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Barmen to Belhar: A contemporary confessing journey

ABSTRACT

The Barmen Declaration (1934) and the Confession of Belhar (1986) have played formative roles in the making and unmaking of ecclesial and political life in Germany and South Africa. Their continuing relevance as contemporary confessions has been seen in the many studies conducted on them internationally and in the fact that churches in other countries have decided to include them in their confessional heritage.

This paper pays tribute to these two landmark confessions. I start with a narrative of the emergence of the idea that apartheid is a heresy. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between Barmen and Belhar. Thereafter, I turn to the question of why the white Dutch Reformed Church cannot yet accept the Confession of Belhar. In conclusion I share some views on the future relevance of the Confession of Belhar.

THE NARRATIVE OF BELHAR'S EMERGENCE

As a student of Professor Jaap Durand in the year 1978, I was challenged, together with the rest of the class, to come to a theological evaluation of the problem of apartheid. He refused to accept our usual legal ("apartheid is a crime against humanity"), political ("apartheid is undemocratic") and economic ("apartheid is an exploitation of human and natural resources") condemnations of apartheid. Together we revisited Karl Barth's theology. Eventually our class arrived at the idea that apartheid takes its point of departure in the irreconcilability of people. That represented the theological centre of the problem of Apartheid.

This theological discovery was communicated to the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in October of that year. Synod then adopted the notion and opened the way for further reflection in local congregations. The most important consequence of this theological discovery was the declaration of a *status confessionis*¹ on the theological justification of Apartheid by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa in the year 1982 and by the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, meeting in Belhar, in the year 1982. The Confession of Belhar was drafted in 1982 and, after ratification by the majority of the congregations, formally adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986.

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)² which emerged from the struggle against the heresy of apartheid made a renewed commitment to the Confession of Belhar.³ Before

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- 1 See Smit (1984:7-32) for the meaning and history of the term, in his article entitled "What does status confessionis mean?" in *A moment of truth: The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*.
 - 2 The Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa unified in April 1994 to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.
 - 3 The story about this struggle can be found in *A moment of truth* by Cloete and Smit (1984); and more recently in *Vraagtekens oor gereformeerdeheid?* by Boesak and Fourie (1998).

unification on 14 April 1994, two very important discussions took place: (a) by which name shall the church be known and (b) on which confessional basis should it be established? After a lengthy debate it was decided to dispose of the word “Dutch” in the name of the church, thereby giving more prominence to the post-colonial African identity of the church.⁴ The URCSA then went further in adopting the Confession of Belhar as of the same status as the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt and the Heidelberg Catechism. As a direct result of the confessional position on church unity and reconciliation, the URCSA calls itself the “uniting” church in order to secure an open door to other reformed churches in Southern Africa, and specifically the white Dutch Reformed Church and the Indian Reformed Church in Africa.

BELHAR AND BARMEN

Belhar and Barmen have become symbols of liberation⁵ in two different contexts where Christians had to respond to a *status confessionis*. Despite their symbolic congruence, the Declaration of Barmen and the Confession of Belhar differ in many ways. Barmen presents itself as a theological declaration true to the Word of God, whilst Belhar considers itself a confession. The Barmen Declaration is a text with six theses on “evangelical truths” central to the situation of its time in the Nazi regime, and Belhar consists of five clauses embedded in its confessional struggle against Apartheid.⁶

Much has been said about the lack of direct reference to the Jewish problem in Barmen and a clearer political statement.⁷ Belhar, on the other hand was formulated, not only hermeneutically with a “view from below”, but existentially in accordance with the experience of oppression and by oppressed and marginalized people themselves. The Confession of Belhar speaks of racism, but does not mention apartheid as a political system. There was an explicit discussion in the 1982 Synod about this matter and it was deliberately resolved to confess against a false doctrine rather than a political system. Therefore, it is also possible to read Belhar as a confession that is not overtly political. However, we have seen that church unity (Clause 2) is as political in South Africa as civil disobedience (Clause 5). The matter of political content can only be resolved if those of us who read these confessions today are prepared to do the social analysis that precedes the lives of these confessions.

4 I have argued the point about the relationship between Belhar and Black Theology as well as African Theology in an article entitled “Discipleship and Practical Theology: The case of South Africa” published in the *International Journal of Practical Theology* (2000a:231-242). The direct relationship between Black Theology and the quest of a *status confessionis* in the South African context relates to the theological leadership of Manas Buthelezi (in the Lutheran World Federation) and Allan Boesak (in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches).

