

'Doing theology as though nothing had happened' – reading Karl Barth's confessional theology in Zimbabwe today?

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Although confessional theology is making its rounds across Reformed communities, this theology remains virtually unknown north of the Limpopo River. The Reformed Church of Zimbabwe (RCZ) is one of the immediate neighbours of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, which produced the Belhar Confession during the apartheid era. The confessional theology of Karl Barth, which informed this confession, has proven to be versatile in diverse contexts. Confessions, it will be argued, do not exist independently from the socio-economic and political situations from which they arise. This article will attempt to argue that this theology can contribute to the Reformed theology in present day Zimbabwe. It will therefore attempt to introduce the confessional theology of Karl Barth to Zimbabwe; however, it also argues that the RCZ will have to realise that a number of adjustments need to be made on its part to ensure that it appropriates this theology profitably for its situation.

Introduction

The Reformed ecclesial tradition is one that prides itself with having numerous confessional statements. Nevertheless it considers the processes that lead to these confessional statements difficult and yet continually open for debate, correction, and modification. Its confessional statements are not born out of courtesy, but are statements that are made because a Reformed Church at a particular point in time perceives the gospel to be under siege. Although a Reformed confession is always called into existence because a particular community of faith is of the view that the gospel is at stake, a Reformed confession can never ignore the socio-economic and political reality in which it is called into existence. Therefore a confession always has ethical implications. Because of its inclination to confess when it feels the gospel is at stake, Reformed communities have always been labelled confessionists. But this was largely because critics failed to see the serious ethical implications that are always intended in confessions.

Karl Barth realised the essence of Reformed theology and confessions and began to appreciate confessions as being more than mere reiterations of what church fathers had said before. The seriousness with which he approached confessions led him to look at his theology in a confessional way. His confessional theology has proven to be an indispensable yardstick in determining how Reformed Christians can organise themselves in situations where other forces had begun to threaten the core of the Christian faith. In conceding to this, it must always be remembered that Barth belligerently held that a particular geographic community would know more than him whether the reality of a confession had become inevitable.

Although the socio-economic and political situation of his time influenced his approach to theology, Busch avers that Barth emphasised on numerous occasions that theology should be done as though nothing had happened (Busch 1976:222). This article will, however, reveal that this statement did not encourage in whatsoever way an abstract theology that had nothing to say to the socio-economic and political reality in which it was uttered.

Taking a cue from the confessional theology of Karl Barth, this article will attempt to argue that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) ought to realise that its theology cannot be perceived to exist independently from the socio-economic and political reality in which it is currently practiced.¹ However, before this theology can thoroughly be deliberated in Zimbabwe, it is

1. The decision to elect the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe was informed by the author's teaching tenure at the Murray Theological College in Zimbabwe. At that time, the author did not only teach Reformed Dogmatics, but was also Dean of students. I became interested in testing a theological trajectory to engender radical reformation ideas with the intention of making students aware of the intersections of theology and politics.

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imperative that this church consider whether it has the necessary space and ability to appropriate this theology profitably for its situation.

This article will initially confine itself to the history of confessional writings, illustrating the close links that they had with their various socio-economic, political, and theological situations. After cataloguing the indicated aspect, it will focus on Barth's confessional theology without making detailed reference to how it was appropriated in other countries. This article opts for not making detailed reference to how this theology was used elsewhere for fear that such an exercise will derail its intention, nevertheless a number of sources which are available in Zimbabwe for the Zimbabwean reader will be cited as a footnote. The last part of this article will consider the situation of the RCZ. It will be argued that confessional theology can be used profitably to engage the socio-economic and political situation of present day Zimbabwe; but that the RCZ shall have to find ways of exchanging views on how to go about with this, both internally and with neighbouring Reformed churches and institutions. More importantly, it will also have to change a number of ways that it encourages ministers to pursue further studies.

Confessions as controversial and yet necessary for the life of the church

The Reformation made way for the formation of numerous churches. Albeit not the intention of the reformation (led at least by Luther) to create a new church, the churches of the reformation documented their faith to avoid been drawn into disrepute by Roman Catholicism and the rulers of their time.² The movement that was started by Martin Luther which is sometimes also referred to as 'Lutheranism broke out of the university into the marketplaces of Germany through a number of means', was none more important than Luther's own means of documenting his views in pamphlets (Thompson 1996:408–409). Von Ranke maintained that between 1518 and 1523 the output of theological literature increased sevenfold, four-fifths of it on behalf of the Lutheran party, the greater share of that having been written by Luther himself (Von Ranke in, Thompson 1996:408–409).

Another factor that contributed towards the expansion of Lutheranism was the German New Testament that was translated by Luther at Wartburg in 1522. An additional factor was that Lutheranism was expanded through the preaching of Lutheran preachers in many key German cities. All these aspects enabled Luther to respond to some requests regarding Lutheranism. When monks pleaded for help in leaving the monastery, he could assist in this regard, and when a town council inquired into German forms of worship, he sent samples (Thompson 1996:409).

