

# On not abandoning church theology: Dirk Smit on church and politics

## ABSTRACT

This essay argues for the importance of correctly defining, and then defending the concept of ‘church theology’ in dialogue with the thought of Dirk Smit. This is done by identifying and examining the ecclesiologies of the two trajectories that dominated the church’s opposition to apartheid in South Africa, namely Kairos and Belhar. The former, rooted in the notion of the church as Institution, came to expression in the *Kairos Document* which was highly critical of ‘church theology’. The latter, rooted in the Reformation understanding of the church, came to expression in the *Belhar Confession* which sought to clarify what it meant to be the church. Through the insights of Smit, a crucial theologian in the Belhar process, the essay argues that we need to find ways to draw these two divergent trajectories together and to recover the heart of what it means to do ‘church theology’ in our context today.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A welcome re-reading of Dirk Smit’s theological reflections on the church’s political responsibility on the occasion of his fifty-fifth birthday has strengthened a growing hunch that the Christian struggle against apartheid and the national security state in South Africa was shaped by two quite different theological trajectories – aimed in basically the same direction. It is my sense that an honest acknowledgement and open reflection on this, including a critical engagement with the fundamental *theological* differences between these two trajectories, is a crucial task if we are to consider a credible post-apartheid Christian political ethics around such issues as democracy, corruption and AIDS.

At the heart of this difference is the meaning of ‘church theology’; but around this central distinction there spins a constellation of other unsettling factors to do with language, institutional culture, theological tradition, personalities and locations. The two trajectories, Kairos and Belhar, (named here after their most public expressions), clearly pulled in the same direction and found common purpose in the rejection of the apartheid state. Yet, as I shall note below, they exhibited quite different ecclesiologies, and thus have bequeathed a contested legacy to the post-apartheid consideration of the relationship between the church and politics – not because they understand politics differently, but because they understand the *church* differently.

Dirk Smit was intimately involved in the *Belhar Confession* and his writings on church and politics from that period until the present exhibit a lively interpretation of its ecclesiological heart in the face of the changing socio-political context. He did not sign the *Kairos Document*, but speaking of the context in which the draft *Belhar Confession* was made in 1982, he seems to anticipate its concerns:

“It supposes that Christians share the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth has struck, in which the gospel is itself at stake. The role of the situation, the kairos, the moment that has ripened, cannot be overemphasized” (Smit 1984:29).

A decade later he makes a link between the two processes:

“That was what was meant a few years ago when a number of churches proclaimed a *status confessionis*, i.e. a moment of truth. That is what the Kairos theologians had in mind when they referred to a *kairos*, a moment of truth. That was the basis on which many attempted to practice a prophetic theology, i.e. to read the signs of the times and to speak the truth openly and concretely. That was our aim when we came forward with a new confession, the *Belhar Confession* ...” (Smit 1993:17).

While Smit clearly sees a connection between the moment of truth as *kairos* or *status confessionis*, nowhere does he specifically align himself with what the Kairos theologians saw as their theological task, or what we call the Kairos trajectory; and the major reason for this is that he stands in a different trajectory that has a different understanding of the church and therefore a quite different understanding of church theology. This ecclesiological tension is important to recognise, and we do so in this essay by posing the question implied in the title of this essay: what, exactly, is church theology? We answer this from both trajectories, and complete the essay with a reflection on Smit’s contribution to the answer.

## 2. CHURCH THEOLOGY IN THE KAIROS TRAJECTORY

Faced with comprehensive resistance to apartheid as well as its inadequate reform initiatives, the PW Botha regime proclaimed a state of emergency in certain areas of South Africa in 1985. In the midst of this cauldron of repressive violence and deep suffering a group of theologians from the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) met in Soweto to articulate a theological response to the crisis. The result was the *Kairos Document* (KD), a searing indictment of both the church and the state, and a call for a ‘prophetic theology’ (Kairos Theologians 1985). Given the context in which it was published the KD became a sensation overnight, although this fact did rather surprise the authors and signatories. It called forth a torrent of support from both inside and outside South Africa, and a barrage of criticism from leaders in both the Church and State. It “has generated more discussions and debates than any previous theological document in South Africa,” wrote the Kairos Theologians in the preface to the revised second edition (1986), and John de Gruchy has commented that “it has become one of *the* theological documents of the ecumenical church in the late twentieth century” (1990:15).

