


The radical, righteous and relevant Jesus in a coronavirus disease-defined world



Author:

Willem H. Oliver¹ 

Affiliation:

¹Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, Cluster of Theology, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Willem Oliver,
wh.oliver@outlook.com

Dates:

Received: 13 Mar. 2021

Accepted: 19 Apr. 2021

Published: 14 June 2021

How to cite this article:

Oliver, W.H., 2021, 'The radical, righteous and relevant Jesus in a coronavirus disease-defined world', *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6617. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6617>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
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.

Stephan Joubert has already made his mark in South Africa (and abroad) with his solid way of doing Theology. In this *Festschrift*, we wanted to accord recognition to him for what he has already made and for what he is currently doing with e-kerk. His book, *Jesus Radical, Righteous, Relevant*, having initially been written in Afrikaans, was translated in 2012 into English and depicts his heart for the followers of Jesus and the *familia Dei*, specifically in South Africa. This article is a journey through this book, with the current dilemma in our country and worldwide in the back of our minds, namely, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) starting in 2019.

Contribution: This article forms part of the Special Collection which will serve as a *Festschrift* for Prof Stephan Joubert to honour him for the tremendous work that he has done (and is still doing) in Theology in South Africa. I took his book, *Jesus, Radical, Righteous, Relevant* as basis and applied it to our current situation with COVID-19.

Keywords: church; familia Dei; Jesus; 4IR; COVID-19.

Stephan Joubert

Stephan believes in God and the Bible in an almost childlike manner. He believes in the biblical narratives and how they present Jesus. He believes that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, he was born from a virgin, he was crucified for our sins, God resurrected him on the third day, he ascended to heaven, he is currently our mediator and redeemer and he will one day come back to earth during his second coming and establish a new heaven and earth for his followers (Rev 21). Joubert is convinced that being a Christian one should be like little children and sheep who follow the shepherd and people whose values differ from that of the world (Joubert 2012:92).

Introduction

The buzzword for the dawn of the third decade of the 21st century, although with a tremble in the voice, is coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Nobody really knows where this virus has originated¹ – this maybe the good part of the 'not-knowing', whilst the bad part is that nobody knows when it will end, if ever.² At first, some people claimed that it is just a super flu, until medical professionals discovered that the virus has mutations and after effects with enduring damage on the body, affecting especially the brain and the heart (cf. Couzin-Frankel 2020). In South Africa, many people are very fatalistic about this virus, arguing on the one hand, that 'everybody' will eventually acquire the virus or one of its strains or on the other hand, that if they are destined to acquire the virus, then no precaution will anyhow prevent it. Others are so perturbed by this 'new normal' that they rather choose to end their lives on earth (Masweneng 2020). For many people, this is a time of more questions than answers.

The world has become a COVID-19-defined world. Everything, from illnesses to jobs and job security, to overseas trips, to the living of one's personal life, has been invaded by this virus, not to mention church services in the 'houses of God' and the attendance thereof. Almost every discussion is filled with COVID-19 talk. Interestingly – again in South Africa – when people, especially the Afrikaners, fear something, they make jokes about it, like with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and anorexia – any trauma is a source of morbid humour. However, I have not heard many jokes about COVID-19. Maybe it is because the effect of this pandemic is too immense or because people are really fearful this time – filled with a sort of holy awe.

1. According to Morens et al. (2020:1), it most probably originated 'from a β -coronavirus in the sarbecovirus (SARS-like virus) group that naturally infects bats and pangolins in Asia and Southeast Asia'.

2. Morens et al. (2020:1) warned that the 'risk of similar coronavirus outbreaks in the future remains high'.

Note: Special Collection: From timely exegesis to contemporary ecclesiology: Relevant hermeneutics and provocative embodiment of faith in a Corona-defined world – *Festschrift* for Stephan Joubert, sub-edited by Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

Already in 2000, Michael Naumann has referred to '[d]er Gott, der uns fehlt' (*the God who fails us*) in *Die Zeit*, a German newspaper (Naumann 2000). As this is the first and easiest way out to obtain a scapegoat – God! – it is actually the 'spirit of the times' (Joubert 2012:28) where people are indicating with articulations like these how shallow their knowledge of God actually is. I wonder what Naumann's verdict would be in this pandemic-filled time.³

This article is a journey through the book written by Joubert and translated into English in 2012, with the title, *Jesus Radical, Righteous, Relevant*, against the background of a currently COVID-19-filled South Africa, being part of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). Let us first have a look at the 4IR world and the people living in it.

