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IN DISCUSSION WITH PIETER VERSTER

GvdW: When you are due to retire, one normally reflects on one's life and contribution. How do you feel about this at the moment?

PV: Thinking back, the words of David in 1 Chronicles 17 verse 16 come to mind where he explains that he and his family are not worthy, but have been blessed so much by the Lord. I had some health challenges in my life, but the Lord helped me reach this point in time. My family and especially my wife supported me throughout. I have had the great opportunity to be a minister of religion for some time and to teach students the wonders of mission and missiology. I am grateful to the University of the Free State for giving me the opportunity to teach mission and to do research regarding this delightful discipline. I served under five deans, and all of them have made it possible for me to teach missiology without interference. I also want to acknowledge the promoters of my doctoral studies, Prof. Carel Boshoff and Prof. Johan Heyns, as well as my predecessor in missiology, Prof. Koos Smit.

GvdW: Please give us a brief biographical summary: Where did you grow up, study, work? Tell us about your family, special interests/hobbies.

PV: I was born and bred in the Free State. Born in Heilbron, I later started school at Vrede Primary School, continued in Bloemfontein at Willem Postma Primary School and matriculated from Grey College High School. I did my admission BA at the University of the Free State and completed my theological studies at the University of Pretoria. I obtained my two doctorates from the University of Pretoria. I studied for a while in Europe and was then called to the Dutch Reformed Bloemfontein North Congregation (the so-called Klipkerk),

where I served for roughly 9 blessed years with superb colleagues, Dr Frans Burger and Rev. Fanie Schoonees, their wives and families. In 1992, I was called by the church to the Faculty of Theology, at that time a faculty of the Dutch Reformed Church. Soon after my appointment, it became an open faculty.

I was blessed with the most wonderful parents, Koos and Frida Verster, who were also born and bred in the Free State. My three brothers and their wives, my sister and her husband, and their families play a positive role in my life. I am grateful to God for my lovely wife Ernène, and our children Wanda, Frida, and Pieter Lafras, as well as my son-in-law Wilhelm Odendaal.

Rugby always played an important role in the Verster family, but I never reached the high levels of rugby as my brothers did.

I love literature, especially Afrikaans literature, and a few of my poems have been published in literary journals. My golf was a total disaster: I looked for missing golf balls for many hours and ultimately gave up, for there is more to life!

GvdW: Why are you interested in theology, specifically in missiology?

PV: My upbringing in the Christian faith by my parents and my grandparents is an absolute privilege. To have been raised in such a positive Afrikaans, Christian family was unbelievable. After my matric year, Brother Andrew came to Bloemfontein and challenged young people to become involved in mission. It had a massive influence on my life. I got involved in the Dutch Reformed mission to the Communist world and distributed Bibles to foreign ships and boats in Walvis Bay harbour, Cape Town harbour, and other harbours in South Africa. As the secretary of the church's outreach, Rev. Pieter de Wet greatly inspired me.

I had the privilege to study at the Universities of the Free State and Pretoria. I found theology and, more specifically, missiology the most interesting disciplines. To me, these disciplines were never something to be developed in ivory towers. They have meaning for this life and the future life with Christ.

GvdW: Why did you obtain a second PhD, and was it worthwhile?

PV: I did a PhD in Systematic Theology and Ethics with Prof. Johan Heyns as promoter. It was on the ministry of reconciliation during revolutionary times. It blended in well with my first PhD on salvation in the light of Marxism Leninism in Southern Africa of that time. Missiology and systematic theology have many aspects that are important for both disciplines. My interest remained, in both instances, in how the church can be relevant in revolutionary times

by remaining true to the essence of the Gospel, namely that God loved the world so much that He gave his only Son so that whosoever believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life.

GvdW: What were your focus areas in missiology and why were they so important to you? For instance, Christology played an important role in your definition of missiology. You wrote a book on that. Please explain this approach.

PV: I have always regarded the challenges in South Africa in revolutionary times as most important for missiology. The philosophical background of Marxism-Leninism and a Christian apologetical reply to the challenges in revolutionary times interested me a great deal. The miracle of, through the Grace of God only, bringing people out of darkness to the magnificent light of Jesus Christ has always been crucial to me. The plight of people in informal settlements and the failure of governments to come up with policies to change it, challenged me to seek the church's involvement. Essential in these regards remains the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord. The confession of Christ as verily God and verily human remains absolute. Since my early days, my minister in the Berg-en-Dal congregation of the DRC, Dr Tienie Zeeman's emphasis on the Divinity of Christ has remained the confession on my lips. Reading Athanasius during my Honours in Greek urged me to proclaim that all the more. This led to my book on Christ and mission. I am also indebted to Prof. Bram van de Beek's insights in this regard. Christ's divinity touches every aspect of mission. My book was written in Afrikaans as protest against the present rejection of this beautiful language and written on the implications of Jesus' divinity for missions as protest against many theologians' present disregard of this confession. The positive aspects of Christology are huge for mission and missiology, especially at present. I also plan a book to explain the huge implications of confession regarding the Holy Spirit and God the Father for mission.

