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Barmen and Belhar in conversation – a South African perspective[1]

ABSTRACT

Claiming that the South African Confession of Belhar should be understood in the tradition of the Barmen Theological Declaration, the paper points to historical continuities, formal similarities and shared theological viewpoints. A central section therefore focuses on the theses of Barmen, to reflect on the question why Barmen influenced and inspired so many South African Christians in the struggle against apartheid. A final section then considers the possible contemporary relevance of Barmen and Belhar by asking three questions concerning their potential impact and influence today, namely if their claims are still regarded as true, how they could be embodied, and whether they could contribute to a new language.

A LONG AND ONGOING CONVERSATION

1. The Belhar Confession is *the product of a conversation* with the Barmen Declaration. Without Barmen there would have been no Belhar, in its present form. Belhar was born in a long, intense struggle with Barmen – with its own historical context, its insights and contributions, the theologies, theologians and church movements informing and inspiring it, the evangelical claims expressed in it, and its own ambiguous history of reception during the decades to follow, in Germany and far outside its birth-place. Since its inception, therefore, Belhar was both a product of this long conversation with Barmen and a further historical moment in this conversation itself.

2. This *history* has often been told, as again during this meeting. It therefore suffices to remember that Belhar would not have been born without the role of – amongst many others – Beyers Naudé, the Christian Institute and its many supporters, from church leaders to many believers and church members, who increasingly understood the struggle against apartheid in continuity with the church struggle in Germany; without the South African Council of Churches with several of its member churches, church leaders and theologians, like Desmond Tutu, Wolfram Kistner, John de Gruchy, Douglas Bax, and many others, its *Message to the People of South Africa*, and the role of the broader ecumenical movement; without South African Reformed theologians like Jaap Durand, Willie Jonker, David Bosch and many others, who worked, thought and witnessed in the theological tradition of Karl Barth; without especially Allan Boesak, who played a major role as church leader, theologian, ecumenical figure and activist, also in the tradition of Calvin, Barth, Bonhoeffer and Barmen, and without whom the struggle against apartheid certainly would not have developed the way it did; without movements like the Broederkring, later the

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Belydendekring, and the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA), all consisting of sisters and brothers who again thought and acted very consciously in this theological and ecclesial tradition; without a whole generation of other theologians and church leaders, like Daan Cloete, Chris Loff, Shun Govender, Hannes Adonis, Johan Botha, Welile Mazamisa, Takatso Mofokeng and many of their contemporaries – to mention only a few from my own small world of personal experience, although there are many others who deserve to be mentioned whenever the full story is told; without a still younger generation of then students and younger ministers, like Russel Botman, James Buys, Leonardo Appies, and again many more, most of them not celebrated and publicly well-known, who through their insights and convictions, commitment and witness, even suffering and fate, stood in the tradition of Barmen. Everyone who knows this history will be able to add many other names of people who deserve to be mentioned, but the point here is very simple. It is a reminder that Belhar itself is the product of a long and intense conversation with Barmen, with Barth, Bonhoeffer, the German Confessing Church, and the history of its reception and interpretation.

3. It is therefore understandable that there are indeed *many formal similarities* between Barmen and Belhar – structural elements, positive claims and negative rejections, appeals to Scripture, direct allusions especially in the preface and conclusion of Belhar, the shared dependence on the Heidelberg Catechism, and many more. Both were documents of the church, not of individuals; both targeted false doctrine, not specific people; both were binding and authoritative and not optional, not mere theological opinions and contributions to a discussion, born in a *status confessionis*, a moment of truth, when the gospel itself was at stake, according to those who confessed. Both therefore did not cause the crisis but were responses to an already existing crisis. There are even deeper commonalities – like the deliberate absence of any reference to these historical contexts or crises that gave rise to the respective confessions, except for being implied in the rejections. The latter characteristic was based on the same understanding of what a confession is, namely not a political statement, but a positive expression of the truth of the gospel, applicable elsewhere and afterwards. The Accompanying Letter to Belhar, according to the original decision of the confessing Synod an integral part of the Confession and always to be read together with it, even shows direct influence from the Barmen history. Scholars could therefore easily develop a conversation between the two documents by looking for similarities and possible differences.