The inhabitants of the fourth industrial revolution world

The 4IR overlaps with a post-modern⁴ (post-post-modern? – cf. Baya 2013) post-secular (cf. Habermas 2008), post-religious (McGregor 2016) and/or post-Christian way of thinking and reasoning (Williams 2014) and a 'post-conquest type of consciousness' world⁵ (Sorenson 1998:107), which will not be discussed in this article. This era is 'characterised by disregard of rational thinking in favour of human experience. People discover anew that they are not only merely rationally wired but also emotionally wired' (Joubert 2012:26). However, the biggest shift in this era is from a

[M]echanically driven lifestyle, and clinical reasoning, to organic forms of living where we no longer act as machines, but as growing, evolving, living organisms. This shift in people's way of thinking also affects our world – changing us from merely rational pursuits and values to emotional ones. (Joubert 2012:27)

The culture of the 21st century within the 4IR can be best described as dialectical and confrontational. Being part of this culture, many academics and clerics view the word of God from a clinical angle (Joubert 2012:56). In this era, the 'people are so hardened, so lost, that even the appearance and touch of Jesus will not change their ways' (Joubert 2012:15). This is because the Christendom has become 'a culture in which central features of the Christian story are unknown and churches are alien institutions whose rhythms do not normally impinge on most members of society' (Murray 2004:1). As we live in a quick-fix era, religion never acts as a quick-fix (Joubert 2012:33) and frustrates many people. The focus of this frustration, interestingly, is not Jesus, but the church (Joubert 2012:36).

The 4IR poses more choices to people than ever – and all these choices make good decisions so much more difficult (Joubert 2012:20). With all the choices at hand, many people suffer from 'information anxiety' (cf. Wurman 1990). The information

3. None of his article has been published in *Die Zeit* during 2020...

4. Leonard Sweet (2000) referred to the people of this era as 'post-modern pilgrims' in his book with the same title, implying a journey from the world of the Bible to the current world.

5. This world is characterised and built on 'reason, logic, facts, arguments and control' (Joubert 2012:56).

overload is also linked to an insecurity about the future. It causes some people to become 'passive, powerless and anxious', even ill (Joubert 2012:25). This kind of (toxic) stress is called 'allostatic load and overload' by Bruce McEwen (2018:6).

Friends and opponents of Jesus

Many people are currently looking for Jesus *outside the church*. These people find themselves comfortable with Jesus, but not with his (institutional) church and followers. They refer to these 'followers' as 'judgemental, hypocritical, politically conservative and intolerant' (Joubert 2012:36). These people can be regarded as 'friends' of Jesus who have started with a new form of church, which we may call *ekklesia*. This 'new form' of church consists of 'ordinary individuals' who profess Jesus as their Lord: 'Jesus alone is the heartbeat of the brand-new movement of vital people known as *ekklesia*'⁶ (Joubert 2012:129). Having referred to Jesus' friends, the fact is that there are also 'opponents' of Jesus.

Who are the people who hinder the word of God to be disseminated on earth? One should think that it must be the devil and his followers. However, when we look at the Gospels, we find that it was the people who professed to be followers of God (the clergymen – Joubert 2012:36) who stood in Jesus' way and even instigated his crucifixion: 'They blocked the path to God' (Mt 23:13; cf. Joubert 2012:52). The reason for their actions was that Jesus stood in the way of their interests as Jewish religious leaders, as 'highest Jewish officials' (Joubert 2012:71) – the pharisees, the sadducees and the scribes. Jesus has desecrated almost everything that they thought was holy, like the Sabbath, the temple and their laws. In fact, even long before he was in Jerusalem for the last time, he had more than one death sentence against himself because of his pronouncements about and his actions on the Sabbath (Joubert 2012:79–81). He even called himself the Lord of the Sabbath! (Mk 2:28). Jesus also reinterpreted the law in Matthew 5:21–48 with a radical new understanding. For him, it was 'about a radical change of heart' and not about external ways of keeping the law (Joubert 2012:85).

This brings us at the question of Jesus' real opponents today. Joubert is adamant that it is 'we' who are the problem. 'We' are the people who confess that Jesus is our 'Hero, Leader, Example, Lord, Messiah and Role Model' (Joubert 2012:37), but sadly 'we' do not know Jesus properly because 'we' are not discovering and following he 'on his terms', but on ours – from our 'safe spiritual encampment' (Joubert 2012:37). However, we *are* and act *as the* 'church'!

The church

According to Joubert (2012),

Church is a verb [not a building]. It is a dynamic movement of people capable of continuing to exist even without particular aspects regarding the well-being and building up of the church – like buildings, positions, formal public worship and clerical councils. (p. 132)

6. From here on, I will mostly refer to the assembly of Jesus' followers as '*ekklesia*' over against the 'traditional form' called 'church'. This term is not used as an elitist term, but only to distinguish the 'old' from the 'new'.

However, in this new millennium, and even before that, people of the church (as institution) focused so much on their church culture and on the adaptation of the word of God to the current needs of the people that Christ did not feature that much anymore, whilst he was and is in fact the 'glue' keeping all of his people together (Joubert 2012:5).

