



# **The struggle over the Enlightenment and Christ's bodily resurrection in the new South Africa's Dutch Reformed Church**

– A Review Article of Ferdie Mulder's Afrikaans book: *Opgestaan* (Cambridge: Opgestaan Publikasies, 2011). ISBN 978-1-4316-0068-7

## Contents

Place and Church: South African Background .....	3
The Man and the Story: “Opgestaan” .....	3
Lessons for Church and Country? .....	7

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### **Place and Church: South African Background**

Woven into the fabric of South Africa's history and peoples, one finds the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Arriving in 1652 as part of the Dutch plan to have a replenishment station for its navigators around the Cape of Good Hope, the DRC established a presence on African soil and mind for the three ancient Ecumenical symbols of catholic Christianity, as well as the three Forms of Unity of North European Reformed Christianity. This primarily Calvinistic, freedom-searching Afrikaner-people had this spiritual input as its guide to a world view, drawing inspiration as it expanded into Southern Africa with comprehensive missionary zeal. The heads and hearts forming the DRC in its frail humanity, throughout a turbulent historical course, caused a fair amount of church building, -planting and -splitting. In the post-1940's, with echoes from two unfortunate late nineteenth, early twentieth century wars between the Afrikaners and the British still resonating in its ranks, the DRC would become increasingly scorned and globally isolated for the unintended consequences of the worst kind that a policy once visualised, implemented and theologically defended by church leaders had on all peoples of South Africa (apartheid). Then, painfully learning lessons from a failed project, from within its midst came leadership (cf. i.e. the legacies of BB Keet, Ben Marais, Beyers Naude, David Bosch, Willie Jonker) to guide the Afrikaner membership to see theological errors made and to seek restitutions. The church established theological training (seminaries having special agreements with universities) at amongst other places Stellenbosch (1859 – to counter theological liberalism in Netherlands-based training), Pretoria (also called “Tukkies” in 1938) and Bloemfontein (1980), and produced well-known theologians like John Murray (†1882), David Bosch (†1992 – from DRC background, but professor in missiology at the University of South Africa), Johan Heyns (†1994), the famous lexicographer Jannie Louw (†2011), and more recently international scholars like Abraham Malherbe (Yale), Cilliers Breytenbach (Berlin) and Jan van der Watt (Nijmegen).

### **The Man and the Story: “Opgestaan”**

Onto the scene in 2001, for the six years theological training (BTh four years, MDiv two years), at the Theological Faculty, University of Pretoria (also called “Tukkies”, and by far the largest of the three), came a student, full of passion to be equipped with theological knowledge and skills for ministry. Frederik S. Mulder (also called Ferdie) comes from Afrikaner parentage on both sides, with missionaries and reformed ministers from both Dutch and Scottish descent in his lineage. He ended up being barred by the DRC from entering the ministry in his final year of study, as well as being banned by Tukkies from any further theological study, after completing his MTh in Biblical Studies in 2006, following disciplinary hearings. In 2011 his 368 page book *Opgestaan* (in English *Risen or Resurrected* is published, with subtitle “Students’ struggle for faith at Tukkies in the years 2001–2006”), in which he reflects on *how* and *why* his expulsion came about. Mulder finished the book shortly after completing an M.A. in Biblical Studies at Durham University, United Kingdom, and before starting as Ph.D. candidate in New Testament at Nijmegen, the Netherlands in 2010.

In the Preface (xi-xix), dated February 2010, Mulder gives us the outline of his story. One of the professors whose teachings drove Mulder and other senior students to formulate a “Status Confessionis” in June 2005, Julian Müller, published in 2006 an account of his interpretation of the resurrection with the title *Opstanding* (in English *Resurrection*). He wrote the book to vent his protest against what he regarded as a growing stream of fundamentalist belief in the “bodily” resurrection and “empty tomb” of Christ, and which had challenged him in the preceding years. Following Müller’s book, with the encouragement of DRC members, ministers and also anonymous senior professors, Mulder eventually became convinced to describe in as nuanced a way as possible, the story of how he (and some other students) lived through it, and to express his concern about what he saw as a theological river swelling in the DRC, whereby Enlightenment worldviews were welcomed uncritically to the extent of causing substantial skepticism about central Christian claims such as Jesus’ bodily resurrection and the testimony of the empty tomb.