4. However, much more important is the insight that the two documents share a common theological tradition, a common faith position, a *common confessional viewpoint and claim.* Although there were similarities even between the historical struggles in which they were born, in the challenges they addressed and the false convictions they sought to unmask and rejected, the much more important agreement is given in the fact that they do that from the same theological and confessional position. Both Barmen and Belhar responded to specific, and in some ways similar, historical challenges, but both regarded these as symptoms of deeper, more fundamental theological and ecclesiological problems and temptations, that had been growing over a long period of time, and that can again in history manifest itself in perhaps different symptoms – and both wanted to affirm positively, against this fundamental but hidden false understanding of gospel and church, the wonderful news of the living, Triune God.

The most interesting conversation could therefore be one that seeks to understand this common confessional and theological ground between Barmen and Belhar, and then continues to ask about the continuing challenges embedded in that confessional viewpoint, if any. In order to understand this theological and confessional tradition, it may be helpful to start the conversation

by listening anew – from a South African perspective – to the central theological claims of Barmen. *Why did the Barmen Theological Declaration so powerfully inspire and inform so many South African Christians during the struggle against apartheid?*

LISTENING TO BARMEN

5. Like every confession, Barmen must be heard as a *single, albeit complex* claim. It is important to read Barmen not as six separate and distinct theses – precisely as it is true of Belhar – of which we can adhere to some while ignoring and neglecting others. Only in their joint claim do they confess what is truly at stake. Therefore, the internal structure, the overall thrust of Barmen is of extreme importance. However, in order to understand that thrust it is indeed necessary first to listen carefully to the way it seemingly fans out into six different directions.

The central claim of Barmen concerns the *church*. It is found in theses III and IV. The message of the church, the faith of the church, has to be reflected in the order of the church, in the form of the church – this is the point. The church belonging to Jesus Christ may not proclaim one message but practise another one. This central ecclesiological claim is given a christological foundation in the form of a preface, in theses I and II. Jesus Christ is the one Word of God, he is the content of the message and faith of the church, he frees us and claims us. He should therefore determine the form and order of this church that belongs to him (III and IV). The final two theses draw practical implications from this central christological and ecclesiological conviction, namely for the public and political role of the church (V) and for the mission and proclamation of the church to the whole world (VI). This structure is seemingly so simple, but the implications are powerful and dramatic – for then and there, and for today.

6. The *first* thesis claims that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Jesus Christ is the *one* Word of God – there is no other. Which Jesus? The Jesus as is attested for us in Holy Scripture, which includes both the Old *and* New Testaments. In this Jesus Christ we know God, and in him alone. The three verbs – we have to *hear*, *trust* and *obey* him, and in that order – are of crucial importance. We have to do this "in life and death," which is a clear allusion to the Heidelberg Catechism, which in fact plays a major role in the overall argument and theology of Barmen (and Belhar). The verbs even suggest allusions to the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ, as prophet, priest and king.

What is rejected by this foundational christological claim? The answer is clear, namely any form of natural theology, claiming that there are also other ways of knowing other gods, other words that we have to hear, trust and obey. When the implications are drawn for the form and nature of the church (III and IV), and also for the public role and the mission of the church (V and VI), the radical implications of this rejection will be clear, and at stake. Or differently put, behind the seemingly practical – even innocent, debatable, and theologically contestable? – arguments of that time concerning Christian ethics (II), the church order (III), the ministries of the church (IV), the public role of the church (V) and the missionary task of the church (VI), lies hidden a fundamental conflict, between natural theology on the one hand and hearing, trusting and obeying Jesus Christ as the one Word of God, in life and death, on the other hand.

To whom is this thesis addressed? Clearly not to outsiders, but to the church itself, internally, self-critically. What is at stake is the theological basis of the church itself, the very ground on which it exists, the very gospel which it believes and confesses. In characteristic confessional style, Barmen (like Belhar) speaks in the first place to the speakers themselves, to the church who utters these words.