In this era, the institutional church is globally on a bad spot, having lost much of her authority and power. Outsiders, even congregants, experience the church as judgemental and irrelevant (Joubert 2012:16). The reason why the church has become irrelevant is because she does not (disruptively) challenge people anymore to serve God and she does not serve her community in 'amazing and innovative ways' (Joubert 2012:16).

Ironically, the church mostly feels good about herself, equalling her success with having 'viable' programmes, lots of money and many congregants on her registers.⁷ This kind of 20th-century thinking, including its complex theologies, formulae, laws and dogmas, is something of the past (Joubert 2012:57). The 'black and white' days have passed for the current church (Joubert 2012:178) – those days where 'central clerical bodies' decide and stipulate everything that should happen in the church building and even outside. This has caused the current church as an institution to even become redundant, whilst the church buildings need a permanent lockdown, never to open again for public services, but rather for services to the public.

Joubert (2012) was correct when he stated that the 'church is not supposed to be an institution' (pp. 121, 125), as Jesus did not mean to leave an institution behind for his followers – 'complete with power structures, personnel and programmes in order to preserve this system for "the church of tomorrow"' (Joubert 2012:177). Jesus did not engage in that way of establishing his *ekklesia* and sharing the gospel. This also causes people to incorrectly refer to a church building as the 'house of God' (cf. Joubert 2012:133), whilst Jesus' intention was the *familia Dei*. This makes the whole world the 'house of God', gathering in 'purposeful places' (Joubert 2012:191), as the Kingdom of God is not linked to and concerned with so-called holy places (like church buildings), but with holy people (Joubert 2012:113).

The *contradiction* in the current church is that, although she offers her congregants and the world the 'most revolutionary message on earth', she presents it in a 'stereotyped and stagnant' way that is rather strange to the 21st-century people and 4IR world (Joubert 2012:121). On the other hand, many congregants only regard the church to be a 'spiritual bunker where [they find] shelter once they had escaped the claws of evil in the world' (Joubert 2012:123), doing nothing more than just filling the pews once in a while. In addition, people regard the church as equal to her office bearers, ironically

7. Growth in the church is not marked by more people on her registers, but rather by more followers of Christ involving themselves in worldwide challenges such as poverty, global warming, water pollution, racism and HIV/AIDS (Joubert 2012:122). It is therefore about all the separate ministries and missions that people are practising outside the church.

calling a congregation 'vacant' when they have no pastor (Joubert 2012:125). Maybe if we understand Jesus better, we will understand his intention with the 'church' better.

Sustainability

People love to join a new movement or 'revolution', also called a 'crusade', but many tend to lose interest after some time, especially when this movement requires much from them. In 2003, Pete Greig and Dave Roberts published a book, *Red Moon Rising*, which was all about a revolutionary prayer movement. In this book, they referred to *The Vision*, starting like this: 'The vision? The vision is JESUS – obsessively, dangerously and undeniably Jesus. The vision is an army of young people. You see bones? I see an army' (Greig & Roberts 2003:148). All over the world, also in South Africa, young people enthusiastically joined in and started to pray. Something that really took people by surprise was the way in which many youths bowed and prayed for 30 s before entering their school premises in the mornings. It kept on for some time...and then faded away. Other examples can be found on websites such as the *30-Second Prayers for Busy People* website (Rogue 2010), being last updated in 2010, and *Thirty Seconds or Less*, being last updated in 2014 (Kast-Keat 2014). This supports my point that people, especially but not exclusively youngsters, love something new and revolutionary, but as soon as they discover that it takes 'too much' from them, with regard to time or their image in the eyes of their peers, they just quietly withdraw. If only we knew Jesus better....

'Understanding' Jesus

The images that we have of Jesus are sometimes skewed and incorrect, being many times depicted as a 'long-haired blond, bearded, blue-eyed, white-robed Aryan' – looking like a king or a prince (Oliver 2014:101). Houston Steward Chamberlain popularised this notion all over Europe at the turn of the 19th century (cf. Chamberlain 2005). Instead, in the Bible, we come to know Jesus being born in an animal shelter in a messy (stinking) manger, with smelly shepherds as his first guests (Lk 2:7–20; cf. also Joubert 2012:47–48). This 'odour' of Jesus accompanied him as he spent much time with the marginalised people whilst he was on earth – the 'tax collectors, the women of ill repute, the sick and the lepers' (Joubert 2012:49).

