


# Honouring Andries van Aarde: A journey of faith, justice, and inclusivity



## Author:

Johan Buitendag<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliation:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Johan Buitendag,  
johan.buitendag@tuks.co.za

## How to cite this article:

Buitendag, J., 2024, 'Honouring Andries van Aarde: A journey of faith, justice, and inclusivity', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a10412. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10412>

## Copyright:

© 2024. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

## Read online:



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

## Condolences

The passing of Andries van Aarde on Monday, 25 November 2024, marks a profound loss for the Church and the academic community. Born on 25 April 1951, Andries dedicated his life to pursuing theological understanding and promoting social justice.

We offer our deepest condolences to Andries's family, friends, and colleagues. His unwavering commitment to Christ's teachings and dedication to inclusivity and justice have profoundly affected the faith community. His legacy will continue to inspire and guide future generations of theologians and believers.

Andries van Aarde, a distinguished theologian and clergyman, made significant contributions to the field of theology and the practice of the Church through his academic work and personal convictions. His journey, marked by a commitment to radical inclusivity and a critical approach to theology, has left an indelible mark on scholarly and religious communities.

## Editor-in-chief of the *HTS Theological Studies*

Andries is particularly honoured for his invaluable contribution to developing the *HTS Theologiese Studies* (HTS). As editor from 1985 to 2023, he developed this journal into the leading scholarly journal in theology in Africa today. Notably, his guidance in transitioning the journal to an online platform has likely increased its readership and impact more than a hundredfold. He was instrumental in encouraging many other journals to pursue this path. *HTS Theological Studies* currently attracts about half a million visitors a year worldwide, especially from the United States of America, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Last year, the HTS published 264 peer-reviewed articles (the second highest in Africa is 88), its impact index is 24 (the second highest is 13), and it has achieved 598 cites (the second highest is 129) (Scimago Journal & Country Rank 2024).

## Academic achievements

Andries van Aarde's academic journey is nothing short of extraordinary. He held three doctoral degrees (DD, DLitt, PhD) and a Master's degree in Semitic Languages, obtained with distinction. His career began in academia after a brief 5-year period in ministry (1975–1980). He progressed through various academic ranks, from lecturer to senior lecturer, associate professor, professor, and head of department. He was a post-retirement professor and fellow at the University of Pretoria's Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship.

His publication record is impressive: at least 8 monographs, 50 book chapters, 250 journal articles, and editorial contributions to numerous books. Andries's work has been recognised globally, with invitations to be a visiting professor on multiple continents, including prestigious universities in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America. ResearchGate indicates a readership of 69562 for his publications. His academic rigour and dedication to theological scholarship have earned him a place among the most respected theologians of his time.

Andries received several accolades:

- Five times in the 3-year cycle, awarded by University of Pretoria (UP) for excellent academic achievement.
- Three times awarded by the SA Academy for Science and Arts for his contribution to Afrikaans in practising theology.
- Awarded as Otterbein Humanities Professor by the US Government.

- Awarded as Researcher by the St Daniel's Institute, Hawarden, Wales.
- Presented with the HCM Fourie Prize in 2007 for achievement in Biblical-Reformational Theology.
- Appointed a member of the Committee for Publications in South Africa (CPiSA) by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf).
- Pieter van Drimmelen Medal in 2008 of the South African Academy of Science and Art (SAAWK) for promoting the Afrikaans language and culture in the field of religion.
- He was awarded the ATKV-SA Academy Prize in 2011 for two of his Afrikaans articles that appeared in the 2008 issues 64(1) and 64(4) of HTS.
- Andrew Murray Desmond Tutu Prize in 2022. The Andrew Murray Desmond Tutu (AMDT) Prize Fund aims to encourage excellence and quality in the Christian media world by awarding prizes to publications and productions in Afrikaans and all the other languages of South Africa.

His role also characterises his professional journey as a visiting professor at various prestigious institutions worldwide. This international recognition underscores the global impact of his work and the respect he commands in the academic community. His contributions have advanced theological scholarship and fostered a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of religious studies.

