reflection upon and response to the Theology of John de Gruchy*, PhD, Duke University, NC.1998.

87 See Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision”, in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, 28–54.

88 See John W. de Gruchy, “Radical Peace-Making: the Challenge of Some Anabaptists”, in Charles Villa-Vicencio, ed., *Theology and Violence: The South African Debate*, (Johannesburg: Skotaville. 1987), 173–188.

with Bonhoeffer in London in 1933 when he “watched the beginnings” of Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship*, “the one book treasured above all others.”⁸⁹ Shortly after, Bonhoeffer wrote and told a friend in Germany that “the real struggle” facing the church was not just confessing its faith, but in suffering through faith, and that “*following* Christ ... is not exhausted by our concept of faith.”⁹⁰ This was why Bonhoeffer wanted to go to India and learn from Gandhi about active non-violent resistance;⁹¹ it was also an affirmation of the Anabaptist critique of the Magisterial Reformation’s understanding of “salvation by faith alone”. This was confirmed for me when I later read Hildebrandt’s dissertation, *Gospel and Humanitarianism* (1942), in which he argued that the failure of the Lutheran church to exercise a prophetic witness in Nazi Germany was a consequence of its rejection of the witness of the Anabaptists.⁹² Bonhoeffer’s reservations about *Discipleship*, expressed in his prison letters, were not a retraction of costly discipleship, but a concern that his book might be misread in support of a pietism that lacked concern for the world.⁹³ But, certainly, he no longer regarded pacifism as an absolute and considered the attempt to assassinate Hitler a necessary act of free responsibility despite the guilt it would incur.⁹⁴ And this certainly influenced my response to those who engaged in the armed struggle against apartheid.

89 Franz Hildebrandt, “An Oasis of Freedom,” in *I Knew Bonhoeffer*, eds. Wolf-Dieter Zimmerman and Ronald Gregor Smith, (London: Collins, 1966), 39.

90 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933–1935*, DBWE 13, ed. Keith Clements, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 135.

91 See, Bonhoeffer, *London*, 81, 137

92 See de Gruchy, *I Have come a Long Way*, 136. Franz Hildebrandt, *Gospel and Humanitarianism*, PhD, Cambridge University, UK, 1941. The dissertation was not published, but I was asked to write an introduction when it was submitted for publication in 1985. When this was unsuccessful, my introduction was published as “Anticipating Liberation Theology: Franz Hildebrandt’s “Gospel and Humanitarianism”, in *El silbo ecuménico del Espíritu: Homenaje a José Míguez Bonino en sus 80 años* ed. Guillermo Hansen (Buenos Aires: Institutio Universitario ISEDET, 2005), 179–192.

93 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 486.

94 See John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer’s Questions: A Life-Changing Conversation*, (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2019), 141–143. “Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela and the dilemma of violent resistance in retrospect”, Stellenbosch Theological Journal, vol. 2, no.1, 2016, 43–60; Keith Clements, *A Patriotism for Today. Love of country in dialogue with the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011),

From its formation in 1912, the ANC had been committed to non-violent resistance in the tradition of Gandhi, and Albert Luthuli, a former ANC President and a Congregationalist from Natal, was among its most vocal advocates.⁹⁵ So, when the leadership of the ANC decided to embark on the armed struggle in 1961, it only did so when it seemed that all other options over the past half-century had failed.⁹⁶ As many ANC members also belonged to the church, this decision inevitably involved members of the church well before it erupted in public.⁹⁷ But it did erupt with a vengeance following the decision of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1970 to launch its Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) and provide humanitarian support to the liberation movements in southern Africa.⁹⁸ As far as the Government and most white members of the WCC's member churches in South Africa were concerned, this decision implied support for the armed struggle and the violent overthrow of the government. But pressure from black members ensured that all the member churches resisted the Government's attempt to get them to resign their membership, but the churches, including the UCCSA, did disassociate from the implied support for revolutionary violence. Despite this qualification, several congregations, not known for any pacifist convictions, withdrew in protest from the UCCSA in 1977, one of them being Union Church, whose leadership barred both Joseph Wing and I from addressing a meeting of the congregation. That was a sad day for the UCCSA, and I was now *persona non grata* in the congregation in which I had first imbibed the dissenting legacy of John and Jane Philips. But it was possible because traditional congregational polity can be gerrymandered, perhaps more than most.

