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Confessing church today?

ABSTRACT

Confessing church today? The article responds to the question from Reformed ecumenical circles regarding what it could mean to be a confessing church today. It revisits Karl Barth's influential contributions to the same discussion during the 1920s and for several decades after that. It calls to mind some major claims from Barth's authoritative paper for the ecumenical Reformed world in 1925 on the question of whether the Reformed community needed a general confessional document – a proposal in regard to which he strongly rejected both the possibility and the desirability. It then traces the legacy of these claims through the reception history of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of Belhar and the Accra Covenant on Justice and the Ecology, and thereby suggests possible answers to the original question.

1. REMEMBERING – FOR THE FUTURE?

The theme given to me – with the question mark, which I added myself – is a reminder of the long history we have together as churches and of how much we have learnt about being a confessing church.¹



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1 This article is an extended, annotated version based on the public lecture held during the commemoration and celebration after twenty years of the official Partnership Agreement between the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany, the Church of Lippe, and the Reformed Alliance. The celebration took place on 29 June 2019 in Rinteln, Lower Saxony. The event also served as part of the commemoration of the Karl Barth year of 2019.

We are here to remember and to commemorate. We are here to reflect together on our joint decisions and commitment to our partnership that began two decades ago, and our shared struggles during the preceding as well as the following decades. We are here to remember together the history of the *Confession of Belhar*, the Reformed confessional document born during the 1980s in South Africa, during the struggle against apartheid. We are here to remember together the history of *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, the ecumenical document born during the 1930s in Germany yet inspiring so many since then all over our world. We are here to celebrate together our appreciation for the work of Karl Barth during this year of honouring his legacy. We are here to think back even further to the common Reformed tradition in which we stand and the calling of the Reformed community to which we belong.

We are, however, also here to ask what all of this means for us together today.

2. CONFESSING CHURCH?

What does it mean to be a “confessing” church? In June 1925 Karl Barth was asked, by both the Reformed Alliance in Duisburg-Meiderich and the World Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches in Cardiff, whether it was possible and desirable to express the common Reformed faith in one worldwide confession. In a passionate paper he argued that it was not possible and indeed also not desirable; in fact, that it would go against the Reformed understanding of what it means to confess – and for several reasons (Barth 1990).

For Reformed people, he explained, quoting Calvin, confession means to say “here, now, we” – this is what we believe, what we believe *here*, what we believe *now*, in the face of the challenges and temptations that confront us *today* (Barth 1990:616).

At the time he developed a description of a Reformed view of confession that would become widespread and influential. In her instructive study on Reformed identity and confession called *Reformierte Identität weltweit. Eine Interpretation neuerer Bekenntnisse aus der reformierten Tradition*, Margit Ernst-Habib recently told this story in fascinating detail (on Reformed confession, see Ernst-Habib 2017; see also Bienert, Hofheinz & Jochum-Bortfeldt 2017; Busch 2007; Freudenberg 2011; Hofheinz, Meyer zu Hörste-Bührer & Van Oorschot 2015; Jonker 1994; Plasger & Freudenberg 2005).

The organisers asked that the lecture addresses the question what it would mean to be a confessing church today, in the spirit of the Barth commemoration.

Reformed confession is a statement spontaneously and publicly formulated by a particular Christian community in a particular time and place, Barth said. It is not a system of doctrines in the plural given to believers, truth-claims which they then must accept and believe. It is rather their own witness to Jesus Christ, given to them through the Word by the Spirit, for their own times and circumstances, in their own conditions and crises, as answers to their own questions, as orientation in the midst of their own confusion, as public account of their own convictions and commitments, as guidance for their own life (Barth 1990:610).

He then discussed different aspects of his definition in detail. Such public witness is always insight given for the moment, Barth said. It becomes God's truth for the church, yes, from generation to generation, but it always has to be given again, it always has to be received again, new, purer, and deeper, he added further (Barth 1990:613). It has to be considered and earnestly pondered again and again. It always needs to be grasped more completely and better, anew (Barth 1990:613). It is always open to discussion and improvement. It guides the church "until further notice" (Barth 1990:613-614). It is therefore always in flux (Barth 1990:615). It helps form a tradition, but it has to be received anew. Having once made such a confession is therefore "certainly not a protection against creeping degeneration," Barth observed (1990:620). This is what it means to be a confessing church.