Joubert (2012:9) added that Jesus was never a 'sweet Jesus' figure, trying to sooth everyone around him. Many people tried (and are still trying) to fashion him in terms of their needs and how they think about him, calling him 'our' or 'my' Jesus. Such a "meek and mild" Jesus offers nothing to this world with its ongoing natural disasters, terrorism and wars' (Joubert 2012:10) – like the pandemic we are currently experiencing – this is a 'sterilised' Jesus (Joubert 2012:10). Over against the sterilised Jesus that we have created for ourselves, is the real, 'original' Jesus who mostly does not fit into our expectations. About the sterilised Jesus we would piously ask: 'What would Jesus do?' And then, *we* decide

what he would do, based on *our* interpretation of the Bible and then *we* would say, 'This is what *Jesus* would do!' However, what would the 'real' Jesus do?

Jesus also did not fit into the expectations of the ancient people when he was on earth. He did not speak and act according to the anticipations that the religious Jews had of the coming Messiah, the 'classical Messiah figure' (Joubert 2012:54). 'He was out of context' (Joubert 2012:45) and therefore disruptive. Even his family at some stage thought he was out of his mind (Mk 3:21).

Currently, Jesus is for most of the times 'out of place' (Joubert 2012:49), finding himself 'constantly between barriers, organisations and spaces...No one can box him in' (Joubert 2012:210). The current church just cannot control him – not with or inside their services, not with their outreaches to the 'others' and not with their wonderful programmes. These things are in fact the *people's* terms, which make it very difficult to follow Jesus on *his* terms (Joubert 2012),

To him back is the new front; small is the new great; weak the new powerful; losing the new way of winning; giving away the new path to being rich; dying the new way to live forever. (p. 50)

Frailty is the new way of doing awesome things. Everything is upside down, the antipole of the world: If you want to be first, you must be last (Mt 20:16) and if you want to be a leader, you must learn to serve (Lk 22:24–30). This brings Joubert to the conclusion that Jesus lived a 'life of reversed roles' (Joubert 2012:54). It also calls to mind the words of the song, *El Shaddai*, written by Michael Card and John Thompson (AZ n.d.; emphasis added), which depicts God's work through Jesus so strikingly:

Though your word contained the plan,
they just could not understand:
Your most awesome work was done
through the frailty of your Son.

During his time on earth, Jesus introduced a new way of living, a 'new normal' to his followers. He himself was a 'new kind of leader', a 'paradoxical leader' (Joubert 2012:54) and a 'contrarian' (cf. Sample 2002) – in fact a disruptive leader. However, he did not come to 'reform religion but to establish a radical new way of life for people in the presence of God – [to transform] the hearts, minds and lives of all who believed' and have decided to follow him (Joubert 2012:58). Jesus, being the 'Son of man' (his favourite reference to himself – Joubert 2012:65), was not afraid to use dangerous words and to speak the truth. He acted as a man on a mission because this is exactly what he was. His focus was on sinners (Mt 9:11; 11:19), putting him completely out of context in the eyes of the religious leaders of his time because the sinners were regarded as unclean.

Jesus' language

Whilst on earth, Jesus wanted to establish a new world and therefore, he needed to create a new language and 'new forms of interaction, rituals and ceremonies' (Joubert 2012:76).

To accomplish this, he chose a 'spirituality of the heart', resulting in a radical new relationship with both God and the neighbour (Joubert 2012:76). Jesus used two kinds of communication: His 'first language' was non-verbal language, which was the 'language of his own life' (Joubert 2012:55), from his birth to his crucifixion. His 'loudest words [were] his own gracious presence' (Joubert 2012:55). Jesus' second language was verbal language. His words were focused on 'bringing life and salvation to dead souls' (Joubert 2012:66). This kind of action – to give life to dead souls – was and is 'surprising, shocking and out of context' (Joubert 2012:67).

Jesus' language causes *metanoia* (a change of heart that we may call a 'revolution' in one's life) in people, as he offered them a 'change of mind, a new way of thinking, a conversion and a fundamental change of character, [living in a] radical different way' (Joubert 2012:67–68). His language happened in relationships; it was 'inviting, drawing people in, creating space' (Joubert 2012:145). His language in fact referred to radical new relationships, with love for God (cf. Dt 6:5) and love for your neighbour (cf. Lv 19:18) in the core. Although this part was acceptable for the religious leaders, the fact that he mingled with 'strangers, sinners, children, women, Gentiles' was 'out of context' for them (Joubert 2012:75). These two concepts – 'radical love and new relationships' – formed the building blocks of Jesus' ministry on earth (Joubert 2012:93).

Jesus' new language was not filled with power and control but with 'images of vulnerability and weakness' – frailty (Joubert 2012:139). It was an 'intimate, genuine and close-up' language (Joubert 2012:184). The question is: How should we implement this new language, this new approach in his *ecclesia* in a 4IR world?

An Ekklesial revolution within the fourth industrial revolution – Why? how?