The document makes two fundamental claims. The first (in chapter 1) is that the church in South Africa is divided racially, with Christians on both sides of the conflict, and also some trying to sit on the fence. “More and more people are now saying that there are in fact two Churches in South Africa – a White Church and a Black Church. Even within the same denomination there are in fact two Churches ... The Church is divided against itself and its day of judgement has come” (1985:1,2). The Kairos is not just a moment of truth for apartheid, but also for the Church. This fact provides the major motivation for the document, a key aim of which is “to analyse more carefully the different theologies in our Churches” so as to identify their real significance. Having done this analysis (in chapters 2 – 4), the document then offers a “challenge to action” with a range of concrete actions, and concludes with a call to Christians:

“The challenge of the faith and of our present Kairos is addressed to all who bear the name Christian. None of us can simply sit back and wait to be told what to do by our Church leaders or by anyone else. We must all accept responsibility for acting and living out our Christian faith in these circumstances” (1985:25).

The second fundamental claim in the document is that there were “three Christian theological stances in relation to the present situation in South Africa” (1986:33, footnote 6). The first of these

was *state theology*, “the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy” (1986:3). A footnote in the revised second edition makes it clear that state theology means more than just the ‘apartheid theology’ of the NG Kerk, and includes all that “justifies the activities of the state and its attempts to hold on to power” (1986:33). The KD calls the second Christian response *church theology*:

“In a limited, guarded and cautious way this theology is critical of apartheid. Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation” (1986:9).

Against these two inadequate responses, the document calls for *prophetic theology*. The first edition declares: “We need a bold and incisive response that is prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand” (1985:15). The section on prophetic theology is the one that is quite different in the revised second edition, because there had been a call for greater clarity on what the document meant by the term (1986: Preface). An additional section thus examines a number of characteristics of prophetic theology, namely, a return to the Bible, a reading of the signs of the times, a call to action, confronting the evils of the times, offering hope, being deeply spiritual, and being thoroughly practical and pastoral (1986:17,18).

This short summary of the KD points to the key elements of the ecclesiology of the Kairos trajectory, namely, the church as a fixed social institution which is deeply rooted in the political ambiguities of South Africa, carrying the racial divisions of the country, and compromised by its inability to act prophetically. While the church is by its very social existence already on the side of the poor and oppressed “because that is where the majority of its members are to be found” (1985:22), the problem lies with its bad theology, i.e. church theology. Through its false faith and spirituality (1985:14), which leads in turn to a lack of social analysis and inadequate political strategy (1985:13) and then to a consequent misunderstanding of reconciliation, justice and non-violence (1985:8-13), church theology serves to confuse matters and inhibit the church from fully participating in the struggle for liberation. This is the division at the heart of the church, and this is why it faces the Kairos, or a moment of truth.

Properly understood, then, the document is not questioning the very status of the church itself as in some way constituted by the gospel. It takes the church as given, one social institution amongst many – albeit a very important one – and seeks to shift its resources, activities, and ideological power, to the side of the poor and the oppressed. In the logic of the document then, the challenge is to replace church theology with prophetic theology, and in so doing to unite the church:

“We are a divided Church precisely because not all the members of our Churches have taken sides against oppression. In other words not all Christians have united themselves with God “who is always on the side of the oppressed” (Ps. 103:6). As far as the present crisis is concerned, there is only one way forward to Church unity and that is for those Christians who find themselves on the side of the oppressor or sitting on the fence, to cross over to the other side to be untied in faith and action with those who are oppressed. Unity and reconciliation within the Church itself is only possible around God and Jesus Christ who are to be found on the side of the poor and the oppressed” (1985:22).

How are we to understand this ecclesiology? The Kairos trajectory, influenced particularly by the pioneering and creative work of Albert Nolan (see Kaufmann 2001) and rooted in the Institute for

Contextual Theology as the heir of work undertaken in the Christian Institute, SPRO-CAS I and II, and early black theology (see Cochrane 2001) is deeply influenced by two similar ecclesiologies that are significant in South Africa, namely, that of the Roman Catholic church and that of the ecumenical churches in South Africa. Whilst there are an obvious range of differences between them, the one thing they hold in common is the social and political concreteness of the institutional church. This is clearly true of the Roman Catholic church, and in a similar way of the Anglican and Lutheran churches; but I would argue that whilst it is not true *in essence* of the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist churches, their particular incarnation as churches in Southern Africa has – for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the great nineteenth century missionary movement ended up planting churches rather than the gospel – turned them into institutions. They are denominations amongst other denominations. They own property, and have bishops, moderators, members, hymn books, and distinctive Manyano uniforms.