## Theological contributions

Andries van Aarde's theological work can be categorised into three main areas: Jesus Studies and the social context of Early Christianity, Matthew Studies, and Hermeneutics. A deep understanding of texts characterises his approach to theology through the perspectives of their original authors, contemporary listeners, and modern readers. This method requires keen psychological insight as he seeks to understand each statement's inner dimensions and psychological value.

In his Jesus Studies, Andries explores the historical and social context of Jesus' life and teachings. He delves into the ethical implications of Jesus' message and how it challenged the societal norms of his time. His work in this area has provided valuable insights into the transformative power of Jesus' teachings and their relevance in contemporary society.

Matthew Studies is another significant area of Andries's work. He examines the Gospel of Matthew through a critical lens, exploring its theological themes and historical context. His research has shed light on the unique perspectives offered by Matthew and how they contribute to our understanding of Early Christianity.

Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, is a central theme in Andries's work. He emphasises the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context of biblical texts in order to grasp their meaning entirely. His approach to Hermeneutics is rigorous and innovative, offering new ways to engage with and interpret religious texts.

## Radical inclusivity and social theology

For nearly 30 years, Andries's thoughts, as reflected in his numerous publications, have been marked by controversy in certain circles in South Africa. Some considered his 'social theology' and understanding of the Bible as unorthodox and even heretical. His monograph, *Fatherless in Galilee* (Van Aarde 2001), led to much controversy in his church and even to orchestrated efforts at excommunication. In this book, he explores how being fatherless influenced the life and ministry of Jesus. This book adds a new dimension to the study of the historical Jesus and convincingly demonstrates that being fatherless was foundational in Jesus' ministry. However, he has always maintained that he does not deviate from the core of orthodoxy. His critical theology is open to drawing richly from non-biblical testimony and unconventional beliefs. He critiques Afrikaner nationalism, male dominance, ecclesiastical institutional power, homophobia, the undervaluation of children with the help of church sanction, racism, and populist self-preservation with accompanying lukewarmness towards ecumenism.

Andries's commitment to radical inclusivity is a defining feature of his work. He believes that the message of the gospel is one of inclusivity and justice, and he has dedicated his career to advocating for these values. His critique of societal and ecclesiastical structures perpetuating exclusion and discrimination has made him controversial. However, it has also earned him respect and admiration from those who share his vision of a more inclusive and just society.

His work in social theology emphasises the importance of addressing social issues from a theological perspective. He argues that theology should not be confined to abstract concepts, but should engage with the real-world issues that affect people's lives. His approach to social theology is practical and transformative, offering a vision of faith deeply engaged with the world and committed to social justice.

## Publications and major works

Cambridge Scholars Publishing (CSP) requested that Andries illustrate, in book format, how his life story had influenced his views on God, Jesus, and the Bible. This opportunity led to the publication of two comprehensive volumes: *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume 1: Discontinuity in Content, Continuity in Substance* (Van Aarde 2020a) and *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume 2: To and From Jerusalem* (Van Aarde 2020b). These volumes begin with a description of the diversity and plurality of Early Christianity, highlighting the roles played by Gnosticism and the Ebionites. Andries argues that the Kingdom of God is the ethical appeal made by the historical Jesus, further developed by Paul and Matthew in different ways.

In these volumes, Andries explores the complex and multifaceted nature of Early Christianity. He examines the various theological perspectives that emerged in the early

Church and how they contributed to the development of Christian doctrine. His work highlights the diversity of early Christian thought and how different communities interpreted and applied the teachings of Jesus.

The first volume, *Discontinuity in Content, Continuity in Substance*, focuses on the ethical teachings of Jesus and how Paul and Matthew interpreted them. Andries argues that while there are differences in how these figures understood and articulated the message of Jesus, there is a fundamental continuity in their emphasis on the ethical implications of the Kingdom of God.