Anyone who knows the history of the church struggle in South Africa, knows that this fundamental theological conflict, between forms of natural theology and pleas for a christological theology based on the Word alone, was at the heart of our struggle as well. There is no other way to understand the theological contributions of people like Jonker, Durand, Boesak, and many others. I remember a visit at the Jonker home with Allan Boesak and an ecumenical visitor, during which Jonker explained how he saw his own calling as teaching this christological theology to a new generation of students, in the hope that the prevailing natural theology undergirding apartheid will in the long run not be able to withstand this truth revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

7. The *second* thesis claims that "As Jesus Christ is *God's assurance* of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also *God's mighty claim* upon our whole life." It adds, in a second clause, "Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures." The rejection is very important: "We reject the false doctrine, as though there were other areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him."

Barmen II is nothing less than "a foundation for Christian ethics" (Busch) – and Christian ethics is "an ethics of freedom" (Barth, Huber). It is at the same time a theological protest against doctrine (I) without ethics (II), and a theological protest against ethics separated from doctrine and theology (Huber). It is again a summary of the overall structure of the Heidelberg Catechism, where salvation and liberation flow over in lives of obedience and gratitude. It describes the nature of discipleship (Busch). Since the church belongs to Jesus Christ, we should live like people who belong to him. He is at the same time God's assurance of forgiveness of all our sins *and* God's mighty claim upon our whole life. The addition "our whole life" is of particular importance, as the explicit conclusions of the rejection show, calling it false doctrine if anyone should claim that there are "other areas of our life in which we do not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords." This is a rejection of all versions of the so-called autonomy (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) of different spheres of (modern) life, understood in such a way that the gospel of Jesus Christ has no implications for those spheres of reality.

Again, these were precisely the theological and ethical claims at work in the theology and sermons of – for example – Allan Boesak, often with appeals to other traditions as well, particularly Reformed ones, including Kuyper, but mostly with explicit reference to Barth and Bonhoeffer.

8. With the *third* thesis one comes to the heart of Barmen. It claims that "the church has to testify with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely the property of Jesus Christ," and rejects "the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions."

9. Here one hears the voices of Barth and Bonhoeffer very clearly. According to some, this thesis offers what Protestantism had been lacking since the Reformation, namely "an evangelical definition of the church" – *the church belongs to Jesus Christ, and this should be reflected in its order, in its visible form and structure as well*. The living Christ is working as Lord in word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit, and this should become visible and practical in the so-called "real church." The truth and the form, the message and the social structure of the church belong inextricably together. The latter should not contradict and deny the former, because of the influence and impact of whatever prevailing ideological, social, cultural, political and economic convictions, practices and policies.

The church is therefore a congregation of brothers and sisters, belonging to Jesus Christ and therefore to one another, given to one another by Jesus Christ himself, and not chosen on the basis of their race, ethnicity, skin colour, sex, class or whatever cultural and social characteristic. The extraordinary relevance of this theological position for South Africa is for everyone to see, then and now. It is also confessed at the heart of Belhar's claims about the unity of the church.

In fact, these convictions have a long tradition in Reformed thought and practice. Since the earliest days of the Calvinist Reformation and ever since, Reformed confessions were always intended to be embodied, also in the form of church orders and practical arrangements. In South Africa, these arguments were for example powerfully made by Willie Jonker, in several of his small but extremely influential, although deeply controversial, publications during the apartheid years, and they were again developed in great detail by people like Hannes Adonis, for example in his work on the wall of separation rebuilt.

10. The *fourth* thesis is closely related to the third, still deals with the church, and describes the nature of ministry in this church belonging to Jesus Christ, claiming that "the various offices do not establish a dominion of some over others, but on the contrary are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoyed upon the whole congregation." There are no special rulers in or over this church and none with vested ruling powers. The brothers and sisters are all and jointly called to *mutual service*, to one another and the world. The "various offices" do not lead to personal authority, but only to functional authority, and this function is one of service.

In Belhar's description, with a whole series of Biblical allusions, of the way in which the wonderfully rich diversity of gifts, backgrounds, opportunities and abilities present in the members work together in the one – *not* uniform – church to enrich and strengthen its life and witness, one hears the same theological convictions at work. In the new Church Order of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, precisely these confessional convictions and their practical implications have been employed to open up possibilities for a church to order and organise itself practically on the basis of this Protestant ecclesiology of Barmen and Belhar.