Such public witness is mostly born under difficult conditions. Others may disagree with us, outside powers may oppose us, and temptations may blind and confuse and mislead us. Confession therefore only becomes possible "after all other possibilities are exhausted," Barth explained (1990:634). It is something which the church dares only do when it has no other choice. No other motives may justify acts of confession, however noble and important and praiseworthy such ulterior motives may be. "When struck on the mouth, I can say nothing except 'I believe,'" stated Barth, in his famously formulated conviction (1990:634). Confession for any other reason would be from the devil, he added (1990:634).

Whenever Reformed churches confessed in the past, he explained, they were always aware that they were "chosen out of destruction," "called out of darkness," "wholly and entirely the church of the desert" (Barth 1990:635v). If the Reformed churches in the 1920s felt the need to confess, he explained (1990:635), for it to be genuine confession, it would again have to "come from the boundaries" – it had to be the confession of those who felt forsaken, lost, shipwrecked. Only then would confession be necessary and possible. For this is what it means to be a confessing church.

Such public witness serves two purposes. Towards the outside, it defines the church's own character, explaining to others what the church is and intends to be, and what it stands for (Barth 1990:619). It is addressed to others, meant to be public, intended for the market place and town hall, and for wherever citizens discuss their common life. It addresses itself to the widest possible public, demanding recognition and consideration – like a herald's trumpet (Barth 1990:617-619).

At the same time, towards the inside, it serves as directive for the community's own faith and life, its own convictions and commitments. It serves as orientation, guideline and directive (Barth 1990:619). It therefore has consequences and practical implications for our own life. Confession makes a difference. We cannot simply say these words and nothing changes, nothing follows, nothing happens. Confession is costly, it is expressed in word *and* deed, it is embodied, lived out, practised, it becomes concrete and visible, for all to see (Barth 1990:619-620). For this is what it means to be a confessing church.

For Barth, it was extremely important for Reformed confessions not only to be about doctrine but also about ethics; and not only about convictions but also about commitments and actions (Barth 1990:639). Confession should always be the result of periods of struggle, he explained, during which the church had fought a hard battle against theological lies and half-truths until it "won definite affirmations to present as the truth now available to it" (Barth 1990:635-636). It should thus feel constrained to bear witness to these truths in the world, by word and deed. It should strive to embody, practise and live these affirmations. born in this long struggle. The words should never become merely "a beautiful flag which is left in the barracks when the regiment is on the march," Barth warned (1990:636). A confession that says nothing and accomplishes nothing, "without the scars from the preceding battle (and) without a compelling concern," is no Reformed confession, he claimed (1990:636).

It is precisely for this reason that he doubted the possibility and desirability of a common Reformed confession at the time – he was simply not convinced that the worldwide Reformed community had the necessary insight, clarity and courage to speak the simple truth about the ethical crises of their time (Barth 1990:622). He did not believe that the Reformed community was willing or able to witness to Jesus Christ in their moment in history – to say publicly what had to be said, and to do themselves what had to be done (Barth 1990:639). He did not see the preceding battle for truth and against falsehood, and he did not see any compelling concern for which the church was willing to bear witness in public. He did not think the church of the time was ready for "naming the great heresy" of their time and he did not regard the church of the

time capable of saying “what is essential for living in the immediate situation” (Barth 1990:637, 640). He did not consider the church able or courageous enough to speak publicly and timeously (Barth 1990:641). The church should not confess afterwards, “thirty years too late,” but rather in the moment, during the confusion, in the face of the growing threats, “at the outset of the problems,” Barth said, there “where the word of the church belongs” (1990:640). He did not think they were able to confess clearly and courageously about the challenges of life which really concerned their own members. As illustration, he sceptically asked whether they were ready to witness publicly about what he called “the fascist, racialist nationalism appearing in similar forms in all countries,” or whether they were ready to speak unambiguously on war and growing militarism – for this is what it would mean to be a confessing church (Barth 1990:640-641).

Already two years earlier, in another address to the Reformed Alliance in Emden, on the nature and task of Reformed faith, Barth expressed the same doubt and scepticism (Barth 1990). There are many reasons why church leaders want to be proudly Reformed and why they may reclaim and celebrate their Reformed identity, history and tradition, he said at the time, but most of these reasons were the wrong reasons. It would be better for them at the time to confess only their weakness and their guilt. It was rather a moment to pray for the renewal of the Holy Spirit, who alone can bring dead bones to life. In doing this, he thus concluded his speech with obvious sadness, they would at least join their forebears, “deren Erbe wir im übrigen noch nicht erworben haben, um es zu besitzen” (Barth 1990; for more of this spirit during this time, see also e.g., Barth 1934, 1935, 1942, 1980).