2. Since the Roman emperor Constantine embraced Christianity in AD 312, Christianity which was only known at the time under the guise of Roman Catholicism proved to be the most powerful religion and was very closely related with the empire.

With the first Diet of Speier of 1526 it became clear that the political solution of the Lutheran question would have to be arrived at territory by territory. This solution was expressed in the formula *cuius region, eius religio*, which suggest that the prince who rules the territory rules the religion within it (Estep 1986:147–148; see also Thompson 1996:422–423). From this understanding it is immediately clear that this formula spelled out a recipe for *landeskirche* (state churches). Therefore although Luther so eloquently insisted that the church 'is where gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly observed' (Luther, in Estep 1986:148), this formula made it clear that there could be no such recognised church without the endorsement of the prince.

During the second Diet of Speier the evangelical princes found themselves in the minority, the Catholics being in the majority. Catholic worship and rights were reinstated in Lutheran territories. This move elicited the concept 'Protestant' because the Lutheran delegation at this meeting had issued a *protestation* against such repressive measures and on behalf of the freedom of conscience (Thompson 1996:424).

Thompson argues that the Lutherans weighed the advantages of forming a defensive union under the leadership of Phillip of Hesse to offset imperial and Catholic power. The association would have included the Lutheran princes of Germany and the towns, both German and Swiss, which claimed the name 'evangelical'. But because of the serious altercations with their seeds in the early 1520s between Luther and Zwingli concerning the right protestant interpretation of the Lord's Supper such an association would never materialise (Thompson 1996:425).

Later in 1529 Phillip convened his Marburg Colloquy where the Lutherans and the Zwinglians were invited to discuss the theological differences between them, especially relating to the understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Martin Bucer, an important teacher of John Calvin, was also present at this discussion. Although he seemed to favour Zwingli's thoughts more than Luther's, he claimed to be mediating between these two schools. Bucer and his colleague Wolfgang Capito presented their own confession of faith at this colloquy on behalf of the cities of Strasbourg, Constance, Lindau, and Memmingen – hence the name Tetrapolitan Confession. This confession was to be read at the Augsburg Diet the following year where the Lutheran confession was to be read before the emperor (Thompson 1996:430).³

Emperor Charles V returned to Germany in 1530, after having attained victory over the French and having been

3. This confession remains opposed to Luther's insistence on the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. It also opposed to ceremonies and argues strongly that all things that are done in church and society be regulated according to the warranty of Holy Scripture. It was only later that Bucer came to the conclusion that one could speak of Christ's true presence in the Lord's Supper as long as one meant a spiritual presence instead of a physical presence received by mouth. Bucer was thus the first to conceive of the doctrine of the spiritual 'real presence' of Christ in the Lord's Supper to which both Melancthon and Calvin later subscribed to. Cf. Thompson (1996:430).

crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Clement VII, with the zeal to re-establish the Holy Roman Empire. However, in doing so, Charles V knew that he would have to reckon with the Lutherans. He thus summoned a Diet to meet at Augsburg (hence the Diet of Augsburg) in the summer of 1530, hoping that he would be able solve the religious question forever.

The mentioned Diet failed in reaching this goal, but it did manage to solicit a major statement of religious belief from the Lutherans (Thompson 1996:411). Lutherans were able to table the faith of their newly established church after a long and intense struggle. Consequently, they also saw to it that a systematic teaching program was put into place. Luther, who is well known for believing in the teaching ministry of the church, produced two catechisms in 1529 – the Large Catechism and the Small Catechism. Although medieval catechisms were used as guidebooks for priests, Luther's catechisms were wittingly intended for the laity (Estep 1986:156).⁴

Phillip Melancthon was the chief spokesperson at this Diet and was at the same time also the chief author of the statement of faith (called the Augsburg Confession). The Augsburg Confession remains today the essential statement of Lutheran thought although Luther had some misgivings about the tone of this statement as well as about some of the fundamental doctrines that are dealt with in this statement of faith (Thompson 1996:411).⁵

It was not long after the adoption of this confession that Lutherans realised that attempts are still in progress to stifle their faith. After the defeat of the Protestant Schmalkaldic League⁶, Emperor Charles V pressured the Reichstag in 1548 to announce the uniformity of the practice of the Mass as well as the authority of all bishops in all churches. Melancthon and others in predominantly Catholic areas of West Germany

4. It is argued that Luther's family life elicited his more tender moments of feeling and reflection. He lost his daughter, Magdalena who as in her teens and this had caused untold anguish for him and yet his devotion to children did not diminish. His responsibility of teaching both his children as well as those of his parish gave rise to his Small Catechism. However Luther also believed in the church as a teaching church, and look at the pulpit as the platform from which he must execute this function. Notably the Reformation had caused many priests cling to his teaching but this very movement had also rendered these priests poor. Both these priests and the ordinary people of his parish only had the faintest idea about this new faith. They of course rejoiced in the new founded liberty from church tithes (taxes), but the result was that the priests became even poorer. With the ignorance that was now abounding both among the priests as well as among the laity, Luther discovered that they could recite the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and sometimes the Decalogue. Morality was something that needed much attention. With their ignorance he discovered that they understood little about the new church teaching: for them it only meant that the mass was now in both kinds (the congregation received both bread and wine) and that according to Luther, a man was justified before God by faith in Christ alone. It is also believed that Luther's doctrine of justification by faith had in some cases produced a new antinomianism. In light of all these it was inevitable that teaching was not an option but a necessity. His Small Catechism became the first primary material to be studied.