When the UCCSA was formed in 1967, congregations of the former Congregational Union (CUSA) retained their autonomy regarding finance and property, whereas those which were previously LMS and ABM mission congregations never had such autonomy. This meant that the former, which included all historically white congregations, had the power to withhold

95 Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go*, (London: Collins, 1962)

96 See Z.K. Matthews, "The Road from Nonviolence to Violence," in *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5, eds. Karis and Gerhart, 347–355.

97 See De Gruchy, *I Have Come a Long Way*, 67–8.

98 De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 123–144.

financial support from the UCCSA if they disagreed with its policies and could withdraw entirely and take their property with them. In other words, the UCCSA could be held hostage by white minority opinion. This possibility was subsequently changed by constitutional amendments, which thereby also changed historic congregational polity, but that was designed to prevent state interference, not to prevent necessary prophetic witness. but in South Africa in the twentieth century, it was a stumbling block to such witness. The sad fact was that much of the white membership of the UCCSA had yet to be liberated from a colonial mentality and become part of an African-led church.⁹⁹ But the colonial captivity of the church could not continue after the Soweto Uprising if it was to respond to the crisis.

Shortly after the Uprising, a youth contingent from the UCCSA congregations in Soweto had addressed our annual Assembly meeting in Durban. Apart from sharing some of their harrowing experiences, they also posed a challenging question: if the church had declared apartheid unjust, and previously supported the war against Hitler as a “just war”, how could we not support those who choose to fight for justice now by joining the armed struggle? We could remain pacifist by conviction, but we could not sit on the fence; we had to learn how to resist non-violently. This was certainly a challenge we had to face as a denomination, nor could it be avoided in local congregations, and there were “white” congregations willing to deal with the issues. One of these was the Rondebosch Congregational Church, which we had joined when I began teaching at the University of Cape Town in mid-1973.

Like Union Church, Rondebosch had a liberal theological ethos, but located near the university, it attracted students and faculty. In 1979, as the debate over the Programme to Combat Racism was intensifying, the congregation called a Presbyterian, Douglas Bax, to become its minister. After Rhodes, Bax had studied further at Princeton and then under Barth in Basle. He had also recently published a devastating biblical and theological critique of apartheid and had no hesitation in addressing political issues from the

99 I would later explore this in the seventh Steve de Gruchy Memorial Lecture in 2019. See John W. de Gruchy, “Conversion & the Persistence of Colonial Racism,” chapter 2, in John W. de Gruchy, *Faith Facing Reality*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 31–55.

pulpit.¹⁰⁰ This, together with his biblical exegetical style of preaching, was strong meat for many in the congregation, and several migrated elsewhere, but the majority began to appreciate Bax's ministry. This also attracted university students, including some Baptists, who, like Steve, were facing military service and for whom conscientious objection had become a form of resistance. In 1988, in protest about the failure of the UCCSA and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa to unite after years of negotiations, the congregation surrendered some of its autonomy and overwhelmingly voted to become the Rondebosch United Church (Congregational/Presbyterian) and so became more Reformed and ecumenical. But in the process, was also recovered its Dissenting heritage just as the church and political struggle against apartheid took a new turn.

In 1982, the black Dutch Reformed Mission Church adopted the *Belhar Confession*, modelled on the *Barmen Declaration* drafted by Barth at the start of the German Church Struggle in 1934, declaring that the theological legitimization of apartheid was a heresy, a decision which was soon endorsed by the UCCSA.¹⁰¹ This meant that the DRC, which a century previously had adopted segregation as church policy and established racially stratified mission churches, was now being challenged from within its own family. This became more problematic when some ministers within the DR Mission Church, led by Allan Boesak, an outspoken prophet against apartheid, became actively involved in the United Democratic Front, which engaged in large-scale acts of non-violent resistance just when the external liberation struggle was intensifying. In response, in 1985, the government declared a State of Emergency.