Around a decade later, in 1938, Barth would again reflect on these questions concerning a confessing church in his lectures on the Word of God, published as *Church Dogmatics I/2*. He now repeated several of these earlier themes and developed some even further (Barth 1956, §20.2 “Authority under the Word,” 585-660, esp. 620ff).

The church’s confession, he now said, witnesses to Jesus Christ in Scripture, but it does not merely repeat biblical texts, it rather speaks in the words and speech of its own age while pointing at biblical texts in an attempt to explain Scripture for the here and now (Barth 1956:621).

Confession therefore always involves a risk, since there is no final guarantee or assurance that it witnesses faithfully. There is always the danger that it may be mistaken or motivated by false motives. The confession therefore speaks from a particular place but appeals to the whole universal church to help them to discern (Barth 1956:622-623). The confession does not want to be the voice of simply one group or one party representing only

its own interests, but rather longs to speak the truth of the gospel and with the whole church. Confession is not merely another theological contribution or subjective opinion longing for more authority, but a compulsion imposed on the church by the Word. The church feels that it can say nothing else but credo (Barth 1956:624).

Confession is always geographically limited, he argued; it speaks from a specific context, it is temporally limited, speaking to a specific moment in history, but it is also materially limited, since it is called forth by what he called a definite antithesis and conflict, by a pre-history, by a controversy, by a "confronting doctrine" which the church feels compelled to oppose. Confession is born in "a battle for the life and death of the church," Barth explained, for the credibility of its witness and the integrity of its existence, and it responds to specific falsehood (1956:625-628).

The confession wants to say "yes" in confrontation with a counter-doctrine to which it says "no" (Barth 1956:628ff) – and again and again Barth would return to this distinction between the yes and the no, this tension between the joy and good news which the church positively wants to express, and the naming of the falsehood which the church feels compelled to unmask and reject.

Referring to the *Theological Declaration of Barmen's* repeated rejections of false doctrine, he now explained that it is natural that such formulae do not make for pleasant reading for those who defend the doctrines concerned, and they certainly should not hear only the no, for the point is that they should hear the yes behind the no – although they should certainly hear the no as well (Barth 1956:630).

It is not the case that this "no" can or will disturb and destroy an existing unity, so that it therefore has to be condemned as a sin against love, as many claim, he argued. Confession does not cause but rather reveals the divided nature of the church. Confession in fact intends to restore the unity of the church which has become obscured and threatened by the falsehoods and half-truths. Confession should therefore be regarded as an act of love (Barth 1956:630).

The confession is thereby a call to the renewal of unity to the whole church and in particular, it is an invitation to the representatives of the counter-doctrines to return to the unity of the faith. For the sake of the unity, it must be made clear to all that they need the confession because they find themselves outside the unity of the gospel and the truth. In order for sick people to be treated they have to know and accept that they are ill. The point of the confession, argued Barth, its acid test, is therefore the "no," the "we

reject.” Without the clarity and confidence and courage to say “no”, the time for confession is never ripe (Barth 1956:630).

Of course, the church should not say “no” and “we reject” simply to support its own opinion, or for emotional reasons, or to claim more authority, or to judge and condemn others. This is indeed a serious risk and danger to ourselves, said Barth. We may so easily pass judgment on ourselves, and sin against the unity of the faith when we judge one another (Barth 1956:631).

Still, the “no” is important. When those who are misled by the falsehoods and half-truths hear our joyful “yes,” they should always also recognise the “no” implied in it. If we try to speak only yes to them and somehow want to conceal the no, in order to make it easier for them, then we actually do not act out of love and we do not truly witness to the truth of the gospel (Barth 1956:631). For this is what it means to be a confessing church.

Just more than a decade later, Barth returned to the theme of confession in his lectures and in the *Church Dogmatics*, in the ethics of creation in volume III/4, under the heading of the church’s freedom before God (Barth 1961, §53.2 “Confession,” 73-86).

Again, he stressed that the church confesses in situations of crisis to give praise to God and not out of any ulterior motive or with any ulterior goal. For this reason, he famously said, “confession will always cause head-shaking among serious people” who do not understand what is at stake.