5 The phrase “symbol of liberation” was used by De Gruchy (1984a: 59-71) with reference to the Declaration of Barmen.

6 Reflections on the relationship between Barmen and Belhar have been ongoing. Publications include Horn’s “From Barmen to Belhar and Kairos” in *On reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (1988:105-120); and his “Die Barmen Verklaring - ’n Belydenisskrif?” in *Teologie-belydenis-politiek: Die referate, response en besprekings van die Dogmatologiese Werkgemeenskap van Suid-Afrika 1984* (1984:34-66). There are other scholars, such as DJ Smit, who prefer to speak of three clauses with a preamble and a conclusion.

7 Huber (1991:54-56) referred to the lack of direct reference to the Jewish problem with reference to Karl Barth’s letter to Eberhard Bethge after he read the Bonhoeffer bibliography in 1967. Horn (1988:112) refers to the political content of Barmen and argues that regardless of the doctrinal nature of its language, Barmen is as political as the early church’s confession: “Jesus is Lord”.

Edmund Arens⁸ proposed a useful model of five categories to study and compare different confessions. Huber further developed his thoughts and typified the following categories: the baptismal creed, the confession of guilt, the doxology, the doctrinal confession and the situative confession.⁹ According to this model one can say that the Confession of Belhar and the Barmen Declaration are both confessional statements of the situational type, but with Barmen using doctrinal language (Huber¹⁰) and Belhar using ethical language (De Gruchy¹¹). As such they both form “symbols of liberation” that seek to redefine the relations between the Christian confession and the political reality. Both these confessions arose from a particular context of a concrete heresy and attempted to understand the theological problem in biblical terms. What is “biblical” is interpreted as Christological. Their doctrinal (Barmen) and ethical (Belhar) content, therefore, bears a very specific Christological form. This results in different presentations of their Christology. Whilst the Christology of Barmen essentially combats natural theology in a doctrinal fashion, the Christology of Belhar is rooted in social ethics. Belhar’s theological significance does not only lie in its contextual association with apartheid (a word which is not mentioned in the text), but in its insistence that the question of ethics is also central to confession.

This characteristic Christology of Belhar consequently focuses strongly on discipleship. This means that its five confessional clauses must be read as practices which the Church is called to do in its calling to discipleship (“*imitatio Christi*”). Just like Barmen, it first confesses faith in the Triune God. However, it goes further in identifying the practices of such a God: “who collects, defends and cares for his Church by his Word and Spirit”. Secondly, Belhar speaks about the unity of the church in Jesus Christ which means that believers should “experience, practice and pursue community with one another”... in freedom and not under constraint. Thirdly, it says what the people believe regarding reconciliation and connects it to the responsibility of the church to act in reconciliation. The fourth clause centralizes the focus of justice expressed as discipleship. The fifth section refers to costly practices of absolute obedience to God.

BELHAR AND THE WHITE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH

The story of the heresy of apartheid is never complete without a reference to its impact on the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). This story is also the story of a racially divided church and a racial theology.¹² As such the story can not really be complete without a reflection on the impact the Confession of Belhar has had on the white DRC.

The DRC also had to ask how apartheid relates to the Christian faith. In the year 1974 the DRC proposed a theology of racial separation in their policy document *Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture*. The declaration claimed to be an attempt by the church to listen anew to “what the Word of God had to say on race relations in a plural society”. Theologically, however, their understanding was determined more by the additional source of a natural theology.

To understand how the DRC arrived at its theological justification of Apartheid one has to look at the strenuous debate between the senior theologians who followed the neo-Calvinist theology of the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, and the young theologians who followed Karl Barth’s

8 Arens (1989).

9 Huber (1991:48-60).

10 Huber (1991:48-60).

11 De Gruchy (1990:13-14).

12 Smit (1992:88-110).

dialectical theology.¹³ The senior theologians regarded Barth as suspect because they disagreed with his views on Scripture and regarded his views on the authority and inspiration of scripture as less than orthodox. The seniors defended creation theology and the idea of the orders of creation. By 1974, the majority opinion of the DRC confirmed that creation theology as it relates to the biblical narrative of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 would serve as adequate cornerstone of a theology of race.