This was the context in which an ecumenical group of theologians, led by Albert Nolan, a Catholic Dominican theologian and a dissenter if ever there was one, and a Pentecostal minister, Frank Chikane, met in Soweto to draft the *Kairos Document*, whose fortieth anniversary we celebrate this

100 Douglas S. Bax, *A Different Gospel: a Critique of the Theology behind Apartheid*, (Johannesburg: Presbyterian Church of SA, 1979)

101 See *Apartheid is a Heresy*, eds. John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, (Cape Town: David Philip; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church*, eds. G.D Cloete and D.J. Smit, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984)

year.¹⁰² Also involved were two UCCSA theologians, Bonganjalo Goba and James Cochrane, who had been a youth minister at the Rondebosch Church and one of our son Steve's mentors. Arguing that theology itself had become a site of the struggle against apartheid, the *Kairos Document* rejected "state theology", which gave Christian legitimacy to apartheid, as well as "church theology", which, it said, proclaimed "cheap reconciliation" without working for justice and liberation. Instead, the *Kairos Document* offered a "prophetic theology" which called the church to get off the fence and stand in solidarity with the liberation struggle. This was more radical than any previous theological attack on apartheid and immediately caused further public and ecclesiastical furore.¹⁰³

Some of us who endorsed the *Document* did, however, express reservations about its use of the term "church theology" as though church theology was invariably a defence of the status quo. The *Belhar Confession*, adopted by the DR Mission church and endorsed by the UCCSA, was surely an indication that a church theology could also be prophetic.¹⁰⁴ Reservations about "church theology" were later avoided in the *Kairos-Palestine Document* (2009), which was signed by all the Orthodox Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Palestine and breathed new life into the global *kairos* movement.¹⁰⁵

The disagreement about "church theology" by supporters of the *Kairos Document* highlighted the difference between a more Catholic understanding of the church as an institution and a Reformed understanding

102 *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Skotaville; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); revised second edition 1986.

103 See *The Church Struggle*, Third Edition, 184-222; John W. de Gruchy, "Bonhoeffer's legacy and Kairos-Palestine," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 143, July 2012, 67–80. "Kairos moments and prophetic witness: Towards a prophetic ecclesiology," published in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, Volume 72, Issue 4, 2016.

104 See John W. de Gruchy, "On Being a Prophetic Church at *This Kairos Moment*: In Celebration of Albert Nolan," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 177, 2023, Special Issue on "The Contested Legacy of the *Kairos Document*", 87–102; Ernst M. Conradie, "Liberation, Reconciliation or Transformation? Revisiting the *Kairos Document* and the *Belhar Confession*," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 177, 103–121.

105 See Anthony Balcomb and Phillippe Denis, "Introduction" to *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 177, 4–9.

of the church as existing only where and when “the Word is faithfully proclaimed,”¹⁰⁶ It also helps us understand why, after the transition to democracy, the ecumenical church was regarded as having failed to speak truth to those now in power, namely the new ANC government.¹⁰⁷ The fact is, *speaking* truth to power when this becomes necessary requires *embodying* the truth all the time not just turning on a prophetic mode when required.¹⁰⁸ As Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend in 1935, the real struggle facing the church was not just confessing its faith, as it did at Barmen in 1934, but in following and suffering for Christ all the time.¹⁰⁹ It was necessary to declare apartheid a “heresy”, but if the structure of the church is shaped by injustice, then the existence of the church is itself heretical. After all, this was the struggle in the early church between the Judaizers and those who wanted to include Gentiles, and it remains the struggle wherever culture, nationality, race, gender, or wealth determine the structure and mission of the church. Orthodoxy or “right belief” and orthopraxis or “right action” are inseparable, which is why Bonhoeffer’s questions “who is Christ for us today?” and therefore “what is the church?” are as pertinent for us today as they were when the leaders of the ecumenical church assembled in Nicaea in 325.