As the experience of the Church Unity Commission illustrates, even the ‘English-speaking’ churches who share a common cultural and language ethos struggle to unite because they are more interested in protecting or preserving this identity than in something bigger than themselves. It is as if they exist and will continue to exist whether or not they are what they themselves believe they should be; and as the KD so rightly pointed out in South Africa this means that they reflect the social reality in which they are located, and they were (and still are) divided between a black church and a white church. They are, in the language of the 1980s, a ‘site of struggle’. Their theology – church theology – reflects this compromised institutionalism, and for the sake of the gospel it needs to be replaced with prophetic theology.

### 3. CHURCH THEOLOGY IN THE BELHAR TRAJECTORY

The *Belhar Confession of Faith* was adopted by the NG Sendingkerk in draft form at its General Synod in 1982, and then in final form at the 1986 Synod at Belhar in the Western Cape. It is rooted in the same socio-political context of the repressive apartheid system as the *Kairos Document*, and it was also decisive in rejecting it from a Christian perspective. However it is a very different kind of theological document, and gives rise to quite a different perspective on ‘church theology’; and in so doing points us to a different ecclesiology and a different way of thinking about *church* and politics in a post-apartheid era.

The Belhar trajectory has its origins in the witness of Beyers Naudé, and the Christian Institute (CI) which he founded; and is shaped by the significant insight of the 1968 *Message to the People of South Africa* of the CI and the SACC, that apartheid is a ‘false gospel’. The fundamental concern of the ‘church struggle’ at this stage centred on the fact that the church was seen to be lending ideological support to the policy of apartheid, and this needed to be challenged for the sake of the truth of the gospel and the integrity of the church. However, events in the 1970s, sparked by the SPRO-CAS I and II programmes that grew out of the *Message*, the emergence of Black Theology, the Programme to Combat Racism, and ultimately by the Soweto Uprising of 1976 led to a concern not just with the gospel and the church, but for the *people* who were the victims of racism, injustice and oppression. This shift challenged the institutional church about its role in the South African struggle for freedom, and culminated, as we have seen, in the *Kairos Document*. Nevertheless alongside the questions of *orthopraxis*, the question of *orthodoxy* still remained, namely: Is apartheid of the gospel or is it a ‘false gospel’? This ideological battle was still to be won.

For good reason this question was most pressing for those in the family of the NG Kerk, where apartheid was given Biblical sanction and promoted as a Christian policy. Thus the challenge was firmly located within the Reformed tradition, and it was from here that the answer to the question had to come. As Beyers Naudé saw early on, the obvious resource for this was the theology of Karl

Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the experience of the Confessing Church struggle against Nazism which culminated in the *Barmen Declaration* of 1934. The issue at stake in the German struggle was the question as to the very existence of the church, and it was based on a particularly important issue in Reformed theology. If as Calvin has it, the church of God exists “wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution” (*Institutes* IV.1.9) then the failure to preach the Word of God means that whatever the institution might call itself, it ceases to be the church. This claim is not to be entered into lightly, and it does not refer to “nonessential matters;” rather it concerns “the proper principles of religion” (*ibid* IV.1.12). In other words, when the Word of God is no longer preached and heard, then we have the ‘death of the church’. As this simple argument is the theological axel around which the very idea of the Reformation spun, it is worth quoting Calvin at length:

“It has already been explained how much we ought to value the ministry of the Word and sacraments, and how far our reverence for it should go, that it may be to us a perpetual token by which to distinguish the church. That is, wherever the ministry remains whole and uncorrupted, no moral faults or diseases prevent it from bearing the name “church”. Secondly, it is not so weakened by trivial errors as not be esteemed lawful. We have, moreover, shown that the errors which ought to be pardoned are those who do not harm the chief doctrine of religion, which do not destroy the articles of religion on which all believers ought to agree; and with regard to the sacraments, those which do not abolish or throw down the lawful institution of the Author. But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows ...” (*ibid* IV.2.1).