Jaap Durand¹⁴, the professor who invited my class to study Karl Barth's theology in order to come to an understanding of the theological centre of the problem of apartheid, makes the following poignant statement regarding the eventual result of the power struggle between the senior Kuypers and the young Barthians in the Dutch Reformed Church:

Unfortunately, Barth's theological influence ... was negative as far as the three most crucial decades in the development of Afrikaner Reformed theology are concerned. During this period, from the beginning of the 1930's to the end of the 1950's, Barthian theology had such a formidable opponent in Kuypersianism that it was never able to obtain a firm foothold in the field of Afrikaner theological thinking ... It was only as late as the 1960's, and particularly the early 1970's, that the Barthian resistance to a creation theology began to take hold among young Afrikaner theologians and new thoughts with a definite Barthian flavour made significant inroads into the debates on church and society.

The real root of the DRC's apartheid thinking, however, goes further back to the DRC's mission policy already established in 1935. Here the DRC developed its understanding of church planting in a racist form. Theologically, the DRC's official position was based on a particular interpretation of Abraham Kuyper's neo-Calvinist theology.¹⁵ The DRC started by taking Kuyper's creation theology and developing it into a grand natural theological foundation for racial separation and the racial separation of churches.

According to Durand, a Barthian resistance began to take hold among young Afrikaner theologians in the early 1970's. Their foothold was unfortunately not strong enough in the DRC in 1974 to resist the acceptance of the theological justification of apartheid. Neither has it been strong enough to this day to lead the DRC to acceptance of the Confession of Belhar, despite its clear Barthian features.

The DRC has, to this date not been able to accept the Confession of Belhar. The DRC decided at its General Synodical Committee (GSC) of 1996 that the Confession of Belhar constitutes "a stumbling block to some of our (its) members"¹⁶ because it has a strong political connotation and is regarded as the fruit of a theology of liberation. Although there was no unanimous agreement on the latter, the GSC declared that the Confession of Belhar has the potential to divide the DRC. Therefore, the meeting resolved that acceptance of the Confession of Belhar was at that stage not an option for the DRC.

13 Refer to Durand's article "Church and State in South Africa: Karl Barth vs Abraham Kuyper" in *On reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (1988:121-138); and Botman's article "Is blood thicker than justice? The legacy of Abraham Kuyper for Southern Africa" in *Religion, pluralism, and public life: Abraham Kuyper's legacy for the twenty-first century* (2000b:342-361).

14 Durand (1988:122).

15 De Gruchy in *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in dialogue* (1984b); De Gruchy in *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African contribution to an ecumenical debate* (1991); and Strauss in an article entitled "Abraham Kuyper, Apartheid and Reformed Churches in South Africa in their support of Apartheid" in *Theological Forum* (1995:4-27); etc.

16 Dutch Reformed Church (1996).

The GSC drew attention to the 1990 resolution of the General Synod. This resolution stated that the Belhar Confession as such was not in conflict with the three Doctrinal Standards (of Reformed Confessions, i.e. The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt) and that it need not cause estrangement between the churches. In addition it compromised by saying:

The GSC ... is of the opinion that the Confession of Belhar can not simply be brushed off as “liberation theology”. It has to be seen against the background of the suffering and need of believing and devout members whose faith is stranded in a crisis as a result of the system of apartheid. The GSC is of the opinion that the “unconditional acceptance” of the Confession of Belhar as a fourth Confession additional to the three Doctrinal Standards will presently cause so much disunity in the DRC that at the moment it is no option.¹⁷

What are the conditions set by the DRC for the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar? First, a revision of the belief that God is a God of justice who, in a situation of injustice and enmity is revealed in a special way as the God of the oppressed and the destitute (Confession of Belhar, 1986, Clause 4). The DRC is of the opinion that certain statements could have been formulated differently, among others, paragraph 4 of the Belhar Confession.¹⁸

Centrally the DRC stands against the Confession of Belhar because it refuses to reflect on the confession from the theological framework of a biblical understanding of reconciliation. Instead, the church narrowly judged apartheid from the ethical framework of the second table of the law, i.e. a sin against fellow human beings.¹⁹

Perhaps, the DRC should begin a reflection on Barmen to take itself towards a firmer understanding of the theology of Belhar.

BELHAR BEYOND APARTHEID

Whatever the DRC may do eventually, the URCSA and Christians who regard the Confession of Belhar as an expression of its own faith, have to face a more urgent question: What is the relevance of the Confession of Belhar after Apartheid?