Why? they will ask themselves and us, and the more seriously we confess, the less will they find an answer (Barth 1961:77).

He emphasised the aspect of risk involved (Barth 1961:78ff). There is simply no guarantee, no objective criterion, that a moment of truth, a *status confessionis*, has indeed arrived. Such situations call for some awareness of what is happening, for discernment, for seeing and understanding what is at stake in the moment – and about that people will almost always disagree. Such situations also call for a willingness and a readiness to act according to what is discerned and what is at stake – and again people will disagree, since some may be willing and ready while others may prefer to wait and postpone and not to act immediately (Barth 1961:79).

Furthermore, he argued that the heart of this response will be the protest against what is perceived as unbelief and heresy – and again such protest will be in the form of “no” but motivated by “yes” (Barth 1961:81). By now Barth explicitly warned against those who always want to confess, who seem to be in permanent *status confessionis*, always looking for something and someone to be against, to be critical of, to say “no” to, to oppose, resist, reject and

condemn. Disturbed by such a mentality, he called this a “sickness.” This is *not* what confessing church means – always to be on the lookout to confess against something and someone (Barth 1961:81).

Such people may think they are a confessing church, he said, but they actually forget that the God whose name they confess is the gracious God. They misunderstand confession as seeing others as enemies and themselves as “God’s detective, policeman and bailiff” (Barth 1961:81). Confessing then becomes war against others and words of faith get “the flavor of pepper” (Barth 1961:81). How can confession be from God if it is against all things human – he asked with exclamation marks – as if God were not *for* all that God created. Such confession is perversion, Barth exclaimed (1961:82).

When, in 1982, during the church’s struggle against apartheid, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa joined the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in declaring a *status confessionis* in South Africa and drafted the *Confession of Belhar*, many of these insights of Karl Barth played a key role (Tshaka 2015; see also other essays in Lessing et al. 2015). This is how the Dutch Reformed Mission Church understood what they were doing at the time. Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Leepo Modise, together with many colleagues, recently told this story in informative detail in their collection of essays called *Belhar Confession* (Plaatjies-Van Huffel & Modise 2017; see also Botha & Naudé 2011; Cloete & Smit 1984; Durand 2014; Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2013a, 2013b).

In the history of struggle leading to the meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa, figures like Allan Boesak, the Belydende Kring (BK), and the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA) played major roles, together with ecumenical partner churches – and the history of *Barmen* and the Confessing Church was well known and inspiring in these circles (see e.g., Boesak 1984, 2009; Koopman 2009; Smit 2009).

In the experiences of struggle around the Christian Institute and figures like Beyers Naudé, the German discussions of *status confessionis* and the life and work of figures like Bonhoeffer, Niemöller and Barth were informative and instructive (see e.g., Coetsee, Muller & Hansen 2015; Hansen 2005; Hansen & Vosloo 2006). In the speech during the 1982 Synod which led directly to the proposal to draft the *Confession of Belhar*, some of these arguments by Barth were directly quoted (*Acta NGSK* 1982:604-606). In the *Accompanying Letter* to the *Belhar Confession*, in which the Dutch Reformed Mission Church described to the world what it was doing and why, many of these convictions of Barth were present (Smit 2003).

The South African black theologian Rothney Tshaka described the whole work of Karl Barth, including the *Church Dogmatics*, as confessional theology and showed how this understanding of being a confessing church contributed to the story of the *Belhar Confession* (Tshaka 2010).

3. CONFESSING CHURCH TODAY?

Indeed, over almost a century, we all learnt much together about what it means to be a confessing church. But what does it mean to be a confessing church “today”?

In May 1998, in Detmold, representatives of several of the churches together held a day of study on *Belhar* and on “its significance for the Reformed churches in Germany.” This consultation drafted the proposal which eventually led to the official agreement between these churches and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (for the text, Lippischen Landeskirche 1998; also looking back, Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche 2016).

But why? Why would a confession born in one context have any significance for other churches in vastly different contexts, decades later? How can confessions born in one “today” have significance in another, much different, much later, “today”?

After all, Karl Barth was always deeply convinced of the contextual nature of a confessing church. Context was central to his views. In his 1925 address to the worldwide Alliance of Reformed Churches, he quoted Calvin, who stated that confession means to say “here, now, we” – this is what *we* believe, what we believe *here*, what we believe *now*, in the face of the challenges and temptations that confront us *today* (Barth 1990:616).