5. Article 10, on the Lord's Supper, admitted transubstantiation as well as consubstantiation; article 18, on free will, was understated in Luther's view; article 20, on good works, declared that good works are necessary after faith – a statement that Luther would have never made given his regard for Christian liberty.

6. After Augsburg Lutheran princes congregated at Schmalkalden, confronted with the prospect that their beliefs would be suppressed by force of Arms. There they formed an alliance to confront the empire by political and military power. The Schmalkaldic League was thus formally constituted on February 27, 1531 and consisted of electoral Saxony, Anhalt, Brunswick and Hesse in league with important German and Swiss cities such as Strassbourg, Constance, Ulm, Magdeburg, Bremen and Lübeck.

favoured a compromise in *adiaphora* (matters of indifference) as long as they did not threaten the heart of the gospel, which is the justification by faith.

Matthias Flacius⁷, who represented a large group in East Germany that was also considered a stronghold for the Lutherans, opposed this interpretation (Teselle 1998:1–7). Flacius argued that in a case of confession and offence, there was no *adiaphora* (*nihil est adiaphora in casu confessionis et scandalii*). With this threat against the independence of the Lutherans we see Flacius registering the first *status confessionis* in the life of the protestant faith.

From what has been mentioned above about the illegitimacy of other faiths in Europe around this time, it must be deduced that the Protestant faith was never homogeneous. In its attempt to find acceptance by Roman Catholic princes, Lutherans have continually disagreed with what they perceived to be the heretical tendencies of Zwingli and his followers.

Seen as perhaps one who presented reformed thought in the most systematic way, John Calvin has brought with him an even more innovative lens of reading and understanding the significance of confessions (Barth 1995:159). In France many years after Luther had skyrocketed to prominence Calvin was attempting to find ways of explaining to the king of France, Francis I, that what he taught was not in contradiction to the gospel. His career was brought to a halt by an incident in 1534 where placards were attached at night on doors of private and public buildings defaming the Roman Mass (Barth 1995:159).

This act elicited fury from authorities against all manners of 'Lutherans' who might have been responsible for such action (Thompson 1996:483). This prompted Calvin to go into exile where, among other things, he wrote one of the greatest contributions to Reformed theology ever (his Institutes of the Christian religion). The intention of this work was to declare what he, as well as those who were persecuted, believed in and it is addressed to the king of France. Although it was intended to be used as a textbook for the king (Barth 1995:109), this work may fundamentally be construed as a confession of what Calvin and his followers believed. In the preface to the king, Calvin explains the purpose of this book movingly and respectfully. Its purpose was twofold: to vindicate the Protestants in France who were incarcerated, tortured, and persecuted. Secondly it afforded French Protestants a catechism, a book of religious instruction responsible for the word of God (Thompson 1996:486).

In a nutshell, Calvin wanted to show the king that the charge against them – in the main that of revolution – should not be accepted without examination (Barth 1995:107). To put the

7. Flacius was born Matthias Flacius Illyricus in the city of Illyria, which is considered an imaginary country since it has vanished from the global map and is believed to be the country which is no longer exists. He was born a Lutheran theologian. Cf. Bradley and Muller (1995).

mind of the king at rest pertaining to the claim that his camp wanted to overthrow the king's government, Calvin concludes:

Your mind is now indeed turned away and estranged from us ... but we trust that we can regain your favour, if in a quiet, composed, mood; you will once read this confession, which we intend in lieu of a defence before Your Majesty. Suppose however, the whisperings of the malevolent so fill your ears that the accused have no chance to speak for themselves, but those savage furies, while you connive at them, rage against us with imprisonings, scourgings, rackings, maimings, and burnings. Then we will be reduced to the last extremity even as sheep destined for the slaughter. Yet this will so happen that 'in our patience we may possess our souls'; and may await the strong hand of the Lord, which will surely appear in due season, coming forth to deliver the poor from their affliction, and also to punish their despisers, who now exult with great assurance. May the Lord, the King of kings, establish your throne in righteousness, and your dominion in equity, most illustrious king. (Barth 1995:109)

Although, as pointed out, this most important work of Calvin can be characterised as his confession addressed to King Francis I, Calvin has succeeded in discouraging attempts at reading this work as an ultimate truth. It is therefore not by chance that this work in question has also undergone numerous vigorous revisions during his life. With Calvin in the picture one is introduced to an understanding of a confession that is not an end in itself but always a means towards an end.