The second volume, *To and From Jerusalem*, explores Jerusalem's geographical and symbolic significance in developing early Christian thought. Andries examines how the city of Jerusalem served as a focal point for the theological reflections of Jesus, Paul, and Matthew. He also delves into the personal and spiritual journey that led him to these insights, providing a deeply personal and reflective account of his faith journey, to and from Pretoria.

## Personal reflections

Andries's theology is deeply intertwined with his personal life. He embodies the love of Christ in his outreach to marginalised communities and his care for those on the fringes of society. His involvement in the Netherdutch Reformed Church's *To Care* programme is a testimony to his commitment to living out his beliefs. Andries has inspired many theologians and laypeople, teaching that a theologian stands 'under' the Bible, not 'on' it.

In honouring Andries van Aarde, it is plausible to reflect on the metaphor of a *triple helix* to describe his *Zeitgeist*, role and contributions. This metaphor, borrowed from genetics, symbolises the intertwining of three influential theologians of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Afrikaans: NHKA): Albert Geyser, James Loader, and Andries van Aarde. Each of these scholars brought unique perspectives and insights into the field of theology, much like the three strands of a triple helix. Together, they represent a dynamic and evolving relationship that has significantly shaped theological discourse. This approach is probably the original character of the core of what Hervormde theology should be, as conceived by Ethical Theology in the Netherlands in the 19th century. Truth is an encounter.

Andries van Aarde's *magnum opus*, in particular, highlighted the continuity and discontinuity in the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and Matthew, emphasising a core ethical message of the Kingdom of God. This innovative approach showcased the complexity and richness of early Christian thought and underscored Andries's commitment to a critically engaged and historically rooted theology. His contributions and those of Geyser and Loader form a cohesive and transformative vision of faith, justice, and inclusivity.

Andries's reflections also highlight the challenges he has faced in his career. His commitment to radical inclusivity and social justice has often put him at odds with established

institutions and societal norms. He has faced criticism and opposition, but has remained steadfast in his convictions. His journey is a testament to the power of faith and the importance of staying true to one's beliefs, even in the face of adversity. Despite severe clerical opposition and even orchestrated efforts at excommunication and several disciplinary hearings by the official bodies of his church, he remained loyal and in solidarity with his church.

## Impact and legacy

Andries van Aarde profoundly impacts theology and the broader religious community. His work has challenged conventional thinking and opened new theological reflection and engagement avenues. His commitment to radical inclusivity and social justice has inspired a new generation of theologians and religious leaders to think critically about the role of faith in addressing social issues.

Andries's influence extends beyond his work, as he has helped shape countless individuals' thinking and careers. The Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria honoured Andries during its centenary in 2017 as one of the 10 most influential theologians of the faculty during the past hundred years. He played a pivotal role in 'opening the gates' of the faculty (the motto of the centenary celebrations). Moltmann – who was bestowed an honorary doctorate by the faculty during its centenary – referred to this as the 'Gateway-Theology' of Pretoria. Moltmann also writes elsewhere that Jesus was crucified outside the wall of Jerusalem because this describes precisely for whom he was crucified: those *outside* the walls of Jerusalem.

Andries and his wife, Esther, recently moved to their retirement home. Somewhat surprising, in his small study room, a photograph of Andries and Moltmann hangs prominently against the wall. My take from this is that Andries increasingly associated himself with Moltmann's theology's ecumenical and ecological contours.

The academic and clerical community mourns the loss of a brilliant scholar and mentor.

The legacy of Andries will continue to inspire and guide future generations of theologians and scholars.

Johan Buitendag,  
Professor Emeritus,  
University of Pretoria,  
Advent 2024.

## References

- Scimago Journal & Country Rank, 2024, *Journal ranking*, viewed 29 November 2024, from <https://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?category=1212&area=1200&country=Africa&type=j&order=h&ord=desc>.
- Van Aarde, A., 2001, *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as child of God*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York, NY.
- Van Aarde, A., 2020a, *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, volume one - Discontinuity in content, continuity in substance*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, United Kingdom.
- Van Aarde, A., 2020b, *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, volume two: To and from Jerusalem*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, United Kingdom.