'Everybody' is talking about and referring to the 4IR world that we are currently living in (cf. Schwab 2016). This revolution requires from us a well-developed digital technological vibrancy and energy to live up to the expectations of the day. Whilst we are exhausting ourselves as a global village to do just that, religion seems to move backward. According to Joubert, approximately 80% of all the Western churches show a decrease in their numbers (Joubert 2012:124). A survey performed by Pew Research Center in 2018 reveals that the number of Christians for whom religion is still important is alarmingly low in the world. In Europe and Asia, only Greece shows a total of 58% of Christians, whilst all the other countries are below 32%. It is important to mention Malaysia with 67% and the Philippines with 91%. Africa and the northern parts of South America show a high interest above 70%, with the United States of America just behind them on 68%, whilst the rest of the world is under 50%. The attendance of worship services (all religions) shows figures below 50% – in Europe below

30% – apart from Pakistan and Indonesia. In Africa, the figures are above 50%, with South Africa on 55% (Pew Research Center 2018). The figures that we will not be able to obtain concern the full commitment of Christians towards Christianity.

The statistics supplied clearly indicate that the church currently needs a ‘revolution’. This should, however, be understood as a different kind of revolution – a revolution that involves the revolving (in an orbit) from one point back to that point (like in a motor engine). As *ekklesia* of God, we need to revolve back to the first *ekklesia* – with the only significant exception that we are living almost 2000 years later in a global village and in a totally different era. Joubert (2012:37) referred to it as ‘reversing to advance!’ whilst Sweet calls it an ‘Ancient-Future Faith’ (Sweet 1997).

The ‘revolution’ that we must undertake/undergo will take us back to the ‘magnetic power of the early church’ where the Christians clearly distinguished themselves in a positive way from other people (Joubert 2012:16). In his 22nd letter, the *Letter to Arsacius* (the Roman high priest of Galatia in 362), Emperor Julian (the apostate) referred to the Christians as follows:

[W]hy do we not observe that it is their [referring to Christians] benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism [i.e. not believing in the Roman gods]...the impious Galilaeans [his name for the Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well’. (Julian the Apostate 1923; also cf. Joubert 2012:168)

Just as Jesus’ actions were disruptive (to some groups) in his time on earth, so his followers’ actions were disruptive to others in the centuries to come. The emphasis is therefore on *actions* – the way they lived (Joubert 2012:171): ‘Their magnetic lifestyle was their testimony...There was no artificial division between faith and “real life”’.⁸

In the 1st century, there were only two dominant social systems – politics and the family. Religion formed part of both, especially the family, and was not a separate social system (Joubert 2012:157–158). The congregations gathered in believers’ houses, being part of the *familia Dei* (cf. Ac 2:42–47; Joubert 2012:159–160). In Paul’s congregation, most of the meetings took place on a Sunday (cf. e.g. Ac 20:7), whilst the believers in Jerusalem met on a daily basis (Joubert 2012:161). During these meetings, most of the believers were actively involved and were trained in the ‘teaching of the apostles’ (Joubert 2012:162). Learning from that, our alternative society will have to adopt a ‘new kind of blood tie in God’s [spiritual] family’, being brothers and sisters of those who are ‘connected to Christ’ (Joubert 2012:53). Joubert supported this, however, stating that in some instances, it is already the case: ‘Innovative communities of faith return more and more to the original roots of Christianity’ (Joubert 2012:195).

8.Joubert (2012:22) referred to Naisbitt (2009) who stated that ‘most changes do not involve *what* we do, but *how* we do it’ (emphasis added).

We should once again become *People of the Way*⁹ (τῆς ὁδοῦ ὄντας – Ac 9:2), being ‘part of a full-time missional movement, understanding and serving the entire world as God’s holy sphere’ (Joubert 2012:176). In this new revolution, we must again focus on the meaning and implications of Jesus’ death on the cross,¹⁰ instead of focusing on the cross itself (cf. 1 Jn 3:16–18):

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Joubert (2012:40) puts it this way: ‘The challenge to live both Biblically responsible and contemporarily relevant is that we must learn to advance by reversing in the light of a vibrant relationship with Jesus’. Everything that we do must be in terms of Jesus’ death on the cross.

The real church – the *ekklesia* – is where people have a meeting with Jesus, where he brings them back to real life. It is therefore about a ‘rediscovery of the person Jesus’ (Joubert 2012:123). His followers only have one calling: To ‘exude the true smell of Jesus’, spreading his aroma to everybody they come across (Joubert 2012:49, 214). For this is what Jesus most probably had in mind when he was on earth: A movement of people who love God, their fellow believers and the ‘others’ with everything they have (Joubert 2012:123). The followers themselves become the ‘abode of God’ (Joubert 2012:133).