The essence and purpose of Reformed confessions

It is self-evident that many people are confused by talk of 'confessing', 'confessions', and 'confessional' churches. Both inside and outside the church a confession is ordinarily associated with admission of wrongdoing and guilt. It is known that criminals 'confess' that they have committed a crime, famous people write 'true confessions' about their scandalous lives, and some people visit a 'confessional' to tell their sins et cetera.⁸

Karl Barth argues that the significance of a confession in the Reformed church consists in its essential nonsignificance, its obvious relativity, humanity, multiplicity, mutability, and transitoriness (Barth 2002:38). He calls a Reformed confession the obvious riddle of history, because it never was the light, and it never wanted to be the light, because it knows that it cannot and may not be the light. The essence of Reformed confessions lies in the fact that they point beyond themselves. Its content is not itself, but instead something beyond it (Barth 2002:38).

The 198th general assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America acknowledges the fact that in

8.Cf. The confessional nature of the church (Presbyterian Church USA). 198th General Assembly (1986) in M. Opocenský (ed.), *Proceedings of the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)*, Debrecen, Geneva, WARC, 1997, p. 198f.

Christian tradition confession has a positive sense. Therefore, for Reformed Christians to confess means to affirm, declare, acknowledge, or to take a stand for what one believes publicly.⁹ When Christians make a confession, they are actually saying, this is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand. It is for this reason, argues John Leith, that because a confession is a particular community's understanding of the Christian faith at a particular time and place, the great caution to give any confession greater status than what it is, is justified (Leith 1977:129).

Here Leith was clearly in line with Barth, who argued that it is faith that confesses, but it does not confess itself but instead that which is written – thus within the Reformed Church, confession is in its entirety 'testimony' (*testificatio*), pointing toward – the object itself is and remains something other (Barth 2002:38–39). Because the testimony is substantiated by something other and greater than itself, those who made this testimony have no other alternative but to adhere to it and to anticipate the dangers that might confront them for adhering to such a testimony.

What is of interest for us here is primarily that we concede that the content is written by God with his finger and is incorporated into the holy Bible; we should only respond that we have heard it – this is the confession. According to Barth, God's Word about the justification of the sinner through his grace is not repeated in the Reformed confession, not even at reduced level; it is not historically reproduced, nor placed in our time as 'our symbol for this time' but quite simply witnessed to not as truth in our mouth but as the truth in God's mouth. The witness of the Reformed confession is a confirmation of reception. The witness (as person) speaks and his witness (testimony) says that God has witnessed to himself. The witness (as person) stutters and the witness (his human testimony) is confused, but the Word of God will stand forever (Barth 2002:39).

Although we acknowledge that Reformed Christians are self-evidently confessional, it is fundamental that in our engagements with our traditional confessions we read the signs of our contextual times. Barth was quite clear on the point of the importance of the context as he dealt with confessions. It was very important for Barth that we admit that we are no longer living in the 16th century but that we are in the 20th century. The theological and political situation that called for a confession during the Hitler regime was an even more fundamental pointer to the importance of reading the signs of time for confessing. In the words of Barth (1964):

It is always a misunderstanding of the communion of the saints and a misunderstanding also of the fathers when their confessions are later understood as chains, so that Christian doctrine today could only be a repetition of their confession. (p. 21)

9.See Presbyterian Church USA, 198th General Assembly (1986), in Mckim (1998:19ff.).

For the sake of fully comprehending the nature and purpose of a confession, it is necessary that we indicate the distinction between confession as act of Christian faith and a confession as a document that wants to say something to the world about that which it confesses. It is inevitable that Barth was fully aware of this distinction. When Barth says the gospel is political, he means that it is political in the sense that it is preached to those who do not share in the allegiance that Christians have in Christ. Therefore it should come as no surprise to realise that because of this obligation of speaking (confessing Christ) to the world all Christians who confess Christ as the only word that must be heard and be obeyed are by definition *ipso facto* 'politicians'.

When the earliest Christians said in public: 'Jesus the Christ is Lord', they were making their first and fundamental confession. Conversely, a confession of faith is an officially adopted statement that spells out a church's understanding of the meaning and implications of the one basic confession of the Lordship of Christ. Thus the scriptural principle was the article upon which the church stands and falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*) – according to the Reformed tradition, this is not one statement among many, but instead the statement which generates the entire confession (Barth 2002:41).

The 198th General synod of the Presbyterian Church of the USA illuminates the fact that such declarations have not always been called confessions. These public promulgations by the faith community have also been called creeds, symbols, formulas, definitions, declarations of faith, statements of belief, articles of faith, et cetera. All these are different ways of talking about the same thing, though 'creed' has ordinarily been used to refer to short affirmations of faith, whereas others have been used for longer ones (PCUSA, in Mckim 1998:19).