GvdW: You also focused a great deal on reconciliation – on Christ the Reconciler. Could you briefly elaborate on this?

PV: There is a deep need for reconciliation in South Africa and the world. In my research, I tried to follow the line of the great reconciliation passage, namely 2 Corinthians 5:11-21: Christ is the One for the others, He gave Himself for all. He who was without sin was made sin so that we can be reconciled with God. From this reconciliation flows the reconciliation with the others. This message must remain central in mission.

GvdW: You did much research on poverty in our townships. Are you hopeful that the church can indeed play a role in healing our broken communities?

PV: I am rather pessimistic about the situation in poverty-stricken areas. We need economic policies that will enhance entrepreneurship and create more jobs. A person who has an occupation has self-respect and hope for the future. The church must be a positive instrument in empowering people to create work and enhance the future of the community. Soup kitchens and bread distribution have limited effect. What is needed is a positive economy and the church's role in this regard is to empower people to do that.

GvdW: During the past few decades, there have been big changes in the discipline of missiology. The missional discourse, decolonisation, dialogue between faiths, and a focus on community development are but a few of these changes. What is your view for missiology in the future?

PV: There is the story of the government (I think in Brazil) who built a bridge but did not take into account that the river could shift, and the bridge became obsolete. Some say that this is the missiology of the past. I have a different view. Recently, I walked across the centuries-old Charles Bridge in Prague. It still stands. Missiology, deeply grounded in the confessions, and proclaiming Christ's Divinity and humanity, is still needed. It does not mean that the challenges of the present day such as decolonisation and the fourth industrial revolution do not need to be addressed fully. Mission committed to the apostolic faith remains essential. I am concerned that missiology and theology, in general, are very often sold out to the present-day philosophical ideas. These ideas are important, but sound theology must always seek to listen to the Word of God in all earnestness and at all times. The solas of the Reformation, namely *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus* must always and at all times remain essential to theology and missiology. Missiology must engage all the new challenges, but must also remain true to the essence of the Gospel.

GvdW: Jy het ook 'n besondere belangstelling in die Afrikaanse letterkunde. Jy het selfs 'n digbundel die lig laat sien. Vertel 'n bietjie meer hiervan. Is daar 'n verband tussen letterkunde en teologie, die woord en die Woord?

PV: In my ouerhuis was daar 'n groot liefde vir die letterkunde, veral Afrikaanse letterkunde. NP van Wyk Louw was 'n geliefde digter in ons huis. My liefde vir Afrikaans is deur die jare steeds gevoed deur onderwysers, dosente en vriende. Enkele van my gedigte en kortverhale is deur die jare in letterkundige tydskrifte opgeneem. Ek het hierdie en ander gedigte gebundel in die bundel, *Die breek van eerste lig*. Teologie, die sending en die letterkunde het veel in gemeen. Groot digters se worsteling met God dien steeds tot nadenke. In Afrikaans is daar verskeie gedigte wat as diep Christelik beskou

sal kan word. Daar is ook gedigte uit 'n ander oord wat uit sendingkundige oogpunt vrae stel, soos die gedigte van Breyten Breytenbach, en wat dus ook ontleed moet word. Dit geld ewe-eens vir romans en dramas.

GvdW: Gaan jy die kollegas en studente mis? Watter planne het jy vir na aftrede?

PV: Sedert 1992 is ek as dosent betrokke by die Fakulteit Teologie. Dit sal uiteraard groot aanpassing verg om nou 'n nuwe lewensfase te betree. Verskeie gesprekke in die teekamer en elders het tot nuwe insigte gelei en mens sal dit mis. Groot is ook my waardering vir die ondersteuningspersoneel wat my deur die jare besonder bygestaan het. Ek het baie respek vir die studente wat onder die huidige, moeilike omstandighede steeds kies om teologie te studeer. Sendingtoere wat ek met hulle meegemaak het, bly my steeds by. Ek sal in die toekoms steeds navorsing wil doen. Ek sal ook graag wil skryf, akademies en letterkundig. Dan sal ek ook nou die wêreld wil verken met Ernène en my kinders. En ek sal in die kerk betrokke wil bly; ek wil bly getuig: Alles, alles is genade onverdiende guns alleen.

TORSO

Die lou asem wat in U longe beweeg
 ruk U liggaam terug in voorlaaste sug,
 die lewe is soos 'n vlag wat oulaas val.
 Papyrus sonder letters hou wonde leeg.
 Nou wag slegs die stil vroue op die dood,
 terwyl hulle soos moeders van soldate
 vertoef by die rou liggaam. terwyl die kordate
 soldate nog oor bloednat klere loot.
 'n Geliefde word trou weer weggeleë.
 Staan nader – rituele van lewe,
 fluisterend oor wat Hy so helder wou sê
 Is daar belofte in die leë liggaam?
 Al die trane van die dood is opgeberg,
 as ons ons ten dode werp op U mooi Naam.
 Uit die bundel: *Pieter Verster, Die breek van eerste lig*

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