By means of Mulder’s story, those wishing to become familiar with personae, plots and positions in recent Afrikaans Protestant theology in South Africa can find their guide. In the first half, in a narrative-based style, he carefully sketches the build-up to the “Declaration” that caused all the trouble. Amongst other incidents, he refers to the influence of a book, published in 2000 by prominent DRC theologian Dr Ben du Toit, as an indicator of the left-wing theological current (8-23). Du Toit advocates a post-modern faith, cleansed of what he sees as old-world mythological baggage. Controversially, Du Toit was appointed to the position of chairman of the church’s doctrinal committee, formulating new doctrinal recommendations for the General Synod to consider every four years. Mulder tells how students’ unease with being presented with these so-called “new” truths as legitimate and in accordance with the gospel were brushed aside consistently by the workings of the official church machine and faculty. Also important, he makes clear that students’ concerns had nothing to do with uneasiness about things like social justice, honest wrestling with and thorough engagement with the plethora of developments in critical biblical scholarship, as well as fresh and cutting edge research, which should be standard practice at universities *and* seminaries. Mulder and some of his friends were involved in mercy projects in a black “township” and white orphanage at the time, and, significantly, achieved distinctions for their bachelor degrees, showing their diligence and desire to make a difference on ground level as well as taking critical scholarship seriously. Their main problem was that some ordained DRC scholars, in their teaching and public pronouncements, went far beyond the heart of the confessional identity and boundaries upon which the DRC confessions are built – and which all DRC professors and ministers promised to uphold in an ordination ceremony. In the mix of troubling teaching was enthusiasm for the historical Jesus book *Fatherless in Galilee* by the Hervormde Kerk, New Testament scholar, Andries van Aarde (member of the American *Jesus Seminar* and personal friend of John Dominic Crossan), and in particular Jurie le Roux, a DRC Old Testament professor’s boundless support and appreciation for it, as well as Le Roux’s ruthless focus on classical nineteenth-century historical-critical work and Enlightenment worldviews. Mulder reports on a controversial public meeting about the *New Reformation* (sister organisation of the American *Jesus Seminar*) where Le Roux stated that his support of Van Aarde’s *Fatherless in Galilee* should be seen as an indication that the resurrection of Jesus does not have to be taken literally any longer. In another unfortunate incident in 2004, Le Roux lost his temper during a lecture for undergraduate students and called Scripture “the fraud of people” (Afrikaans: “die gekonkel van mense”) (36-38).

Chapters one to five of Mulder’s book narrate a tale of student adventure, deep and honest study, struggle, shock and officialdom’s uncaring opposition and obstruction. In addition to the complexities described above, the unfolding events which eventually led to the notorious 15 June 2005 student declaration about the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which Mulder (shortly after resigning as chairman of the DRC student body) formulated primarily – but with input from senior postgraduate students, was among other things: i) the church board, under the chairmanship of Dr Kobus Gerber’s extended and consistent inability or unwillingness to deal with oral and written complaints with regards to Christ’s uniqueness and bodily

resurrection, ii) The church board's refusal of further conversation with senior students about pressing doctrinal concerns in March 2005, iii) Five left-wing students, under the leadership of Cobus van Wyngaard, an undergraduate student, who went to the secular media in June 2005 giving their unequivocal support to all the DRC professors, denying any serious doctrinal problems, and significantly also iv) Professor Julian Müller, DRC Head of Department in Practical Theology's unwillingness to confess the bodily resurrection of Jesus when asked about it during a June 2005 national radio broadcast. All of these events eventually contributed to the declaration which were signed by some forty-six students, and distributed at the faculty and in the church (61-68). The declaration's heading reads:

*"We believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead historically-literally and bodily".*

In the paragraph that follows, Mulder explained those interpretations they disagreed with:

*"We want to differ from views that take the resurrection of Jesus to be non-historical, non-literal and non-bodily. Such theories hold amongst other things that Jesus' resurrection is possibly figurative, metaphoric, non-literal, mythological, symbolic, a pre-modern worldview expression, and that the resurrection does not matter historically" (88-89).<sup>1</sup>*

In footnotes at the bottom of the one-page declaration, each of the above interpretations were linked to published articles, books or personal conversations with these DRC theologians. Additionally, reference was also made about two theologians from the Cape Province: Dr Ben du Toit and Prof Louis Jonker, the latter from Stellenbosch University.