I am aware of the fact that it is possible to ask: “Whereto after Belhar?” But I think it is the wrong question at this time. Instead, we should continue the search for the relevance of Belhar in the current context.

As I have said, the Confession of Belhar has five sections. First, it confesses faith in the Triune God. Then it speaks about the unity of the church in Jesus Christ. Thirdly, it says what the people believe regarding reconciliation. The fifth section refers to the absolute obedience to God. The fourth point states the justice question:

We believe:

- that God revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity he is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that he calls his Church to follow him in this; that he brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that he supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps the orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for him pure and undefiled

17 Dutch Reformed Church (1996).

18 Dutch Reformed Church (1990).

19 I have argued this point in an article entitled “Gereformeerdeheid en die Belydenis van Belhar (1986)?” in *Vraagtekens oor Gereformeerdeheid?* (1998:94-111).

religion is to visit the orphans and widows in their suffering; that he wishes to teach his people to do what is good and to seek the right; that the Church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which means, among other things, that the Church shall witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that 'justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'

- that the church as God's possession must stand where he stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who seek selfishly their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the Gospel.²⁰

The justice question is here also at heart a confessional concern for economic justice. The Confession of Belhar is a testimony to the liberating activity of God in history and context, including that of a global economic reality. It challenges the church as community to follow God in God's liberating actions. The poor and oppressed are identified as the prime interlocutors of such actions. God is a God of justice seeking and acting for justice in a world of enmity and suffering.

Finding a way between an uncritical progressive understanding of God as "a God of the poor" or an equally uncritical conservative view of God as "a God of compassion", Belhar has opted for the Barthian description of this relationship.²¹ God has been revealed, it says, as One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people. This revelation is embedded in a contextual understanding of how God acts. In a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged. This is then extended ecclesiologically. It means that the Church is called, in these actions, to follow God, standing by people in any form of suffering and need, which means, among other things, that the church shall witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that 'justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'. Standing with God impels the church, as God's possession in this world, to stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.

Barth's strong call for focusing on the historical-theological meaning of discipleship, in the form of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's argument, is then retrieved.²² In following Christ, the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged "who seek selfishly their own interests and thus control and harm others."

In a world of enmity, a world of the powerful over against the powerless and where the privileged seek selfishly their own interest and control over others, the Word of God calls us to revisit our discipleship in light of the challenges of the global economy.

During the time of Barmen and Belhar the central institutional question revolved around the church and the nation state. In the current context the market economy is the primary authority with its own secular, neo-capitalist ideology. We are all subjected, no longer so much to religious

20 De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio (1983:180-181).

21 Barth clearly understood that the church has to side with the poor, oppressed and exploited people. His discussion of the mercy and righteousness of God in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 reveals this: "God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it" (1957:386).

22 Barth (1958:533-553).

institutions or states, with their accountability to God or people respectively, but this time to unaccountable financial transactions which operate around the world anonymously and with impunity. Bob Goudzwaard correctly concludes that: "... in this time of globalization it is not the presence of church and state, but far more their absence or end which sets the tone of the debate."²³

This point of departure of economic globalisation is not as important to the existence of the church itself as it is to the socio-economic meaning of its confessions.

I chaired an historic consultation of African Scholars on the issue: "How our faith is being challenged by economic globalisation" in Kitwe, Zambia in 1996 where a new groundbreaking theological awareness arose. This consultation proposed that Africa is faced with a *status confessionis* in the light of the exclusionary nature of economic globalisation. This matter was referred to the executive of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) for ecumenical evaluation and action. A discussion ensued between myself and Ulrich Möller, ecumenical secretary of the Lippische Kirche, after which we decided to disagree about a definition of a *status confessionis* and agree on a request for a *processus confessionis* on economic injustice.²⁴

Urged by the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches (SAARC), of which I was the moderator at the time, the executive of WARC allowed time for a special forum of churches from the South which was to be sponsored by SAARC on the evening of Wednesday, 13 August 1997. An interesting flow of events led to a situation where I was instructed to lead the forum and present to them a paper defending the issue of a *processus confessionis* on economic globalisation. In addition I had the responsibility to prepare a motion which was tabled that evening at the forum.²⁵ In my presentation to the forum of the South I referred to Karl Barth's 1925 address to the WARC in Cardiff on "The desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed creed". As in the year 1925, I argued that the churches of the South must now reluctantly accept that the World Alliance is, for the same three crucial reasons, not yet ready to declare a *status confessionis* on global economic injustice. The Alliance (a) does not have a shared theological category to judge the current global economic reality; (b) although it has so many member churches from the South in its consciousness the Alliance does not come from an illuminating contextual position to understand the kairos; and (c) I questioned whether it had the combined political will to act on this matter in the nature of a confessing community. From the perspective of the South, the question is no longer whether we are in a *status confessionis* of a global economic nature. However, based on the criteria required for the declaration of such a state of confession, we must conclude that it is not yet possible. The World Alliance would, therefore, do better if it declared a process of learning, education, confession and action at this time in history.