For Barth and Bonhoeffer, the moment at which the German church accepted the Aryan clauses, Nazism was no longer – in Calvin’s words - just a ‘moral fault or disease’, and it certainly was not a ‘trivial error’ which did not ‘harm the chief doctrine of religion.’ Allowing a racist policy dictated by the state to control the very form and ministry of the church meant that ‘the sum of necessary doctrine’ had been overturned. This crisis for the integrity of the church and the truth of the gospel meant that a *status confessionis* existed in Germany, one in which Christians had to confess their failure and seek again to gather around the Word of God, otherwise the ‘death of the church’ would follow. As Berkhouwer puts it, the Barmen Confession allowed scripture to “resound anew in that situation as a reminder that decisions are necessary and that they affect whether the Church is ‘to be or not to be’” (1976:300). Thus in this context of ‘not being,’ a Confessing Church arose which sought ‘to be’ the true church of Jesus Christ, and it was this experience that provided the inspiration for those, like Beyers Naudé, who were struggling to bear witness against the ‘false gospel’ of apartheid. (J. de Gruchy 1994:164)

The initial discernment came, however, from outside the Reformed tradition. In 1977 the Lutheran World Federation at a meeting in Dar es Salaam declared that a *status confessionis* did indeed exist in South Africa, and they challenged all white Lutherans to reject apartheid. A year later at a SACC consultation on racism, black Christians called on white Christians to purge the church of racism within twelve months, failing which they “will have no alternative but to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by becoming a confessing church” (De Gruchy 2004:192). Yet, the ecclesiological impact of this discernment and passion was never realised because whilst there were certainly many in the ‘ecumenical churches’ who benefited from apartheid or were racist themselves, none of the churches *qua* churches actually defended apartheid or racism on theological grounds. In the NG Kerk and the wider Reformed tradition in South Africa, however, it was a different story and it was therefore here that the ideological battle for ‘true doctrine’ was waged and won (see S de Gruchy 2006).

Under the leadership of Alan Boesak, the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa (ABRECSA) was formed in 1981, and it immediately put to the South African member churches of WARC, (the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, i.e. the NG family, Presbyterian and Congregational churches) that the *status confessionis* was indeed real, that apartheid was a 'false gospel' and its theological justification a heresy. This message then exploded onto the world stage when the General Council meeting of WARC in Ottawa, Canada in 1982 recognised the *status confessionis* in South Africa and declared that "apartheid is a sin, and that its moral and theological justification ... a theological heresy." (See De Gruchy 2004). This declaration meant that the Reformed churches in South Africa were called upon to confess their faith in this context of 'disobedience to the Word of God', and so at the General Synod of the NG Sendingkerk in September and October 1982, the draft *Belhar Confession* was adopted. After it was sent down to local congregations, it was formally adopted by the Church in 1986.

*Belhar* is a simple, short, and yet profound confession of faith in the face of the 'heresy' of apartheid (See Cloete and Smit). It comprises five clauses, with the first and last being a very short statement of faith in the triune God and a commitment to the confession itself. The other three clauses each focus on a key issue at the heart of the heresy of apartheid: unity, reconciliation and justice. Clause 2 on unity affirms the one-ness in Christ that is at the heart of the church, and rejects the way that apartheid has entrenched division in the church. Clause 3 affirms that the church is entrusted with the gospel of reconciliation and includes the claim "that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity."

Clause 4 takes the confession beyond the obvious rejection of apartheid on the basis of what might be construed as 'individual' unity and reconciliation, to the question of social and political justice. Here the authors are absolutely clear that the fundamental issue with apartheid is not just about the integrity of the church in a 'churchy' way, but also about its integrity in the public arena (see De Gruchy 1992). It makes the bold claim that God "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." The implication is clear:

"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."

What the *Belhar Confession* is doing, in essence, is to drive home the implications of the *status confessionis* for Reformed ecclesiology. If a theology involves the promotion of a position that 'harms the chief doctrine of religion' then it becomes a heresy and its adherents forfeit the right to be 'church'. In other words, by definition, true theology can only be *church* theology because any theology that is false cannot be of the true church of Jesus Christ. Whereas the Kairos trajectory focuses on the ethics of apartheid, and in this sense seems to focus on apartheid as a 'moral fault or disease', and thus rejects the church theology that undergirds it; the *Belhar* trajectory focuses on the false gospel or heresy of apartheid, and so calls for church theology to triumph. The former issues a challenge *to* the church, the latter is a confession *of* the church.