11. The *fifth* thesis considers theologically *the public role of this church*, its political responsibility and its relationship with the state, and claims that "Scripture tells us that" in the "as yet unredeemed world" in which both church and state exist, the state has "by divine appointment" the task of providing for "justice and peace," and should do this "according to the measure of human judgment and human ability." The church "acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before God," and calls to mind the kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness," and thereby the responsibility of both rulers and ruled – trusting in and obeying "the power of the Word by which God upholds all things." It therefore rejects both the false doctrine of the totalitarian and usurping state and the false doctrine of the church itself becoming state-like and an organ of the state.

Again, the historical context is clearly implied and present, but even more fundamental for Barmen are the theological convictions at stake and the false doctrines that had become powerful and pervasive, even in the church itself. Thesis five should be heard against the backdrop of theses one and two, about Jesus Christ as the one Word and both God's assurances and mighty claim upon our whole life. A Christ-like church may not become a state-like church, employing state-like methods and demonstrating state-like characteristics.

In its political ethics, describing both the task and the boundaries of the state theologically, Barmen affirms the strengths of both the two-kingdoms and the lordship-of-Christ understandings. The oft-construed tension between these two rests, mistakenly, on only a seeming contradiction, since both represent elements of truth. Church and state should be distinguished, but not totally

separated. The arrogant hubris of both state and church should be resisted in the name of the kingdom. The state is not the kingdom and the church is not the state. The state is not the kingdom, but exists in the unredeemed world by God's appointment – in German *Anordnung*, a clear allusion to and rejection of the totalitarian *Ordnung*, the total order usurped by the totalitarian state, exceeding its divine appointment, as the rejection says. Appointed by God, the state has a task, namely to serve justice and peace. The state should do this humanly and humanely, and the church should thank God for this. The church is not the state, but also exists in and as part of the as yet unredeemed world – reminding both rulers and ruled of their respective responsibilities.

Many commentators, including already Barth himself, and later Wolfgang Huber, have argued convincingly that political ethics today should go beyond the insights and claims of this thesis, although in the same theological direction. In a very definite way, Belhar and again the URCSA Church Order have already done this to some extent, for example by not concentrating on church and state relations, but rather situating the church in more complex spheres of public life, civil society, the formation of public opinion and economic life, but specifically also by focusing explicitly on real reconciliation and compassionate, caring justice.

12. The *sixth* thesis addresses *the missionary task of the church*, claiming that "the church's freedom" is founded upon its commission to deliver "the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead," which leads to a rejection of the false doctrine "as though the church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans."

Again, this is clearly a further implication of the christological claims that the church belongs to Jesus Christ (I and II) and should therefore visibly demonstrate this belonging to him in its own order, life and ministry (III and IV) – which also involves its public witness (V) and its mission and proclamation (VI). The mission of the church may – also, like the church order – never be instrumentalised to serve other desires, purposes and plans, whether political, cultural, social or economic. The expression "to all people" (*an alles Volk*) was extremely controversial at the time, and has remarkably remained so in the history of Barmen's reception, until today. Of particular importance is the way in which the freedom of the church – a central theme right through Barmen – is understood in relation to the mission of the church. The church's deepest freedom is given in its calling to proclaim the message of the free grace of God – "to all people"! Any other message, however religious and pious, moral and serious, any restriction of the addressees to only some, to a specific *volk* or to only some in the *volk*, any refusal or reluctance to proclaim this good news of God's free grace, any denial of this wonderful missionary task of the church, is nothing less than a loss of freedom.

Again, it is abundantly clear how exactly this confessional stance was at stake in the theological and ecclesial developments legitimating apartheid and therefore in the theological opposition against this alien influence and power in the church and its proclamation, and the resultant loss of the freedom of the church. It was precisely the ministry of Christ's Word and work through sermon and sacrament "to all people" that was compromised – so that this wonderful freedom was lost.

13. Even through this superficial reminder of the content of Barmen, its *central and powerful claim* becomes obvious. The church belongs to Jesus Christ, who assures the church of joyful deliverance and claims the church with a mighty claim. The church is not simply a religious organisation of like-minded people, who can decide and determine for themselves how to organise themselves, what to do and whom to serve. The order, the structure, the ministries, the offices of the church should all visibly serve the truth of his message, the content of his good news. The church should hear, trust and obey Jesus Christ in every aspect of its whole life, and should therefore freely proclaim this wonderful truth of God's free grace in the public spheres and to all

people. In almost every respect this central claim was being denied by the thought, practices and structures of the official church and its leaders at the time – a denial in which the confessing believers recognised false doctrine and false theological convictions that had grown amongst them over many decades until their moment of decision.