Ulrich Möller was appointed secretary for the Section II Report that was responsible for a final recommendation to the WARC's 23rd General Council, Debrecen, Hungary (1997). Based on the recommendation of the Section II Report, the WARC, at its meeting in Debrecen subsequently declared a *processus confessionis* with regard to economic injustice in the context of globalisation.

In the past we have called for *status confessionis* in cases of blatant racial and cultural discrimination and genocide. WE NOW CALL FOR A COMMITTED PROCESS OF

23 Goudzwaard (1998:10).

24 Refer to The World Alliance of Reformed Churches publication *Reformed World* (volume 47) and *Update* (volumes 5 and 6) prior to the 23rd WARC General Council in Debrecen, Hungary, August 1997.

25 This motion was adopted by delegates of churches from the South with only one person voting against it because of the absence of a reference to "economic destruction" in the call for a *processus confessionis*. The motion, as prepared by me, was adopted by the forum and became part of the proceedings of the WARC 23rd General Council. See Appendix 22 of the report in Opocensky (1997:245).

PROGRESSIVE RECOGNITION, EDUCATION AND CONFESSION (*PROCESSUS CONFSSIONIS*) WITHIN ALL WARC MEMBER CHURCHES AT ALL LEVELS REGARDING ECONOMIC INJUSTICE AND ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION²⁶ (Their capital letters.)

The exclusionary nature and the principle of triage in the global context served as epicentre for this development. The decision took the issue of exclusion in the realm of economic globalisation beyond the boundaries of the ethical. Indeed, it took ethical challenges and translated them in terms of faith affirmation. The Alliance has invited member churches and Christians everywhere to embark on a journey in which we continued to study the global phenomenon, its impact on people and nature to come to a better understanding of the theological centre of the global challenge which could lead to faithful action for global transformation.

The WARC 24th General Council took place in Accra, Ghana (2004). In a presentation to the council, I focussed on the notion of God's covenant as a theological construct in the discernment of human dignity and the integrity of creation. This construct is useful in the engagement of global economic realities in the context of globalisation.²⁷

In a document entitled *Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth* the WARC 24th General Council (2004) agreed on a choice for confession in response to the call of Debrecen (1997) and to show the necessity and urgency of an active response to the current challenges of our time.²⁸

The WARC 24th General Council (2004) Public Issues Committee Report reflected on economic and environmental justice with a call to action within churches, towards governments, the private sector, international organisations and other faith-based and secular organisations.²⁹

The Policy Committee of the WARC 24th General Council (2004) is responsible for reviewing the work of the WARC since Debrecen (1997) and for proposing future priorities and directives. The Policy Committee Report recognised the work that was done on covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth (*processus confessionis*) and recommended work on this subject as a priority issue for the future.³⁰

BEYOND BARMEN: A GLOBAL ECONOMIC CONCLUSION?

Beyond the Declaration of Barmen, hovering in Barmen's own proud tradition, stands the Confession of Belhar. This Confession belongs to the ecumenical Christian community. The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa is merely the present trustee of this great confessional treasure which is relevant to the neo-capitalist global economy. I think that Belhar has much more to say to the present situation in Germany and the context of economic globalisation than even, perhaps, the Barmen Declaration. Perhaps, beyond Barmen, the journey of the confessing community is leading to Belhar and thus back to the younger Karl Barth.

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26 Opocensky (1997:198).

27 Botman (2004).

28 World Alliance of Reformed Churches 24th General Council (2004a).

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KEY WORDS

Confession
Barmen Declaration
Belhar Confession
Church
Dutch Reformed Church
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Church unity
Economic justice
Integrity of creation
Human dignity

TREFWOORDE

Belydenis
Barmen Verklaring
Belhar belydenis
Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerk
Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika
Kerkeenheid
Ekonomiese geregtigheid
Integriteit van die skepping
Menswaardigheid