What is of paramount importance is that we value the fact that a confession is a public declaration of what the church believes. Individual Christians may and should confess their own personal faith, but a confession of faith is more than a personal affirmation by the mere fact that it is arrived at by a collection of Christians who read the signs in a like-minded fashion. Historians and theologians are unanimous in maintaining that the Lutheran and Reformed Churches of the 16th and 17th centuries tended to be longer and more comprehensive summaries of faith. In reforming the church, they dealt with the most critical theological and political issues that divided Roman Catholics, Reformed, and Anabaptist Protestants et cetera.¹⁰

Another very idiosyncratic characteristic of Reformed confessions is the fact that regardless of how serious confessions were meant, how powerful and resistant to all contradictions their propositions were, and how widespread the general acknowledgement of their content might be,

10.Cf. The histories which underpin these Confessions, especially the Heidelberg Catechism (AD 1563), as well as the Second Helvetic Confession (AD 1566) et al. For a detailed discussion on this subject see Dowey (1968).

these confessions were fundamentally intended as merely provisional, improvable, and replaceable offerings, never as an authority, as the 'form and rule' (*forma et regula*) as is the case with the Lutheran Formula of Concord (Barth 2002:24). In order to substantiate this claim, Barth reminds us of what Zwingli in his presentation of his Sixty-seven theses for discussion wrote, '[a]nd where I have not now correctly understood the said Scripture, I am ready to be instructed and corrected from the aforesaid Scripture' (Barth 2002:24).

Confessions of faith as officially adopted declaration that spells out a church's understanding of the meaning and implications of the one basic confession of the Lordship of Christ, has brought the Reformed tradition under fierce attack especially from Christians of Baptist and Free Church backgrounds. Hesselink reports that this criticism has come about because some simply assumed that anyone who recites a creed or acknowledges even the relevant authority of a confession thereby undercuts the true authority of the scriptures (Hesselink 1983:9).

With the emergence of confessional declarations in the 20th century, it became quite evident that the writing of confessions slowed during the periods preceding the 20th century. There seems to be reason for that. Leith makes an argument which is worth serious pondering with regard to the reasons for writing confessions during the 18th century. He asserts that the paucity of creeds in the 18th and 19th centuries are awakenings and revivals with an emphasis on emotion rather than intellect; cultural movements that undermined the faith and to which the church found difficulty in responding; and certainly of equal significance, the 'finished' character of the 17th-century confessions, which gave them an appearance of permanence and universality (Leith 1977:129).

Reformed confessions distinguish themselves from Lutheran and other traditional confessions and the first distinguishing feature is their number and variety (Tshaka 2006). Leith maintains that contrary to the Lutheran confessions, which were written for the most part in a period of 8 years by Melancthon and Luther in one geographical area, many different people in a great variety of places and time wrote Reformed confessions (Leith 1977:129).

Christianity as an active faith has no other choice but to be oral. Her speech in this world always plunge her into action. This speech allows her to continually look at her life in this world confessionally. It does this confessionally for it remains convinced that it is called to always talk about God. Therefore, because of this talk (which because it is conducted in human speech and remains therefore susceptible for mistakes and errors) confessions cannot and must not be imposed by a simple fiat upon other churches.

For this given reason they are examined, corrected, rejected, and confirmed by history. In concurrence with Barth, Leith maintains that a confession of faith is never merely a matter

of mind irrespective of how important the mind may be. Because the confession commits more than the mind, it commits all of life and therefore it must be affirmed with the whole person (Leith 1973:5). With this Leith is implying that confessional writings are more than mere intellectual activities – instead it has to do with the entire welfare of the body of Christ.

Reformed confessions have direct as well as indirect implications for the political settings in which they originate. The chimera of entertaining the independence of theology from theology has enabled many to construe confessions as being merely theological and having nothing to do with the political setting from whence they are called into being. Nevertheless many have recently become fond of thinking of the Barmen Theological Declaration and lately of the Belhar Confession as the only confessions that display the political undertones that necessitated them. This conclusion is reached perhaps because of the close proximity of these confessions to our present context.¹¹ However, we remain indebted to contemporary confessions for they have impelled us to look beyond the actual statements that Christians in a particular geographic location at a particular point in their history have made.

Still, when looking more closely at confessions, since the inception of Christianity we encounter the fact that the socio-economic and political dynamics of human societies impelled Christians throughout the ages to formulate for them guidelines that would give consensus on how they should conduct themselves both within the civil community as well as within the Christian community. It is therefore the contention of this article that confessions originated in the context of people and are therefore fallible. But in conceding to this fallibility one cannot ignore the utmost seriousness which characterised confessions. It should therefore also be said that because of the seriousness with which confessional statements take their historicity, confessions are necessitated by the socio-economic, cultural, and political reality that is threatening to ridicule the lordship of Christ and contorts the justice that remains at the heart of the Christian message.