It is also *obvious why* so many South African Christians would recognise similar thought patterns, practices and structures in the church during the days of apartheid, and why the theological stance and tradition of Barmen would help them to discern similar fundamental theological and confessional choices present here, in our moment of decision. Perhaps the more intriguing question is *whether* this longstanding conversation between Barmen and Belhar *still presents us with challenges, today?*

LISTENING TO BARMEN AND BELHAR, TODAY?

14. It is possible to list a whole range of crucial themes and issues for us today, in the light of this conversation. Hopefully, people will do precisely that during our time for discussion. I would like to invite such reflections by pointing to *three* possible clusters of themes and issues. Recently, as part of the 70-year anniversary of Barmen, Eberhard Busch wrote:

> "Confession does not mean: clinging to a confessional text that has once been called forth from the church. Confession rather means new witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of present challenges. A church that does not faithfully practise its own confession, does not thereby make this confession invalid, but is instead called to repentance by its own confession. The worst that could happen, would then be that such a church, instead of such repentance, with unrepenting hearts, proudly exhibits their confession as a golden memory in a glass display cabinet. Its has happened often enough that the church has not understood that the confession does not belong at home in a museum, but that it must be carried in front of them and that they must follow their confession, whenever facing new challenges and struggles. It is not enough for the church to *have* a confession. The church should *live* from and with its confession." (Busch 2004, freely translated, but with his own italics)

15. The *first* question is whether we still *hear* and *trust* these claims, today, whether we still hear this one Word of God, Jesus Christ, in our churches and in our lives, and whether this is indeed still the good news, the gospel, that we trust, in life and death? The symptoms of the temptation, the visible manifestations of the false doctrine and the deviant theology differ through the years, they do not appear in the same form again – but do we have the spiritual discernment, the theological skill and gospel sense to read the signs of the times and to recognise the new temptations and false teachings, which we may be facing today in our contemporary societies and world, or are we still caught in the struggles that lie behind us, unable to discern the present ones?

Are we able to recognise the – possibly – new forms of natural theology, of natural religiosity, of idolatry, of cultural usurpation of gospel and church, of the church becoming state-like? Do we really trust and worship the one Word of God, according to the Scriptures, or do we celebrate and worship, trust and follow other promises, other claims of self-fulfillment, happiness, and success? Do we see the – possibly new – ways in which the church is tempted today to take on cultural form, rather than the form of Christ? Which kind of freedom do we truly celebrate and trust – the joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free and grateful service to his creatures (Barmen II), the freedom based on the church's commission to proclaim the message of the free grace of God to all people (VI), or a different kind of freedom, offered to us by other events and powers, figures and truths (I)?

These are self-critical questions, addressed to the church itself, in particular churches who stand – sometimes seemingly proudly and smugly, even self-righteously – in the tradition of Barmen and Belhar. This is why many commentators like Busch have repeatedly stressed that having a confession is not the point, but confessing it, and ever anew. A true confession – of this nature – becomes a self-critical voice, also addressed to those who think they have and possess this confession. A church with a confession is not necessarily a confessing church.

From the beginning the Dutch Reformed Mission Church knew this very well. That is why it officially and publicly distinguished from the very beginning between the fact of Belhar and the content of Belhar. The DRMC did not expect of any other church, including the members of the DRC-family, but also more widely in the ecumenical church, to accept Belhar as their own confessional document. That would have been contrary to the century-old Reformed practice and custom concerning confessional documents. It would have been contrary to the fact that it was precisely the confession born in the heart of the DRCM itself, expressing its own identity, understanding of the gospel, and commitment. It also would have been contrary to what we learnt from the reception of Barmen over decades, in many churches all over the world, where the exact status of the text and the diverse ways in which churches affirmed, appropriated and adopted Barmen correctly never became the major issue, not even in the different evangelical churches in Germany itself, and contrary to the firm conviction – expressed again and again in discussions with other churches by the so-called *Gesprekskommissie* – that the "fact" of Belhar should not be a hindrance in the way to achieve what Belhar is about. Having a confession and formally accepting a confession was not the point.