Mulder is very candid about the shortcomings of the declaration, the naïve way in which he went about constructing and publishing it, and acknowledges his technical errors of process and procedure along the way. For example, nine of the forty-six students whose names appeared on the declaration did not read the declaration first-hand, they were phoned, and the document's first edition was redactionally fine-tuned following recommendations made by an anonymous DRC professor. Before any disciplinary hearings proceeded (see below), Mulder offered his apology to students for technical errors.

This declaration caused a threatening response by the DRC governing body who oversees theological training for students. The threat was initially in the form of a mobile phone sms (text) sent by Dr Flip du Toit to students' phones whose names appeared on the declaration stating: "Note taken of signing of Declaration (Ferdie). Possible legal action can follow. Contact me urgently..." [English translation]. Within a few days, and following a formal threatening letter from the church board, all except Mulder revoked their support for it. One student, Riaan Rossouw rejoined it again later following unsatisfactory talks with church officials, but he resigned from the DRC shortly after ordination (91–103).

The church board decided to proceed with an internal, quasi-legal disciplinary hearing, charging Mulder initially with "fraud", only to significantly change the charge to "dishonesty", the latter being a word not found - nor on which basis one can be found guilty - in a South African court of law. Mulder was found guilty of "dishonesty" with regards to the technical changes to the declaration, and suspended as a DRC ordinand. Mulder appealed to the General Synod's committee overseeing legal matters, only to receive a letter four months later indicating that the board decision was final and that no appeal could be heard. Significant for Mulder was also a telephone call from the church board's lawyer who wanted to negotiate a special deal. What he offered was the possibility of Mulder being re-admitted as DRC student, in turn for Mulder's withdrawing all the claims he made about the three DRC professor's views on the resurrection of Jesus. Mulder refused.

While the hearing was in process, Mulder together with two ministers and one congregation took Müller, Le Roux, and Human's allegedly controversial views to their local church council (classis) as per the code of conduct of the DRC, believing that their reformulations of Jesus' resurrection could not be reconciled with what is taught by Scripture, the confessions of the DRC, and that their views had a devastating effect on some students (131ff). In a gripping

tale of procedural misapplication and abuse of power, all were acquitted. In at least two of the three investigations, personal friends, former students of the professors and some left-wing theologians sat on the committees overseeing the process. One theologian in particular caused serious disruptions during the process. Dr Danie Veldsman's participation, (already controversial for claiming in a 1993 academic article that Jesus' body might in fact have been stolen and reburied), was characterised by unwavering support for Julian Müller. During the process Veldsman argued forcefully for the view that believers' bodily resurrection and Jesus' resurrection should be held *apart* while the Apostolicum was under discussion. This, Mulder believes, was part of a strategy to argue for Jesus' "resurrection", opening the door for semantic possibilities to include radical re-formulations propagated by the likes of the *Jesus Seminar*, over against the "bodily" resurrection which for Veldsman and Müller at least, became out of date and too restrictive (135-138). Shortly after Müller's investigation, a DRC commission appointed Dr Danie Veldsman as new professor of Systematic Theology at Tukkies.

Mulder also took the views on the resurrection articulated by Du Toit and Jonker from the Cape Province to their classis (the latter from Stellenbosch). As with the Pretoria cases, here also, all the concerns were rejected, in spite of significantly controversial statements Jonker made about Jesus' resurrection. In what might be seen as a sign of the times and newfound priorities, at the very same time that Jonker's views on the resurrection was up for consideration, the same DRC classis of Stellenbosch completed a process of re-unification with the *Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk*. Perhaps a classic example of unity before truth?

The dean of the Theological Faculty in Pretoria at the time, professor Cas Vos and the three DRC professors then went on to charge Mulder with having caused damage to the university's reputation (in light of what they held to be Mulder's false accusations) at the university disciplinary board. After a four day hearing Mulder was eventually found guilty and ordered to complete his studies and then be banned for life from the Theological Faculty. As he tells the story of the disciplinary hearing, much is learned about the theological viewpoints of Old Testament professors Le Roux (196-242) and Human (243-260), and professor of Practical Theology Müller (131-195). The verbatim evidence makes it quite clear that the non-literal interpretations of the resurrection propagated by the likes of the *Jesus Seminar* (in South Africa popularised by the *New Reformation*) should, according to the professors, be welcomed as alternatives to the traditional literal interpretation of Jesus' resurrection and its place in the confessional identity of the DRC. This renovation was in fact contrary to the official DRC exegesis and interpretation of Scripture, its confessions and synodical statements at the time – something that was the basis of Mulder's concern, but was ignored (purposefully, Mulder reckons) by the university's disciplinary committee. Contra the confessions and synodical statements on the historical and bodily nature of the resurrection of Jesus, the judge in his verdict, on behalf of the university, made the surprising and (ever since) controversial declaration that *no* confession, *no* synodical decision and *no* church report were submitted in which the bodily resurrection of Jesus is portrayed as reflecting the DRC's official position (184-191). Official DRC documents and confessions in which the bodily resurrection is shown to be the official confession were in fact submitted, one example being the 2003 General Synod Commission who publicly rejected the *Jesus Seminar* and *New Reformation's* interpretation of the resurrection. Among other things the declaration stated:

*"They [the Jesus Seminar and New Reformation] stir doubt about his [Jesus'] real, bodily, historical resurrection from the dead, and thereby brings the heart of our faith in the risen Lord into disrepute" (269).*

Despite the above, and amongst other references to the *Apostolicum's* "... resurrection of the body", in addition, the judge concluded that in light of the three professor's testimony, and given *modern* interpretation, DRC ministers need not interpret or confess the resurrection of Jesus literally any longer (183-191).

The book concludes with a chapter describing the aftermath, where Mulder has to wrestle with making sense of and achieving inner peace about what happened (261-279). He reports on jubilations and relief among some senior church officials, the board overseeing theological training as well as the professors, following the verdict in their favour in the different hearings. Müller, for instance, in the official DRC paper called *Kerkbode*,

*“... pleads that theology should stop to prescribe already formulated standpoints onto people as to how they should think about themselves, the world and God ... (theology) should rather start to hear from people how they experience themselves ... and we should think together about the connections between the different stories with which they (people) construct their own realities”* (English translation, 272).

In seven addenda to the main body of text (281-338), Mulder supplies valuable extra bodies of information that supplements the picture of the wider spiritual climate in which all of this happened. One addendum, for instance, reports on a spiritual retreat (a few days of reflection and isolation in a camp setting) organised by Müller, where final year DRC students were forced to “meditate” and perform “contemplative” prayer in an inter-faith meditation centre surrounded by pictures of the likes of Krishna, the Dalai Lama, etc. During a previous spiritual retreat (2003), also organised by Müller, students had to “meditate” on specific *Jesus Seminar* and *New Reformation* material (281-291).

Despite all the tragic events and stories, Mulder manages to reflect on the complexities and nuances with respect, and admitting errors he himself made along the way. There is also a unique and surprisingly reconciliatory twist in Mulder’s conclusion. After reporting that he and his family resigned from the DRC and left South Africa for further study in England and Europe, he finishes with hope and possible reconciliation with his former church and the Theological Faculty in Pretoria based on Jesus’ bodily resurrection. He writes:

*“Jesus of Nazareth and the reality of his bodily resurrection and empty tomb is fortunately not dependent upon the sanction or judgements of a General Synod, a judge, an advocate or the University of Pretoria ... The power of God, which no university, synod, judge, lawyer or professor can undo with skeptical remarks, continues to bring new life and unexpected hope in a confused, broken, dark and power-hungry world. It is that same power that can penetrate through the worst trauma, doubt, bitterness and unbelief through resurrection power and faith as a surprising gift. With this vast, creative and transforming power that God gives, even the darkest and saddest events (also those in the DRC and at Tukkies!), can give birth to repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. It was that power that carried me through the past few years, giving me the strength to first of all acknowledge and confess the mistakes I made during all that happened, and also forgive those who hurt me and other students. It is my honest hope and anticipation that that same power of God will bring hope and surprising change in the Dutch Reformed Church but also in particular at my beloved Theological Faculty in Pretoria!”* (English translation, 277-278).

## Lessons for Church and Country?

Mulder’s story contains the main ingredients of a struggle still very much visible in the DRC family on many fronts. How essential is the confession that Jesus rose from the dead in a transformed body, leaving an empty tomb behind? Should post-Enlightenment world-views have the last say about it? Should radical diversity be welcomed within the heart of our confessions even when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus?

Following Mulder's resignation from the DRC, at least one local DRC synod, all the 2009 local DRC moderators, and several DRC minister and professors declared in public their faith in Jesus' bodily resurrection from the grave.