11.The Barmen Theological Declaration (1934) is a declaration, which was made by the Synod of Barmen in which Christian representatives from the Lutherans, Reformed as well as the Uniting ecclesiastical backgrounds participated. Because of the Lutheran understanding of the concept 'confession' many Reformed Christians had to be content with the notion declaration instead of confession. This declaration was necessitated by the theological and political situation under Adolf Hitler and the German Christians who were espousing a politicised theology in the form of fusing Christianity with nationalistic ideals. The declaration in question spells out the church's conviction that membership to the church is only determined by Christian baptism as well as in the belief that Jesus Christ as he is attested to in Holy Scripture is the only Word to which Christians should subject themselves to. There is no doubt that the confessional theology of Karl Barth influenced this declaration immensely. The Belhar Confession (1986) of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa was likewise influenced by the confessional theology of Barth. This confession took its cue from the Barmen Theological Declaration although the socio-economic, political, cultural and theological situation differed tremendously to that which precipitated the Barmen Declaration. The Belhar Confession was opposing the biblical and theological underpinnings that were given to the apartheid ideology. Much has already been written on these subjects and material on what has already been referred to here is available for the Zimbabwean reader in the library of the Murray Theological College. See especially the work of the following authors on the subject of the Barmen Theological Declaration and the Belhar Confession also available in the mentioned library: Smit (2005); Ernst-Habib (2005); De Gruchy (1984; 1991; 1997); and Tshaka (2005).

'Doing theology as though nothing had happened': The essence of Barth's confessional theology for the current Zimbabwean theological situation

Throughout his theological enterprises, Barth has illustrated with distinction that he considered theology to be always related to politics. This idea is underpinned by Barth's many involvements with issues that affected the civil community as well as his staunch belief that what affects the civil community affects the Christian community. Yet with all these Barth has also insisted that theology should be nothing less than theology.

He had lambasted on a number of occasions attempts at making theology a trailer of a political vehicle. The caution displayed by Barth when confronted with such inclinations is not without merit. Barth's disappointment with protestant liberalism was necessitated by the theological and ethical justification that was given to the First World War (WWI) in 1914. He had witnessed with dismay how theologians used God in support of the war policy. Yet this was before Barth came to appreciate the zest and zeal of Reformed confessions and orthodox Reformed theology.

Despite the many theologians that contributed extensively to the formation of Barth's theology, it must be stressed that upon entry into academy, Karl Barth became more impressed with Reformed theology and especially began to see Reformed confessions in a different light (Tshaka 2010:1ff.).¹² He began to realise that Reformed confessions were not mere boring statements but had as much to do with the socio-economic and political realities from which they originated as they had to do with an obsession of speaking about God.

Hitler's seizure of power and the German Christians' zealous campaigning for the assimilation of the church into the state posed worrying concerns for Barth and those within the confessing movement about the essence of theology and the church. Barth had already witnessed the repercussions that politicised theology had for the church and its theology from the incidents around the WWI. Thus with the rise of Hitler and the German Christians who advocated a nationalist theology Barth could not sit by and let this madness continue. The German Christians' option for a politicised theology, according to Busch, galvanised Barth to take his stand on the side of theology. It was because of the tendency to assimilate theology into politics that he insisted that theology should now be done as though nothing had happened (Busch 1976:226).

This statement has sometimes been misconstrued to suggest that Barth was advocating for a theology that remained oblivious of the politics in which it is exercised. Yet when one

12.Repeated efforts were made to catalogue theologians and individuals that influenced the theological thought of Barth. For a thorough account of this see Tshaka (2010:1ff.).

considers the activities of Barth during this period, one realises that Barth was reacting against those who found convenient allies in politics and thereby making theology merely an appendix to their causes that would allow them to provide theological justification to their causes when necessary. For Barth the situation under Hitler was most conducive to do theology and only theology as though nothing had happened. It must also be stated that in maintaining this view, he kept his membership of the Socialist Democratic Party, although many had argued that the situation compelled them to forfeit their membership to the party.

In his doctoral dissertation written during the South African state of emergency, Horn (1987) engages the distinction between theology and politics and how Barth related with them during his theological enterprise in his own context. Written from an Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) background, Horn seems fascinated by a maxim made popular by Barth: *Theologie treiben, als wäre nichts geschehen*. In the first instance Horn understands this maxim to be a rule for insisting on the Word of God as one's point of departure in theology in contrast to the 'German Christians' who had found an ally in their nationalist politics and thereby making theology merely an appendix to their aspirations.

Horn rightly understands this maxim to have been temporal in that it challenged faithful Christians not to develop political ideals in combating the current political terror, but to radically insist on God in challenging political ills. More importantly, such an approach was a radical approach particularly in the context of South Africa's state of emergency. Secondly, Horn regards this maxim as a way of giving meaning to a theology that was otherwise discouraged within the tradition of the AFM – a theology that refused to ignore the political context in which it was conducted.