#### 4. DIRK SMIT ON CHURCH AND POLITICS

What are we to make of these two different ways of understanding the church, and therefore of church theology? They both emerged from the 'underside'. They were both fundamentally opposed to the apartheid regime, and they were both fundamentally focused on justice for the poor and the oppressed, and sought to bring good news to the victims of the regime and its security

forces. Yet they draw on different theological resources, go about their work in quite different ways, and – because of their divergent ecclesiologies - embody different strategies for the relationship of the church to politics in post apartheid South Africa.

My sense is that this difference points to a real division within the ranks of progressive theology (for want of a better word) in South Africa – namely one between the Afrikaans speaking, predominantly ‘coloured,’ Reformed tradition centred at the University of the Western Cape and more recently also in Stellenbosch, and with partnerships at UNISA, drawing on the work of Barth and Bonhoeffer, and given contemporary expression in the *Belhar Confession*; and the English speaking, predominantly black, ecumenical tradition centred at the SACC, ICT, FedSem, and more recently the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, drawing on the work of the Latin American (mainly Roman Catholic) liberation theologians, and given contemporary expression in the *Kairos Document*. Whilst this rather caricatures the division, and clearly does not paint the entire picture, I know personally from having grown up in the struggle of the ‘ecumenical church’, having signed the *Kairos Document* in 1985, and now working at the School of Theology in Pietermaritzburg on the one hand; and the other hand having taken my D.Th. degree at the University of the Western Cape under Dirk Smit soon after the *Belhar Confession* was adopted, having worked in a ‘coloured’ Afrikaans-speaking church setting for a good deal of my ministry and being a theologian in the Reformed tradition, that there is enough truth in the matter to make it stick.

In this sense, we are heirs to a *double legacy* from the church that bore witness against apartheid and the apartheid state – Belhar and Kairos. Not only do we need to acknowledge this, but we need to reflect on that fact that these two worlds seldom connect *theologically*. And yet there is a desperate need for them to do so in the years that lie ahead, because we need to know what we mean when we use the term *church* when we speak of church and state, or church and politics, or church and AIDS. The legacy of the Kairos trajectory reminds us that we need to take seriously the ethical-political task, to not flinch from analysis, reflection and choosing sides, and to be suspicious of a ‘church theology’ that “relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation” (1985:8). Yet, as the Belhar trajectory shows, this use of the term ‘church theology’ carries ecclesiological assumptions that disconnect the *witness* of the church from the *confession* of the church, and therefore from the *being* of the church; and in that sense it allows for an unwarranted surrender of the value of the term ‘church theology’ to precisely those who have betrayed the church and therefore are least worthy of being accused of doing *church* theology.

In not abandoning church theology, however, we need to think very carefully about what we could mean by the term and the concept, because the *Kairos Document* is obviously correct that much of the theology undertaken by the institutional church is weak. It is here that the reflections of Dirk Smit over the past twenty years are instructive because they articulate the contours of the Belhar trajectory on precisely this matter. In drawing this essay to a close then, I want to point out three key elements (amongst others) that are crucial for a genuine or authentic *church* theology. Some will recognise the links between these three concerns and the three levels of response that Smit, in his very helpful essay, “Reformed ethics and economic justice” (1996b), offers to the question: *How can it be expected of us to make a contribution if we have nothing to share?* Here he argues that the church can make a difference by shaping the vision of a moral society, by building the integrity of moral people, and by engaging in deeds social justice. Let us reflect briefly on each.

First, and most important, is the recognition that engagement in the socio-economic and political realities of life is fundamental to being church, and is not an ‘add-on extra’. The third clause of the *Belhar Confession* makes this clear. Unfortunately the Kairos trajectory can lead

itself to the opinion that once the struggle was over and the ‘people’s leaders’ were un-banned or had returned from exile, the church could abandon its vicarious role in the political arena and go back to ‘getting on with the business of being the church.’ This could mean abandoning politics to the politicians (or becoming a politician, thus Chikane and Mkhathshwa), and on the assumption that political freedom has come could lead to diverting energy to the interior struggle for freedom (thus Nolan’s current work). For the Belhar trajectory this not possible, as witness to the God of life in the political arena is constitutive of ‘the business of being the church’. Smit writes:

“... I think it would be dangerous to stop here without asserting that such an inward focus is not enough. The church, particularly at this stage in South Africa, also has an obligation to act in the public arena” (1993:11).