Since the 2011 DRC General Synod however, when new leadership in the person of Professor of Missiology Nelus Niemandt (an enthusiast for the American so-called "Emerging/Emergent Church" phenomenon) replaced the old leadership of Church Historian Professor Piet Strauss (known for his confessional loyalties), the public church debate in press and social media reverberate with what amount to calls for "dreaming new dreams" for the church - where social justice and ecumenical unity it seems, are exceedingly more important than doctrines such as Jesus' bodily resurrection. Niemandt has, since joining the Theological Faculty in Pretoria in 2007, consistently supported Julian Müller and defended the outcomes of the hearings in which the professors were acquitted.

Celebration of radical "diversity" and "listening to present voices" have, for some church leaders become such leading guidelines that adhering to the heart of Christianity's early church and reformation confessions is viewed as outdated, bothersome and restrictive in the brave new world of the New South Africa.

As a replay of many a church controversy in history, Mulder's story has great relevance to highlight not just the complex ethical dimensions underlying some DRC professors' personal faith and academic work (in this case as it relates to the bodily resurrection of Jesus), but also with regards to crucial choices that theologians and churches have to make regarding confessional boundaries and hermeneutics. Choices have consequences, as examination of similar controversies in other parts of the Christian world can show. For the DRC, it is once again a *kairos* moment when the decision has to be made between staying with the historical Christ of Scripture and the classical confessions as the basis for authentic Christianity, reconciliation, social involvement and testimony to the world, or a leap into hermeneutical relativism by becoming a mere social grouping based on a socially constructed post-Enlightenment spirituality forged from radically diverse historical-critical Jesuses.

Mulder includes a story about a close friend, a former theological student from Tukkies with two PhDs, who ends up being an outspoken and public atheist, unable to find comfort in anything faith-wise as he used to in his under-graduate days (1-2). The totally immanent this-worldliness of the panentheistic or anything-but-theistic theology (espoused by Müller in particular [26-29]) would have us find the "god that happens," in things like a child's smile, or a re-enactment of tradition, or "surprise" as a category of existential religious experience. Indeed, by excluding the possibility of God also existing outside of our word- and power-games, and by negating *a priori* the possibility of God raising Jesus from the dead, this recent theological trend in the DRC is but another manifestation of first century pagan sophistry.

In our post-Enlightened twenty-first century however, notable world-class Christian scholars in churches marginalised in secular society conduct ground breaking research advocating the credibility of the eyewitnesses testimony in the canonical gospels (Richard Bauckham) in relation to gnostic texts like the gospel of Thomas (Simon Gathercole), an historical Christ surprisingly consistent with Jesus of Nazareth (Paul Barnett), and a personal and transcendent God raising Jesus from the tomb in a transformed body (N.T. Wright). Observing such fresh, rigorous and authentic explorations, theological students (*also* in South Africa!) can indeed be encouraged and take heart, avoid turning agnostic or atheistic. It seems that the DRC leadership of these times is once again in need of playing catch-up!

One has to attempt to try and get behind the possible motives for some DRC academics and church leadership as described above for moving away so far from the classical foundations of Christianity. The "New South Africa" dawned in 1994 with new political masters and revolutionary promises of changing old mindsets and social constructs. Embracing radically diverse theologies and spiritualities were the next politically correct stances to have, and post-modern philosophies and theories were announcing themselves as the vehicle



available to deliver this correctness. In throwing out the bathwater of the “misguided mindsets” that allowed the Afrikaners to construct the “Old South Africa”, the present cohort of leadership in the DRC got rid of the confessional baby as well. History might judge on that as an overcompensation too far. By choosing to speak such that twenty-first century post-Enlightenment Christians need not take offence in the gospel containing the *skandalon* of Christ’s death for our sins and his bodily resurrection from the grave as basis for our justification, reconciliation, testimony and work for the Lord, a radical discontinuation with the historical Christ and the church’s classical confessions of such proportion is made that any advantage for the DRC may yet turn out to be fool’s gold.

Mulder’s struggle to keep the inheritance of the faith from the fathers (i.e. first-century Apostolic Fathers, not twentieth-century Apartheid Fathers!) for the catholic church amongst all peoples of (at least) South Africa in its proper place is worth noting. The DRC will benefit when they listen to this voice until they hear it well.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout all the later proceedings, the real issue was never the discontinuity between Jesus’ dying body and his transformed resurrection body. Mulder explains that it was the specific provision for the radical views of the *Jesus Seminar* and *New Reformation* that was at issue (66–69).