It was especially important for Horn to point out that Marquardt had misconstrued Barth's engagement of theology and politics, creating the impression that it was his politics that influenced his theology. Horn realised that the choice between theology and politics did not exist in Barth's theological reflection. For Barth it was always about theology, but this theology was never oblivious of its political context. Horn's decision to confine his research on the subject of theology and politics to a specific period had however inhibited him from doing justice to the extensive progress that accompanied the theology of Barth (Horn 1987).

'Theology must continue as if nothing had happened'. When it follows this advice it will realise that it concedes to the premium that is placed on the Word of God, it will discover the church as the primary subject of theology, it will emphasise the importance of witnessing Jesus Christ to the public, it will acknowledge the importance of the socio-economic, political, and cultural context in which it occurs, and the ethics which is always envisaged in theology. Consequently, it becomes clear that theology can therefore not continue 'as though nothing had happened'. It is then realised that theology has at all times something to do

with politics (Barth 1994:204). This point was thoroughly demonstrated by Barth himself (Barth 1934:1–40). The statement 'doing theology as though nothing had happened' therefore summarises the confessional theology of Karl Barth, which is underpinned by five characteristics:

- the primacy of the Word of God
- the church as the subject
- public witness to Jesus Christ
- the socio-economic and political context
- ethical implications (Tshaka 2010).

I now will attempt to explain these briefly; doing 'Theology as though nothing had happened' means that theology should always have the Word of God as its point of departure. Theology is more than mere anthropology; therefore it must at all times be biblical. Being biblical suggests that those espousing this method understand that theology is more at home in church (Barth 1975:9). Its subject is therefore the church for it is only in the church that it makes greater sense and is best appreciated. The church remains the subject of confessional theology for it constitutes a community of those who believe in Jesus Christ. In witnessing to Christ confessional theology admits that it can only say 'Credo'. 'I believe in, *credo in*, means that I am not alone. In our glory and our misery we men are not alone' (Barth 1975:16).

The church consists of its own language, which is in most cases not comprehended by the world. When it confesses the lordship of Christ, this is sometimes not understood by the world. It is for this reason that Barth asserts that the language of the church is the 'language of Canaan'. Thus when the Christian confesses his faith ... no one can avoid speaking in this language (Barth 1975:31).

However, Barth warns that we should avoid leaving the impression that a confession is a matter of faith that should only be heard in the area of the church. The reason for this caution is supported by the fact that the church stands in the world as outwardly the church stands in the village or in the city, beside the school, the cinema, and the railway station. For this reason the church's language cannot aim at being an end in itself (Barth 1975:32). It cannot be denied that the socio-economic and political situation remains fundamental in Barth's theologising. For this reason the language of the church ought to be translated into a language that is spoken by the ordinary person on the street – there must be translation into the language of the newspaper (Barth 1975:33).

Finally confessional theology is always ethically for it calls for those who align themselves with it to embody that which they confess. Barth (1975) avers that

an evangelical church which was today, say, prepared to keep silent on the question of guilt with regard to the events from which we have issued, which was unwilling to listen to this question which must be answered honestly for the sake of the future, would *a priori* condemn itself to unfruitfulness. (p. 34)

For Barth a confession is only a living confession when it takes all these aspects into account.

Confessional theology in Zimbabwe today: What can RCZ theology learn from it?

The history of the RCZ is remarkably similar to the history of Dutch Reformed offspring Churches in South Africa (Van der Merwe 1981). Like both the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church as well as the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa these churches remain somewhat indebted to the missionary activities of the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) despite all the controversies that characterised and characterise the DRC.

The theological maturity of the sister churches of the DRC in South Africa has enabled these churches to transcend the selfish hermeneutics and careless theology that justified the position of African people as mundane and barbaric. The result of this maturity culminated in the amalgamation of these churches to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). More importantly, the Belhar Confession that was produced by this church to illustrate its commitment to the pure proclamation of the gospel has also become a document that is discussed at numerous international as well as national meetings.

The URCSA became associated with the faculty of theology at the University of Stellenbosch (US) after the theological training was shifted from the University of the Western Cape to the University of Stellenbosch. Both the DRC congregation at Stellenbosch and the faculty in question are closely related to the RCZ as well as to the Murray Theological College (MTC) at Morgenster, which is the centre where ministers for the RCZ have been trained since a Reformed church was established in Zimbabwe. It does seem that there is at least some degree of cooperation between the URCSA and the RCZ on some structures, yet this cooperation does not seem to be one through which the different parties learn from one another.

On the part of the academic institution referred to here, it must be said that the faculty of theology continue to be involved in the life of the MTC. However, it must also be said that this involvement is more departmental. The department of practical theology and missiology at US are contributing fairly towards the theological education of prospective Reformed ministers in Zimbabwe.¹³ However this involvement raises a number of fundamental questions. It could be that the department of practical theology and missiology is involved in the theological life of Reformed Christians in Zimbabwe because it still deems the mission imperative for Africans north of the Limpopo. Nonetheless, it needs to be complemented on a job well done, particularly as it has recently realised the need of looking at other theological subjects that are particularly important today for the RCZ also offered at MTC.