This claim again rested on his earlier argument in 1923 to the German Reformed Alliance, that confession is based on the assumption that the living God still speaks to the church today, always within its own context – to us, here and now, *today* (Barth 1990).

In fact, the whole point of Barth’s 1925 paper to the World Alliance was to argue that a universal Reformed confession was both impossible and not desirable, precisely because of the contextual nature of real confession. Confession is born in specific Christian communities and within geographically limited areas. There simply was no universal, worldwide “today” in which Reformed believers could speak with one clear and courageous voice (Barth 1990).

This contextual nature of confession was described in wonderful detail by Hanna Reichel in a study of the contextual ways in which Barth read the *Heidelberg Catechism*, called *Theologie als Bekenntnis. Karl Barths kontextuelle Lektüre des Heidelberger Katechismus* (for Barth and Reformed confession, see Reichel 2015; see also Barth 1998; Busch 1998; Freudenberg 1997; Plasger 2005; Smit 2000, 2009, 2013; Webster 2005). He read it again and again, over many decades, from different perspectives and with different emphases, with new eyes in ever-changing “todays.”

Yet still, precisely in the fact that he kept returning to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, it becomes clear that there is more to confessions than just their meaning within their original contexts. There may indeed be something in confessions that speaks from generation to generation, from context to context. There may be something in confessions that speaks from church to church, so that “geographical is to be taken with a pinch of salt,” Barth acknowledged (1990:630, “Örtlich ist cum grano salis zu verstehen”). There may be something in confessions that makes reception possible, processes of new reception in new contexts, not mere repetition of the original words, but new receptions of the significance of earlier convictions and commitments, from elsewhere.

Eventually, the *Heidelberg Catechism* even framed Barth’s whole theology in the final volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, on Jesus Christ and reconciliation, as Reichel convincingly showed (Reichel 2015:esp. 203-239).

Barth quoted Calvin in this regard when he spoke about *pia conspiratio*, pious conspiracies that become possible between churches and between generations and between contexts. It literally means “breathing together,” making accords, finding agreements, building partnerships (Barth 1990:628). The Swiss Reformed theologian Lukas Vischer would later use this expression as title of his moving collection of Calvin’s passionate pleas for the church’s unity, *Pia Conspiratio*. The unity of the church also becomes visible in the ways in which we read and receive confessions born in earlier times and in different contexts anew in our own “todays” (Vischer 2000).

It is for this reason that the original false teachings that triggered the moments of confession are mostly not mentioned in confessions – not in *Barmen*, not in *Belhar*. This is very deliberate. This happens because confessions are not about the falsehoods but about the truth of the gospel – which can be heard and received again in ever-changing todays, perhaps far away and perhaps much later, when and where those falsehoods no longer exist at all.

Although confessions are therefore always born in particular times and places, their message is not only for those times and places, and their truth does not depend on their contexts, but on their appeals to the message of Scripture. Their truth depends on the question of whether sisters and brothers from other contexts and from later todays can also recognise the gospel in them.

This is what happened to *Barmen* – although Barth himself could not have imagined that this would happen, in contexts far away and in much later todays (on Barth and Barmen see e.g., Barth 1984; Brinkman 1979; Busch 2004; Lippischen Landeskirche 1998; Möller 1999; Niemöller 1998). This is what happened to *Belhar* – although it was never the intention in the crisis moment in which it was born (on Barth, Barmen & Belhar see e.g., Berkhof 1985; Cloete & Smit 1984; Huber 1991; Tshaka 2010) It is for this reason that *Belhar* has been received in different places – in different continents, countries, churches – but every time for different reasons and for different todays (Smit 2003, 2017).

Still, the question of Detmold (and Cardiff) remains, the question as to whether our “today” has indeed somehow become a shared today, a common world, one small enough and interwoven enough that we can and should be a confessing church together, today. Has our world perhaps become one today in ways that were not yet the case for Barth in the 1920s? Can we already describe the confusion and temptations and darkness of our today, together? Can we already name false portrayals of the gospel in our time, together? Can we name heresies of our today and say no to them, together? Can we be a confessing church together in this sense, today? Perhaps this is the real question hidden within the theme given to me.

One particular such story of reception, which involves us all, indeed seems to suggest that this may today indeed have become possible and desirable.