3. Ecumenical and Orthodox dissent from Nicaea (325) to the Jubilee (Rome 2025)

The birth of Christendom led many Christians to believe that God’s reign had been established on earth.¹¹⁰ They no longer had to fear the state or live in apocalyptic expectation. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea even declared that the emperor “is a bishop ordained by God to establish a Christian empire

106 See Steve de Gruchy, “From *Kairos* to Belhar: On Being Church in a Time of AIDS,” in *Keeping Body and Soul Together: Reflections by Steve de Gruchy on Theology and Development*, ed. Beverley Haddad, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2015), 242–253.

107 See Andrew G. Suderman, “The Character and Potential Pitfalls of Prophetic Theology: An Appreciatively Critical Look at Fr. Albert Nolan,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 177, 2023, 68–86.

108 See John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation Restoring Justice*, (London: SCM, 2002), 79–112.

109 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (DBWE 6), ed. Clifford Green, Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 96–97.

110 A good overview of the complex process is in Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: the Thrust of the Christian Movement into the Roman World*, (London: Collins, 1970)

and govern the whole world (*ecumene*) on God's behalf."¹¹¹ This meant that the message of the cross was no longer what the world considered foolish or impotent, and there was no contradiction in confessing Jesus as Lord and acknowledging the emperor as God's regent on earth. However, as Constantine knew, if Christianity was to replace the pagan deities of the past and become the spiritual glue that held the Empire together, the church needed to be united in faith. There was no room for heresy or dissent.

To this end, Constantine convened the first ecumenical Council at Nicaea to resolve the divisive Arian controversy. Arius, an ascetic and learned priest in Alexandria, acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God, but insisted he was subordinate to God the Father.¹¹² Reasonable as this sounded, as well as supported by some New Testament texts, for Arius' bishop Alexander and his young advisor and future successor, Athanasius, it was a gross heresy that undermined Christian faith.

Athanasius was responsible for writing the creed adopted at the Council of Nicaea, and shortly after his death, at the Council of Constantinople in 381, the *Nicene-Constantinople Creed* was confirmed as the doctrinal basis of Christian orthodoxy. It was a "rule of faith", said Emperor Theodosius, Constantine's successor, which only mad people and heretics would not accept, and they deserved to be punished by the state on the authority of God.¹¹³ This did not prevent Athanasius from opposing Theodosius on occasion for abusing his power and being exiled many times for his efforts, nor did it prevent Bishop Ambrose of Milan from challenging Theodosius for the same reason. But even if a distinction was drawn between imperial and episcopal power, to liken the emperor to St. Peter as the rock on which the empire is founded turned out to be, as Grillmeier remarks, "a volcano whose eruptions could convulse the Church at any time."¹¹⁴

111 See *A New Eusebius*, ed. J. Stevenson, London: SPCK, 1957), 390–395.

112 Of the many accounts of the Constantinian triumph, I have mainly used Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1957); W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984), 473–517; see also J.N.D. Kelly, *The Early Christian Creeds*, (London: Longman, 1950); Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975)

113 Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 327.

114 Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. two, part one, *From Chalcedon to Justinian I*, (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1987), 209.

After a detailed examination of the complexities of the Arian controversy, Rowan Williams has, with due caution, compared it to the German church struggle against National Socialism in the 1930s.¹¹⁵ The main point of his comparison is that in both cases the issue at stake is the uniqueness of God's free and gratuitous self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Whatever the differences within the triune God, the *personae* are not separate individuals but consubstantial and united in creation and redemption. This means that no "orders of creation" such as nation or ethnicity, are entitled to our unconditional loyalty other than the God revealed in Jesus Christ. As the Barmen Declaration, largely Barth's handiwork, put it, because "Jesus Christ... is the one Word of God", we must reject "other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation."¹¹⁶ Or, as the Belhar Declaration later said, the attempt by the theological apologists of apartheid to make race a God-given order of creation was a heresy that denied the Lordship of Christ over all reality.¹¹⁷