The real *ekklesia* should be built on Peter’s credo in Matthew 16:16 where he referred to Jesus as the *Messiah, the Son of the living God*, whilst ‘[t]he resurrection as credo’ should be at the heart of the *ekklesia* (Joubert 2012:156; cf. 1 Cor 15:17, 19).

A new ‘alternative society’

The above discussion requires from the inhabitants in the COVID-19-stricken 4IR world to committedly and daringly go on a ‘quest for Jesus’ (Joubert 2012:15). By doing so, we will become part of a group of ‘new congregants’, a new Christian community, who can also be called ‘an army of young [and not so young] people’ (Greig & Roberts 2003:148) who has grasped the meaning of ‘revolution’ as discussed here and who starts to build Jesus’ Kingdom *almost from scratch* (Joubert 2012:15). This has nothing to do with strict, formal religion, with dogma and church structures, with talks *about* Jesus, but things that have much, in fact everything, to do *with* Jesus.

The *ekklesia* needs leaders, but not for positions *per se*: ‘Leadership positions are ordinary *ministries* in service of the believers’ (Joubert 2012:128; original emphasis).

9.This was most probably the earliest term in which people referred to believers (cf. Joubert 2012:171).

10.Gordon Wakefield (1992:79) argued that one cannot be a Christian without the cross, implying that we should live from Jesus’ cross to our own cross—turning us into ‘both crucified and cross-bearers’ (Joubert 2012:93).

Ministries (or spiritual gifts – cf. 1 Cor 12; Rm 12; cf. Joubert 2012:188) must be used in service and for the effective functioning of the *ekklesia*. Jesus' kind of leaders are gardeners [sowing his Kingdom seed], not project managers or land magnates' (Joubert 2012:212). They are 'all fired up and inspired to serve Jesus' (Joubert 2012:141). They do not have 'after hours' or are working 'part-time' for Jesus – '[s]ervice is all or nothing' (Joubert 2012:142, 143). A true service is never moonlighting¹¹ for Jesus (Joubert 2012:143; 171). This alternative society ('brand-new movement') must start an *ekklesia* – in the service of God's Kingdom (Joubert 2012:131) – filled with '[o]rdinary individuals...who are vital, professing followers of Jesus...in a new, vital relationship with Christ and others' (Joubert 2012:129; 187). In this way, God's people will form a *familia Dei* (cf. Jn 13:35), *wherever* they are together. *Ekklesia* is therefore also a verb (Joubert 2012:151).

Currently, we are in need of more 'Gray' (not grey!) thinkers/doers. These are people (mostly not clergymen or women) who 'live against the grain of the conventional wisdom of the day' (Joubert 2012:54; cf. Sample 2002). Whilst retaining their 'foundational beliefs', they think and live liminally¹² – no simplistic thinking anymore (with a 'closed perception and naïve answers'), but dualistic thinking (inclusive thinking), multiplistic thinking (with a 'high tolerance and paradox') and omniplistic thinking – where one flourishes unthreatened as follower of Jesus, notwithstanding 'chaos' around them (Joubert 2012:180). They enjoy it to discover 'new territories from fresh angles...thinking on their feet' (Joubert 2012:180).

In order to reach this point, Joubert (2012:38) argued that we need a positive attitude to survive: Only if we feel positive about tomorrow (also in and about South Africa!), we will be able to live a happy life today. We therefore need wise people in this new alternative society. Joubert (2012:23–24) defined 'wise people' as follows: 'wise people are those who fear the Lord and choose his way...They are ever seeking more wisdom at God's feet. They wish to understand his actions in our times'.

We need to give a place to not only rational language but also emotionally driven language. In this new era, where the acquisition of knowledge is key, people are focused on rational language: 'Verbal language, objective argument and intellectual knowledge' (Joubert 2012:56–57). Feelings and intuition, forming part of emotional language, are regarded by many people, even clergy, as insufficient – 'even childish and naïve' (Joubert 2012:57). However, in this era, we need both rational and emotional thinking skills – we must be both *information analysers* and *experiential learners* (Joubert 2012:57).

11. This term can be defined as follows: To have another inferior job, mostly in secret, in addition to your real job.

12. Gray (2016: xiii), in his book, *Liminal thinking*, defined 'liminal' as follows: 'Liminal is a word that means boundary, doorway and portal. Not this or that, not the old way or the new way, but neither and both. A state of ambiguity or disorientation that precedes a breakthrough to a new kind of thinking' (original emphasis).

People of the way in a coronavirus disease-defined era

During this pandemic, the people of God have the unique opportunity to start and live like the early Christians as Julian the Apostate described them (cf. also Joubert 2012:169). In a positive and challenging way, we must start to cause trouble *all over the world* again (Ac 17:6b). We should start to influence our communities dramatically 'with relationships of servitude and stories about Jesus' (Joubert 2012:170). We should be recognised by the 'genuineness of [our] faith marked by [our] humility and transparency' – constantly serving each other and the 'others' (Joubert 2012:122). Whereas there are times of lockdown in our country, hampering our physical movement, this opens the door for starting our ministries on social media, connecting with as many people as possible. Social media also includes short messaging service (SMS), where internet is not readily available. Innovative thinking is the key here.