The church has no other business but to witness to the gospel, and as this is about the Lordship of Christ over all life, it is *essentially* political and economic. There can be no abandoning of the public sphere. Smit has shown how the Belhar trajectory speaks with power and clarity (in a way that the Kairos trajectory struggles) into the post-apartheid and post-Cold War context of poverty and economic globalisation, particularly around the current work of the WARC and the *processus confessionis* ‘regarding economic justice and ecological destruction’ (Smit 2003a, 2003b, 2003c).

The second crucial element that Smit points us to is the role of the church in nurturing ‘disciples, friends and saints,’ and I would add ‘prophets.’ One problem with the Kairos trajectory in the way that it contrasts prophetic theology over and against church theology is that it can lead to the impression that in order to do prophetic theology one can have (must have?) a very negative view of the church. But as Des van der Water (2001) has shown in his (positive and supportive) analysis of the *Kairos Document*, it does beg the question as to how one relates the institution of the church to the charisma of the prophet. And this in turn leads to further questions that we can pose: Who nurtures the prophet? And if the prophets leave the church, what happens to their children - will they be nurtured in the same ethos that shaped the moral vibrancy and prophetic indignation of their parents? And if not, is prophetic theology able to live beyond just one generation? And if it is not able to do so, what does that mean? Smit has written about the work of the church in shaping the moral ethos of its members, and not just their practical ethics (see 1996a, 1996b). And he has dwelt on the role of liturgy and worship in contributing to this ethos (1996b, 2002a, 2002b). In this way he reminds us that church theology takes the church seriously, not just as one social institution amongst many, but as a church in which the Word and the Sacraments are experienced and which shapes the lives of the people of God to live in a life-giving way.

The third element concerns the proper task of social analysis and engagement. For all its claiming of church theology, the Belhar trajectory does not abandon the task of what the Kairos trajectory calls prophetic theology. Smit shows us that the obvious implication of confession is ethical engagement in the ambiguous world of politics and economics (1984, 2003b). Thus he makes a direct link between the *Belhar Confession* and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of the ANC-led government in the mid 1990s (1996b:441). Yet crucially the socio-political context is not itself the heart of confession, and thus the word *apartheid* does not appear anywhere in the *Belhar Confession*. This is quite different to the *Kairos Document*; and yet while it is a great strength of the document it is also becomes an immediate weakness as the political context changes. H Russell Botman, a former doctoral student and recent colleague of Smit’s and a key participant in the Belhar process, has drawn attention to this in his engagement with the document - showing how it theologised the contextual political division in South Africa into a messianic division between God and the enemies of God and between whom there could obviously be no reconciliation; and then how it was left stranded when the liberation leaders (on



God's side) sat down with the apartheid leaders (the enemies of God) and hammered out a political compromise, and then promoted a policy of reconciliation:

“Negotiations, with a greater willingness to compromise, were eventually accepted as the correct response in view of these socio-political conditions. Kairos theology was subsequently set on a collision course with the sunset-clause of the liberation movement, at least in so far as its doctrine of reconciliation is concerned” (2001:119).

In this context, Smit speaks of the *Belhar Confession* as both a final document and a minimum document. Its *finality* is that it gives voice to the Gospel around which there can be no compromise. The situation is such that it places “the essence and the confession of the Christian Church itself at stake” (1984b:63); but because it is the *Gospel* that is confessed, the confession humbly calls for confession, repentance, and reconciliation. It seeks the unity of the church, rather than to promote one position in another ‘site of struggle.’ But it is also a ‘*minimum* document’:

“It is not confessed that the DR Mission Church believes in the democratic form of government, or in a system of one man, one vote. No choice is made between a free-enterprise economy and a form of socialism. No theological verdicts are pronounced about the ideal relationship between church and state. No political or economic ‘alternative’ is presented ...” (ibid 61).

And yet, as Smit goes on to say, by confessing the Gospel in its finality the Belhar trajectory opens itself to being of use beyond the given *apartheid* context: “the confession will serve as a critique held before any new policy and administration, and it will therefore remain relevant as a confession concerning the permanent calling of the Church” (ibid). That remains the task that awaits the church and church theology. To translate its ethos into its ethics, and to see the link between what the church is and what it does in each and every context.

In these three ways the work of Smit on church and politics helps us to recognise the character of an authentic church theology. These elements are vital to being the church, and constitute the heart of a church theology which is to be embraced rather than abandoned if we as Christians, as theologians, as *church* are to make a difference in politics today.

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## KEY WORDS

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## TREFWOORDE

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