Congregationalists are not reticent about confessing their faith,¹¹⁸ but they do not normally use the *Nicene Creed* (or any other) in worship, even though they sing hymns that are creedal in character.¹¹⁹ The only confession required for membership is probably the earliest, namely, that "Jesus is Lord", made in tandem with a commitment to obey him.¹²⁰ And this means, as it did in the beginning, a rejection of the absolute claims of both Caesar and pagan idolatry, whatever their contemporary manifestation. To confess "Jesus is Lord" is not acknowledging that Jesus is in some sense divine and worth following, but that he is God incarnate, which is the

115 Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Second Edition, (London: SCM, 2001), 235–236.

116 The Barmen Declaration, <https://www.ekd.de/en/The-Barmen-Declaration-303.htm>

117 See Templin, *Ideology on a Frontier*, 301; David Bosch, "Nothing but a Heresy," in eds. John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Apartheid is a Heresy*, (Grand Rapids, IN: Eerdmans, 1983), 24–38.

118 See Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960)

119 See Bernard Lord Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, (London: Epworth Press, 1988)

120 Romans 10:9. See C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 35–45; C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (New York, NY: Harper, 1957), 200–201.

central tenet of the *Nicene Creed* on which everything else is contingent, including the doctrine of the triune God, which, as Forsyth insisted, “makes Christianity Christian”¹²¹ This also means that while Rome may have erred in unilaterally inserting the *filioque* clause into the Creed, Christ and the Holy Spirit, while distinct, are always united in purpose.¹²² For this reason, there should be no division between a Christological and a Pneumatological understanding of the church. As St Paul wrote, “... the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”¹²³ To confess Jesus as Lord means embracing the freedom that the Spirit gives the church to confess Christ in changing circumstances.

The truth is, the *Nicene Creed* was a response to a particular crisis in the fourth century, so while it may be the test of orthodoxy, it does not cover all the bases of Christian faith or stand apart from the Scriptures and their witness to the preaching or *kerygma* of the apostles on which it is based.¹²⁴ The *Nicene Creed*, for example, does not declare that “God is love”, which is, as St Augustine insisted, what the doctrine of the Trinity is about.¹²⁵ So from the outset, there has been much debate on how to interpret the Creed, not least in translation. How should we understand the relationship between the two natures of Christ and reconcile Jesus’ suffering and death with his status as “truly God”?

While such issues were clarified at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, that was not to the satisfaction of all, hence the early schism between Eastern and Oriental (Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, and Ethiopian) Orthodoxy.¹²⁶ And long before the schism between Constantinople and Rome occurred in 1045, there were differences of interpretation resulting from the translation

121 P.T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, (London: Independent Press, 1912, 1955) 263.

122 See “The Filioque Clause in Ecumenical Perspective,” (1979) in *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 172–175.

123 2 Corinthians 3:17.

124 See C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936)

125 I John 4:9. See *The Trinity: The Works of St. Augustine*, (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), VIII/5, 251–255.

126 See R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon: A Historical and Doctrinal Survey*, (London: SPCK, 1961), 3–87.

of the creed from Greek into Latin. Moreover, the fact that Western Christendom itself was torn apart by the Protestant Reformation despite a shared affirmation of the Nicene Creed demonstrates that Christian unity requires more than a creed enforced by the princes of Christendom. The truth is, neither an infallible Bible nor an infallible pope, nor creeds nor confessions of faith have managed to hold the ecumenical church or even denominations together when threatened by cultural and social forces or changing historical contexts. And when political and ecclesiastical authority attempts to maintain unity or enforce uniformity, it invariably undermines the integrity and witness of the church. That is why informed dissent is critical for the life and mission of the church in the world. Dissent may sometimes be heterodox, but it is more often at the forefront of identifying and countering heresy, as it did in the church struggles in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. Athanasius, Bonhoeffer and Naudé were all orthodox dissenters in confessing Christ as Lord.