In October 1995 the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches met in Kitwe, in Zambia. They issued a so-called *Kitwe Declaration* regarding global economic injustice and the careless and selfish destruction of creation. It was an appeal in the spirit of *Belhar* to the World Alliance to respond urgently to this cry for life (for the text, see Smit 2007).

In Debrecen in Hungary, representatives of our churches played leading roles in the World Alliance when a *processus confessionis* was declared, a process of confession. It was a call on all member churches to seriously consider and discern whether the faith we confess was not perhaps at stake in our economic and ecological behaviour (Opocensky 1997; 2003).

Eventually, this call from Debrecen led to the *Accra Confession* of 2004, when the World Alliance covenanted together to confess and resist the spirit and powers of our time – excluding so many and destroying so much (for the text, see World Alliance of Reformed Churches 2004).

Furthermore, some of our churches joined in a long and intense process to understand and receive these decisions from Accra together. After several years, the study process, led by Allan Boesak and Johann Weusmann, and involving many others from our respective churches, concluded with a joint publication, in both German and English, called *Dreaming a Different World. Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth/Gemeinsam für eine andere Welt. Globalisierung und Gerechtigkeit für Mensch und Erde* (Boesak, Weusmann & Ali 2010).

During this process, Barth's description of "lordless powers" in his posthumous ethics of reconciliation was helpful in overcoming misunderstandings and finding broad consensus, in the words of Martina Wasserloos-Strunk, in the volume *Europe Covenanting for Justice* (Wasserloos-Strunk, Engels and World Alliance of Reformed Churches [Presbyterian and Congregational] 2010; see on "empire" also Boesak 2015).

This spirit of *our* today has since then been movingly described by Allan Boesak in his recent work on "the globalization of our cultures of indifference" in many forms of what he calls global apartheid (Boesak 2015). The African scholar Achille Mbembe, well-known for his work on decolonisation and racism, goes even further in his recent work, describing our global today as widespread and destructive "politics of enmity" (Mbembe 2019). Is this not the lordless powers which we have to name and resist – and are they not also sometimes justified in the name of gospel and church, of us and them, of welcome and unwelcome? Or what should we call the lordless powers of today? (Boesak & Hansen 2009; 2010).

The results of this joint study between our churches were summarised in a public declaration in the form of a prayer called *Dreaming a Different World Together*. Together, from North and South, we discern the signs of our times, we hear the cries of God's people and we see the wounds of God's creation – we prayed. Together, from North and South, we are comforted by the gospel, by the common faith we share and the common tradition in which we stand, by God's Word and Spirit – we prayed. Together, from North and South, we heed the call of God's Word and Spirit, the claim of this gospel on us, today – we prayed. From South and North, together in communion, we dream a different world – we prayed (for the text, see Boesak, Weusmann & Ali 2010:80-81).

Perhaps this is the closest that we can come to being a confessing church together, today?

If this is the case, then one final reminder perhaps remains necessary. Barth concluded his 1923 paper with the sad comment that we have not really made the legacy of our forebears fully our own (Barth 1990:247). In 1963, in an interview about *Barmen* after 30 years, he sounded similarly sad about the way in which *Barmen* had also not been received in the ways in which it could have mattered and could have made a difference (Barth 1984:213-218). For that reason, he was not really interested or eager to participate in commemorations and celebrations of *Barmen* (see several of the later contributions in Barth 1984).

In one of his very last pieces, Russel Botman, the leading South African Reformed theologian, made similar comments about *Belhar*. *Belhar* probably came too soon for his generation, he said, with obvious sadness. They were not ready to embody the insights of their own confession, they were too much still prisoners of the past. He was however convinced that it would be different for the next generation, the youth of today, those to whom the future belongs, in his words, for tomorrow's children. His hope was that they would receive and live *Belhar* in new and imaginative ways. He wrote this as the foreword to a study on *Belhar* by Johan Botha and Piet Naudé called *Good News – for Today and Tomorrow* (Botman 2011; Botha & Naudé 2011; see also Naudé 2010).

Perhaps the deepest question implied in my theme is finally, to what extent have we already made our own confessions our own – *Barmen*, *Belhar*, *Kitwe*, *Accra*, *Dreaming Together* (see also Smit 2009)? If being a confessing church is about God's yes, about good news, about joy, about hope, not only for today, but for a new future, then perhaps for us being a confessing church today is indeed about whether and how we dream a different world together – and how we live this dream.

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