What the DRMC did take very seriously, however, was the content of Belhar. We wanted to hear what other churches said about the content, and in the official conversations that was what we asked from other churches, in the DRC-family and in ecumenical circles. We wanted our ecumenical brothers and sisters to advise us, and to help us to hear the one Word of God, and we wanted to know where we stood with the other member churches of the family. We explained officially that, as far as we were concerned, the unity we longed for so much was only to be found on the basis of this content. Therefore, we needed to know whether our brothers and sisters also heard the same gospel, trusted the same promises, and wanted to obey the same claim on our lives – and only on that basis could we re-unite, we said. Merely clinging to a document as document, to a text as text, and expecting others to accept that text formally as their text as well, has never been what Reformed confessions, what Barmen and what Belhar was about – and, in fact, doing that could ironically and sadly even become a form of the church becoming state-like, attempting to deal with others primarily by legal and judicial means, by dominion rather than service, which Barmen so clearly rejects (V and VI).

It has therefore indeed been an encouraging and often wonderful experience over the last decades to hear from so many churches, ecumenical bodies, and groups of Christians, in South and Southern Africa, in larger regions, in other countries and continents, that they indeed hear in Belhar the one Word of God, his liberating assurances and his mighty claim, and that this helps them in their own contexts, with their present challenges and struggles, and our joint struggles in the world today – this is indeed the first and important question.

16. The *second* question is whether we truly *obey* these claims, today? The ongoing conversation has made it abundantly clear that Protestant – very definitely Reformed – confessions call for *embodiment*. The one Word we hear and trust must be practiced in all areas of our life (Barmen II), in our church structures and order, including our material and financial structures, as Huber rightly underlines (III), in our ministries and services (IV), in our public witness through word and deed (V), and in our mission and proclamation (VI).

Regarding Barmen, Huber developed "an ethics and ecclesiology of freedom," asking how Christian freedom can achieve concrete form and body in such ways that it is really experienced. Answering this question, he develops a practical vision of the church "*als Raum und als Anwalt der Freiheit*," as both the space where freedom is practised and experienced as well as the advocate who publicly speaks for freedom whenever and wherever necessary.

Regarding Belhar, it similarly should be possible to develop an ethics and ecclesiology of living unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice, according to which the church becomes both the place where unity, reconciliation and justice are really practised and experienced in the church itself, as well as the voice that actively and publicly speaks and pleads for these forms of unity, reconciliation and justice, whenever and wherever necessary.

What would this truly mean in our world, our societies, today – to be a church like this, to embody the claims and convictions of our own confession? In several of the sessions to follow during this consultation, this will be the focus of our discussions, and this is indeed of crucial importance. The question is how we – together, jointly – *live* these convictions today, in our church order and structures (Barmen III), but also in our ethics (II), in our mutual acceptance and service (IV), in our public witness, presence, actions and style (V), in our mission and our proclamation, through sermon and sacrament, through word and deed, in many and rich ways at our disposal in the contemporary world (VI). This is our acid test, also for a new, reunited church in our family – not whether we find the best formulations for including Belhar in the confessional basis, since that will be easy, and certainly not whether we use a confessional document in un-Reformed, inquisitional ways to test the personal faith of individual members, but whether this new church as a whole hear, trust and obey *this* faith, today. For a reunited church this faith could never be optional, to choose or to ignore, to live and embody, or not.

17. This leads to a *final* question. Following Ernst Lange's famous description of the church as *Sprachschule für die Freiheit*, as the school where we learn to speak the language of freedom, Huber expresses the hope that Barmen could maybe provide us with *a new common language*, with a new and more adequate way to talk about our world and our shared responsibilities. Regarding Belhar, that could perhaps also be a realistic hope. The ongoing ecumenical conversation in the tradition of Barmen and Belhar will certainly not provide us with the answers to our present challenges, but perhaps it can indeed help us to find a common language, a language of freedom, unity, reconciliation, justice and responsibility, a language of discipleship and hope, that could help us better to see and recognise, better to understand and describe, better to respond together to the new challenges of our common and radically changing world, today.

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English text of the Confession of Belhar available online at:
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