G.K. Chesterton, a Roman Catholic, famously described orthodoxy as a “whirling adventure”. That might not be the language of Eastern Orthodoxy, but more soberly, as Kallistos Ware, one of its bishops, tells us, it is always about more than ascribing to a statement of faith, a set of principles, or even biblical texts; it is a way of living in, and travelling towards the mystery of God.¹²⁷ And ever since, as a student, I listened to lectures by Alexander Schmemmann, an émigré Russian Orthodox theologian, I have grown in appreciation of Eastern Orthodoxy for precisely that reason.¹²⁸ I have also discovered, with Keith Clements, that there are profound connections between Orthodoxy and Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, spirituality, and understanding of nature and salvation.¹²⁹ So even if I am not orthodox according to the norms of Eastern Orthodoxy, I think I am, in Bernard Lord Manning’s words, an orthodox dissenter.¹³⁰

127 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1979)

128 The lectures were published as *For the Life of the World* (New York, NY: National Student Christian Federation, 1963). See John W. de Gruchy, *Icons as a Means of Grace*, (Lux Verbi, 2011)

129 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, vol. 2 *The Christian Tradition*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974), 1–7.

130 Bernard Lord Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent*, (London: Independent Press, 1939) Manning (1892–1942), a Congregational layman, Medieval history at Cambridge University,

There were some very courageous Eastern Orthodox dissenters during the years of the Soviet Union, in which Christianity was proscribed, as there were in previous centuries. But, as Clements says, Bonhoeffer would have been deeply concerned about the connection between Eastern Orthodoxy and the virulent nationalism which has erupted in Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹³¹ For once authority is accepted as a “divine right”, then emperors, monarchs, as well as presidents begin to rule in a way that is no different from pagan rulers who were exalted as gods. This is idolatry, and this is why Christian Nationalism is a dangerous heresy that requires ecumenical dissent as it did in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. That is why alone, Bonhoeffer’s theology is as pertinent today as it was in 1933 when he gave his lectures on Christology in Berlin.¹³²

Much of these lectures deal with the development of Christology up to the Council of Chalcedon, before Bonhoeffer asks his question concerning the contemporary significance of Christ. All of this must be assumed when, in prison, he more cryptically describes Jesus as “the human being for others” and spells out its consequences for the church. In other words, Bonhoeffer is not positing a liberal understanding of the “Jesus of history” but insisting that the Christ of faith is truly “the human being for others”, and therefore that the church is only truly the church if it exists for others and confronts “the worship of power” by bearing witness to “the humanity of Jesus.”¹³³ This, to stress the point, was not a denial of the divinity of Christ, but a recognition that God’s power is revealed in the “weakness” of the cross,¹³⁴ echoing Luther’s *theologia crucis* against the *theologia gloriae* of Caesaro-Papism.¹³⁵ The only Christ who should determine the form and mission of

131 Keith Clements, “Dialogue with the Orthodox World: A Further Journey for Bonhoeffer,” in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in Transition*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, (Grand Rapids, IN: Eerdmans, 1997), 342, 351–352; Clements, “Dialogue or Confession? Ecumenical Responsibility and the War in Ukraine,” *Journal of Anglican Studies*, July 2023, 1–14. Cambridge University Press DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355323000451>

132 Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology”, in *Berlin*, 299–360; See de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer’s Questions*, 48–52.

133 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 503–504.