13. NetAct which is housed in the department of practical theology and missiology at the University of Stellenbosch is able to provide lecturer exchange opportunities to some of its partner theological institutions across Africa. The author of this paper is currently relief lecturer of Reformed Dogmatics and Ethics at the MTC.

Concerning the department of systematic theology and ecclesiology at the US, one is impelled to ask a number of questions pertaining to its focus. It is common knowledge that the Belhar Confession, and the theology that underpins it, is well known both in Europe as well as in the USA, yet immediately north of the Limpopo River this confession remains fascinating when explained but is virtually unknown. Furthermore, in light of talks concerning the African Renaissance one is tempted to ask whether the priorities of this department include focusing Africa.¹⁴

This department also houses the Beyers Naudé centre for public theology. This centre has been used ever since its inception as a platform to deal with contemporary theological issues, and because of this it attracts a wide array of outstanding theologians. This avenue could also be used profitably by the RCZ.

Although this article remains of the view that the entire faculty of theology can contribute extensively towards enhancing the level of Reformed theology in Zimbabwe, it remains equally convinced that the RCZ will ultimately be the chief actor that determines the direction of its theology and its relevance for the present situation of Zimbabwe. This church shall have to contemplate the essence of further studies in theology, which is currently not widely encouraged, primarily because it is expected that senior ministers should enjoy this prospect. The RCZ must realise as a matter of urgency that it needs to invest in the many capable young students that are currently involved with their preparations for the ministry.

Not much if anything has been changed in the church order of this church. Not much, if anything, has been done to ensure that this church is able to engage some of its doctrines progressively. This is essentially because of the dearth of trained people in theology that can help it in this regard. For this reason views that imply that the RCZ does not have a voice on many of the current issues seem justified. Although some of its leadership occupies key positions within the Zimbabwean Council of Churches it must be remembered that a Reformed church also relies equally on its own voice. There is also no Reformed academic journal in Zimbabwe and this makes it particularly impossible to share ideas and views about the Reformed faith.

Conclusion

Reading Karl Barth in Zimbabwe today!

The RCZ as an autonomous Reformed church stands in a strategic position of dealing with the socio-economic and political situation of present day Zimbabwe. Consequently,

14. Tshaka has argued elsewhere that in order for Africans to avoid rendering the notion African renaissance a cliché; African Reformed Christians (particularly in South Africa) will have to seriously concede to their Africanness in their Reformed theological reflections. He refers to this point after having realised that the African's acceptance of the Reformed faith compelled him to choose either against or for this faith. In most cases choosing this faith consequently meant being assimilated into this new faith. Acknowledging one's Africanness mean today that the fallacies that have accompanied African beliefs need to be revisited and be corrected, but African Reformed Christians themselves can only successfully execute this. The African organic intellectual, that is, African ministers of the word and African professors of theology in this tradition, will play key roles in making the necessary corrections suggested. Cf. Tshaka (2007).

the confessional theology of Barth can assist greatly in this regard. But in order for it to take advantage of this prospect, it first needs to reconsider that which makes it different as a church with a Reformed tradition from the rest of the other ecclesiastical traditions in Zimbabwe. This article has made exhaustive mention to the essence of confessions and confessional theology, but the RCZ can only begin to profit from it once it has repositioned itself against that which threatens the gospel in Zimbabwe. In doing this it will have to discard a number of practices which had been kept in place in the name of tradition.

Although the majority of the work will be done by it and its membership, the RCZ can benefit from its partner churches that had managed to take some theologically quantum leaps forward. Leaps that saw the birth of the Belhar Confession in South Africa during the apartheid era as well as many new students that are committed to helping the Reformed church in South Africa rethink the concept of being a church in Africa and in a rapidly changed and changing time.

The MTC will have to be supported in its attempts at placing theology at this centre in line with international standards. With the RCZ having the facility (MTC) it is perhaps about time that this Reformed institution entertains the possibility of opening theology to other ecclesiastical traditions as well. But more importantly, the RCZ should reconsider its understanding of the ministry. Although ministers of the word are necessary and indispensable, particularly in the chaotic present situation of Zimbabwe, precisely because the church exists in the world it is necessary that some are trained as its doctors to help it understand when its doctrines need to be reinterpreted so that it continuously remains faithful to the gospel. It has been pointed out that traditionally senior ministers are given the privilege of pursuing further education. The RCZ now needs to ponder whether this practice is still in the best interest of the life of the RCZ. In the likely event that it is not, the RCZ shall unfortunately have to invest in those students that it should identify as having the ability to help the church find both a voice and a direction in the current socio-economic and political situation of Zimbabwe.

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