Tshaka, RS
University of Stellenbosch

A Need for a Consensus on an Interpretation of a Reformed Confession? Karl Barth's Interpretation of a Confession as a Basis for Further Discussion

ABSTRACT

The concept 'confession' continues to be viewed with suspicion especially in some South African theological circles. One of the reasons that it has acquired such a view is because it is interpreted by some as a condemnation on those who are not associated with it. The Reformed church in South Africa is locked up in squabbles with regard to the 'obligatory powers' that such a statement presupposes. This paper argues that the squabbles apparent in the reformed church today are not alien from the reformed church of yesterday. To display the similarities, the history of the Lutheran interpretation as well as the reformed interpretation of a confession is investigated. This paper then argues that the problem lies with the lack of consensus on what the essence of a confession is and therefore how it ought to be interpreted in the reformed church. In contrast to the Lutheran interpretation which seems to dissuade the authorship of other confessions, a reformed confession is treated as a temporal statement of faith.

INTRODUCTION

Talks concerning the essence and relevance of confessions in South African reformed churches continue to be hectic and challenging. The reformed church which is implied here refers significantly to the reformed churches that have their origin in the Dutch Reformed Church. Since the adoption of the Belhar Confession and the subsequent unity between a huge portion of the then Dutch Reformed Church in Africa as well as the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) much talks have ensued with regard to the significance of this confession for unity between the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the URCSA.

The Belhar confession was greatly influenced by the theology of Karl Barth. It is because of the influence that Barth's theology had on Belhar that this paper resorts to investigating Barth's interpretation and understanding of a reformed confession. Recently a number of theologians have explored Barth's response given to the question of the universality and possibility of a reformed confession.[1] The socio-economic, political and theological history which precipitated the

1 The response reads as follows: " a reformed confession is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which until further action, defines its character to outsiders; and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the holy Scripture alone". Cf. K Barth, *Theology and Church*. London: SCM Press. 1962, 112; Bruce McCormack also makes extensive use of this response especially when he deals with the question of ecclesial authority and its relationship to confessions. See. B L McCormack, 'The end of Reformed Theology? The voice of Karl Barth in the Doctrinal chaos of the

Confession of Belhar has rendered this confession a very sentimental and sensitive subject. For the URCSA there can be no real unity between itself and the DRC unless this confession is adopted by the DRC as one of its confessions. On the other hand there seems to be widespread disagreement within DRC circles with suggestions that this confession should be adopted by the entire DRC.[2]

The current lack of consensus on how a reformed confession must and should be interpreted is not different from its past. By browsing through the history of the reformed church and its relationship to its confessions, one is immediately confronted with the huge disagreements and squabbling concerning how this subject ought to be seen and interpreted. These problems are further illuminated when the different ecclesial traditions on the interpretation of this subject is considered. The difference between the interpretations of a confession within the reformed ecclesial circle differs tremendously from the interpretations of a confession within Lutheran ecclesial circle.

This paper shall endeavour to probe the differences between the reformed and Lutheran understanding of a confession. This is done in order to illustrate that the misunderstanding of what a confession means within the reformed fold has not been resolved yet. Having dealt with the different interpretations pointed out, this paper will probe Barth's understanding of what constitute a confession. While admitting the histories that underpin reformed confessions, the scriptural principle is called to mind with the intention of illustrating the significant role that it plays and must play also in confessional talk. In the end a few comments will be made with regard to a need for a platform to discuss the meaning and significance of reformed confessions.

1. THE HISTORY OF CONFESSIONS IN THE LUTHERAN AND REFORMED CHURCHES.

Since the inception of the reformed church, a confession has always played a crucial role. In addition to the essential position that confessions occupied in the reformed church, it must be added that reformed churches in most cases consisted of more than one confession. It was especially because of this that the Reformed were scornfully described as 'confessionists' in the sixteenth century.[3] Although this church had many confessions, it is imperative to understand that each reformed confession was essentially a singular work, a work which existed next to many others. Barth emphasises that the confessors of the reformed church had little or no actual drive, whether out of a sense of duty or even ambition, to compose a confession for all the Reformed churches.[4]

The understanding of a confession in the reformed church differs from the understanding of a confession in Lutheran ecclesial circles. Rohls characterised this different adequately when he said that "In Lutheranism the process of confessional development came to a conclusion with the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord[5]. On the Reformed side there is nothing that

---

Present' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2003, 61f; D J Smit, 'Social transformation and confessing the faith? Karl Barth's views of confession revisited. *Scriptura* 72 (2000), 67-85.