134 I Corinthians 1:18–25.

135 See Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” 1518 in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 1989), 30–49; Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, (Belfast: Christian Journals, 1976)

the church is the One who was crucified, for this is the only Christ who is risen and glorified.¹³⁶ If Jesus the crucified and risen Christ is Lord, then Caesar's power and authority, as well as that of the church, can never be absolute, even if we brazenly confess "with our lips that Jesus is Lord".¹³⁷

Luther's critique of papal triumphalism began after his disillusioning visit to Rome in 1510. Much had changed in the Roman church by the time, in 1924, Bonhoeffer, as a student, visited the city, and more has changed since I visited Rome in 1964, during the Second Vatican Council. But wars have not ceased, neither has poverty, injustice or the onslaught of atavistic nationalism. And this is the context in which I end my discussion in Rome because it is there, as Pope Francis (surely a pre-eminent dissenter of our time) lies seriously ill in hospital, that the Catholic Church is celebrating a Jubilee Year of Hope.¹³⁸

According to the Hebrew Bible, a Year of Jubilee was meant to be celebrated every fifty years by releasing people from the burden of their debts, setting slaves free, returning property to its rightful owners, and allowing the earth to lie fallow and recover from producing crops.¹³⁹ It is unlikely that this ever happened, yet Jesus surely had it in mind when, according to Luke, he began his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth by saying that he had been anointed by the Spirit to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" which was good news to the poor ... release to the captives ... recovery of sight to the blind" and "freedom for the oppressed."¹⁴⁰

The *Nicene Creed* does not refer to the prophetic ministry of Jesus, a subject that was probably not even discussed in the debates that preceded the Council of Nicaea.¹⁴¹ Of course, Christians believe that Jesus is more than

136 Philippians 2:5–11; See also Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, (London: SCM, 1974)

137 Romans 10:9; See John W. de Gruchy, "Barmen: A Symbol of Contemporary Liberation", in ed., Hubert G. Locke, *The Barmen Confession: Papers from the Seattle Assembly*, Toronto Studies in Theology, volume 26, (Lewiston, Canada, Edwin Mellen Press), 335–362.

138 See Pope Francis, *Hope: The Autobiography*, (London: Penguin 2025)

139 Leviticus, 25:1–13.

140 Luke 4:16–21. See Isaiah 61:1–1. See also Pope Francis, *Hope*, 117–118.

141 There is no reference to Christ as prophet in Alois Grillmeier *Christ in Christian tradition vol. 1 From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*, (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1975);

a prophet, but he clearly identified his mission with that of the prophets of social justice, something that is confirmed throughout Luke's Gospel from Mary's *Magnificat* to the parable of Dives and Lazarus.¹⁴² And the latter significantly concludes with Jesus saying that if people "do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."¹⁴³

Even though the prophetic witness of radical Christianity was pushed to the periphery of Christendom from the outset, and throughout subsequent history, established authority has tried to silence the voice of dissent, prophetic dissenters across the ecumenical spectrum continue to emerge and bear witness to their faith in words and deeds. They are not confined to any denomination or confessional tradition, and many have opted out of the church altogether. But I still cherish my Congregational heritage that, in South Africa, goes back to John and Jane Philip, for whom being evangelical meant both saving grace and struggling for justice, a heritage that was ecumenical from the outset, for the LMS had come to the Cape to serve Christ, not to establish a denomination.

It is, then, by no means a denial of that legacy that late in life, Isobel and I became Associates of the Order of St Benedict, an Anglican monastic community at Volmoed. After all, the first monks who went into the African Desert in protest against Christendom were undoubtedly dissenters.¹⁴⁴ And so, week by week as we join in saying the *Nicene Creed*, we are reminded of the mystery of God revealed in Christ through the Spirit into which we continue to be led. But we do so mindful that Benedict counsels us to "Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches," today. Words that remind us that one of our Congregational ancestors, having bewailed the fact that some churches of the Reformation were stuck in the past and could not see further than Luther and Calvin, famously said, "The Lord

see also James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Enquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, (London: SCM, 1980), 136–141.

142 For an extensive exposition of Luke's Christology, see Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 234–282.

143 Luke 16:31.

144 See John W. de Gruchy, *This Monastic Moment: The Wars of the Spirit and the Rule of Love*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021)

has yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy Word."¹⁴⁵ With those words in mind, we celebrate 2025 as "An Ecumenical Year on the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity" with Christians across the world.¹⁴⁶

145 Davies, *English Free Churches*, 56.

146 As designated by the World Council of Churches, See Nicaea2025@wcc-coe.org