The *people of the way* in the 21st century should form missional, relational and incarnational (MRI) groups (Sweet 2009:18) – be it physical or virtual: 'Missional' refers to every member of the group being a 'market square' missionary and 'relational' means that we should put 'relationships first' all the time, whilst 'incarnational' refers to the followers of Jesus who are creating 'colonies' of heaven by constantly praying, 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10; cf. Sweet 2009:19).

This is a time for God's followers to also take enough time for sitting quietly with God, reading, meditating, contemplating and praying (called *Lectio Divina*), in this way 'fuelling up' for a day's work, reaching out to the world (Joubert 2012:195).¹³ This is

[N]ot a time of master plans or franchised churches. It is a time of groups who grapple with issues of emerging culture and the living out of their faith as followers of Jesus in that culture. (Riddell, Pierson & Kirkpatrick 2000:132)

Having social media and the wider internet at our disposal creates a unique opportunity for the *people of the way* to reach more and more people on a daily basis. There are so many different forms of social media that one will not be able to exhaust it in a lifetime. If we have to physically go out to people – to assist them, buy something for them, etc. – we must always be responsible, adhering to all the COVID-19 protocols of our country, in this way showing that we abide by the rules and regulations of our government (cf. Rm 13).

Dolinger (2020) mentioned quite a few useful things that the followers of Jesus should innovatively engage in, amongst others, that they should stay connected – organise certain

13. Gjelten (2020) referred to a devoted congregant who referred to being locked down during the pandemic: 'It's almost like God is sending everyone to their room for a time out. With all the business taken away, I can just be still and really focus on my relationship with God'.

times to engage with each other, to encourage generosity, start with a virtual 'church,' give special attention to lonely people (old and young), look out for people who have lost their jobs and are struggling, encourage the worship team to start with a 'spotify playlist of worship songs' and pray for revival, many congregants were 'church-consumers' for years – they should now become 'church-givers' 'who serve as the hands and feet of Jesus to those around [them]'.

When we are serving this way, it is not for us to boast that we are relevant – it is actually for the people around us to decide (Joubert 2012:198). To be relevant, we need a 'Kingdom theology' (Joubert 2012:201), consisting of stewardship (according to Gn 1:28–30, we must take care of God's creation on his behalf; Joubert 2012:203–204) and simplicity (over against an 'insatiable consumer mentality' – Joubert 2012:205). With this in mind, we will be able to create a 'dynamic generation of believers [where] hospitality, closeness, discipleship, caring, prayer, involvement, friendship, assistance and service are not mere words...but daily realities' (Joubert 2012:182). This is what Stephan had in mind with this book.

Conclusion

To be part of the *people of the way* in a 4IR world 'contaminated' by COVID-19, is a full-time ministry – no moonlighting – meaning that wherever we live, or work, or spend time with friends or 'others' – physically or virtually – we must establish God's *ekklesia*. It requires from us to be innovative, courageous, motivated and committed: 'You see bones? I see an army'.

Despite the pandemic, life goes on – so does our mission here on earth. No excuse is good enough to be absent where we should have been present: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few' (Mt 9:37). Although these times are filled with unique challenges, innovation is key: Where there is a will, there is a way.

This book of Stephan Joubert is very *relevant* for these challenging times and *radical* enough to make us realise that the 'new normal' has arrived and is here to stay. The *ekklesia* should act accordingly, as this is a unique opportunity for God's followers to start *from scratch* and to serve all the 'old' obstacles, like formal religion, complex theologies, formulae, laws, dogmas and church structures and to *be* people of the way in a revolutionary manner.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

W.H.O. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- AZ, n.d., 'El Shaddai', *Amy Grant Lyrics*, viewed 08 August 2020, from <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/amygrant/elshaddai.html>.
- Baya, A., 2013, 'Post-postmodernism: Automodernity and its relevance to understanding contemporary media audiences', *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 71, 154–159. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.021>
- Chamberlain, H.S., 2005, *The foundations of the nineteenth century*, transl. J. Lees, 2 vols., Ballantyne, London.
- Couzin-Frankel, J., 2020, *From 'brain fog' to heart damage, COVID-19's lingering problems alarm scientists*, American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), viewed 08 August 2020, from <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/07/brain-fog-heart-damage-COVID-19-s-lingering-problems-alarm-scientists>.
- Dolinger, S., 2020, *19 ways to help your church thrive during COVID-19*, National Christian Foundation, viewed 02 March 2021, from <https://www.ncfgiving.com/stories/19-ways-to-help-your-church-thrive-during-COVID-19/>.
- Gjeltén, T., 2020, 'Things will never be the same.' *How the pandemic has changed worship*, Special series: The coronavirus crisis, 20 May, NPR, viewed 02 March 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/20/858918339/things-will-never-be-the-same-how-the-pandemic-has-changed-worship>.
- Gray, D., 2016, *Liminal thinking: Create the change you want by changing the way you think*, Two Waves Books, Brooklyn, NY.
- Greig, P. & Roberts, D., 2003, *Red moon rising*, Kingsway Communications, Eastbourne.
- Habermas, J., 2008, 'A "post-secular" society – What does it mean?', paper presented at the Istanbul Seminars organized by Reset Dialogues on Civilizations in Istanbul from 2–6 June 2008, viewed 12 February 2021, from <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/a-post-secular-society-what-does-that-mean/>.
- Joubert, S.J., 2012, *Jesus radical, righteous, relevant*, Christian Art Publishers, Vereeniging.
- Julian the Apostate (Flavius Claudius Iulianus), 1923, *Letters*, transl. W.C. Wright, Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, London, viewed 02 March 2021, from http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm.
- Kast-Keat, J., 2014, 'Prayers of the people', *Thirty Seconds or Less*, 21 April, viewed 08 August 2020, from <http://thirtysecondsorless.net/prayers/>.
- Masweneng, K., 2020, 'Congregants heartbroken by tragic suicide of pastor at church', *Sunday Times: Times Live*, 29 June, viewed 08 August 2020, from <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-06-29-congregants-heartbroken-by-tragic-suicide-of-pastor-at-church/>.
- McEwen, B.S., 2018, 'The end of "stress" as we know it', *Endocrinologist* 130(Winter), 6–7, viewed 03 March 2021, from <https://www.endocrinology.org/media/3002/the-endocrinologist-130-web.pdf>.
- McGregor, M.N., 2016, 'The language of spiritual literature in a post-religious era', in K. Garcia (ed.), *Reexamining academic freedom in religiously affiliated universities*, pp. 87–96, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham.
- Morens, D.M., Breman, J.G., Calisher, C.H., Doherty, P.C., Hahn, B.H., Keusch, G.T. et al., 2020, 'The origin of COVID-19 and why it matters', *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 103(2), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.4269/ajtmh.20-0849>
- Murray, S., 2004, *Post-Christendom: Church and mission in a strange new world*, Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes.
- Naisbitt, J., 2009, *Mindset: Eleven ways to change the way you see – And create – The future*, HarperCollins, London.

- Naumann, M., 2000, 'Der Gott, der uns fehlt: Märchenfilme und fromme Kantaten im Supermarkt der religiösen Gefühle', *Zeit Online*, 19 December, viewed 12 August 2020, from https://www.zeit.de/2001/52/Der_Gott_der_uns_fehlt.
- Oliver, W.H., 2014, 'Reconsidering the skin colour (race) of Jesus and his ancestors', *Journal of Early Christian History* 4(2), 95–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2014.11877306>
- Pew Research Center, 2018, '3. How religious commitment varies by country among people of all ages', viewed 10 August 2020, from <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/>.
- Riddell, M., Pierson, M. & Kirkpatrick, C., 2000, *The prodigal project: Journey into the emerging church*, The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London.
- Rogue, B., 2010, 'New home for 30-second prayers', *30-second Prayers for Busy People*, viewed 08 August 2020, from <https://30secondprayers.wordpress.com/>.
- Sample, S.B., 2002, *The contrarian's guide to leadership*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Schwab, K., 2016, *The fourth revolution*, World Economic Forum, Geneva.
- Sorenson, E.R., 1998, 'Preconquest consciousness', in H. Wautischer (ed.), *Tribal epistemologies: Essays in the philosophy of anthropology*, pp. 79–116, Routledge, London.
- Sweet, L.I., 1997, 'Living an ancient future faith', paper delivered at Princeton: Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, viewed 14 August 2020, from <http://youthlectures.ptsem.edu>.
- Sweet, L.I., 2000, *Post-modern pilgrims: First century passion for the 21st century world*, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN.
- Sweet, L.I., 2009, *So beautiful: Divine design for life and the church*, David C Cook, Colorado Springs, CO.
- Wakefield, G., 1992, *Bunyan the Christian*, HarperCollins, London.
- Williams, R.D., 2014, 'Britain in post-Christian era, says former archbishop of Canterbury', *The Guardian*, 27 April, viewed 21 March 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/27/britain-post-christian-ex-archbishop-canterbury-williams>.
- Wurman, R.S., 1990, *Information anxiety*, Bantam Books, New York, NY.