2 Both the URCSA and the DRC continue to engage each other on the subject of unity between these churches. The URCSA has once again registered its unwavering view that a confession (such as the Confession of Belhar) cannot be optionally adopted by the DRC. See especially the comments of the then moderator of the URCSA, Rev. J Buys. Kerkbode, 13 May 2005, part 174, no. 7.

3 Cf. K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. Trans. D Guder and J Guder. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 13.

4 Cf. K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 12.

5 The Book of Concord (1580) which is sometimes called The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church – as is known in German Lutheran circles or Concordia – as is known in Latin Lutheran circles.

corresponds to this conclusion".[6] The Augsburg confession undoubtedly plays a significant role in the Lutheran church. Despite its significance, this confession is written in a civil and conciliatory tone and emphasises the moderate positions of the Lutherans. Pelikan and Hotchkiss reckon that this was done by its authors probably to divorce the views contained from the views held by the more radical movements of the time.[7]

It is initially imperative to note that Lutheran confessions were generally written in brief periods and were primarily aimed as a response to the issues facing a specific geographic area.[8] Karl Barth displays at least five points which characterises a Lutheran confession.[9] These characteristics are briefly summarised as follows: (a) Lutheran confessions intend to be ecumenical in character. This suggests that Lutheran confessions endeavour to be seen as having the same dignity and validity as the confessions of the one ancient imperial church of Europe. A confession of this nature thus aspires at all times not to be a private declaration but purposefully wants to be public. (b) the Lutheran church insist on the essence of unity as well as a united interpretation of its confessions. This is especially prevalent in the Augsburg confession which had secured its position as a confession that embodied the ecumenicity of the Lutheran church. More importantly this confession bears testimony to the intention of its authors that it never wanted to depart from ancient confessions that preceded it. (c) a public confession of the Lutheran church has the character of a symbol. Because such a confession is given the status of a symbol, such a confession is then compared with the classical creeds such as the Nicene Creed. (d) a Lutheran confession tends to command authority. Because it is seen as an authoritative confession, it is claimed that such a confession cannot be changed or be replaced. (e) the authority which this confession claims obligates those who teach it to concede to the inerrancy of this confession. Barth maintains that seen in such a way, it is revealed that 'upon this confession rests, albeit in a subordinate way, the sacredness and necessity of the revealed Word of God itself'.

In contrast to the Lutheran understanding and interpretation of a confession, a confession is not seen according to the reformed faith as being on the same level as the classical creeds which are also called symbols.[10] Confessions are seen in the reformed church as not being on the same plain as symbols because they have to be re-examined from time to time in order to be able to

---

It contains all the generally accepted symbols of the Lutheran Church. The Book of Concord consist of the following creeds and confessions: (1) the Apostles' Creed (ca. 186); (2) the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381); (3) the Athanasian Creed (ca. 350-600); (4) Luther's Large and Small Catechisms (1529); (5) the Augsburg Confession, written by Melanchthon and submitted by the elector of Saxony and other Lutheran princes at Augsburg in 1530; (6) the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), written by Melanchthon against the Roman confutation which had rejected the Augsburg Confession; (7) the Smalcald Articles (1537), written by Luther and summarising the Protestant understanding of the major articles of faith for a church council that was never called; (8) the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537), written by Melanchthon to augment the Smalcald Articles; and (9) the Formula of Concord (1577), written to settle a number of disputes arising among Lutherans after Luther's death. Cf. R Kolb and J Nestingen (eds.), *Sources and contexts of the Book of Concord*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.

6 Cf. J Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. 1997, 9.

7 Cf. J Pelikan and V Hotchkiss (eds.), *Creeds and Confessions of faith in the Christian tradition. Vol II. Reformed Era*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 49.

8 Cf. J Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: a reader in Christian doctrine from the Bible to the present*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1973, 61.

9 Cf. K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 1-7.

10 Reformed theology insists on the distinction between Creeds and confessions.

speak to the cultural existence at particular moments in history. Barth succinctly summarises the essence of seeing confessions as contemporary statements of faith that are in constant need of re-examination accordingly: "[confessions are] a trumpet blast which needs to be blown in our sick time".[11]

This interpretation and understanding of a reformed confession is best articulated when the idea of re-examination is taken in line with Barth's 1925 response to the World Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches which was held in Cardiff (see footnote 1). Unlike an understanding prevalent in Lutheranism where confessions are interpreted as being on the same significant level as the creeds, reformed confessions - because they constantly have to be re-examined – are compared with a bell and the mighty sound that it makes. The mighty sound dies away gently. It is for this reason that Barth contends that the significance of the confession in the reformed church consists in its essential nonsignificance, its obvious relativity, humanity, multiplicity, mutability and transitoriness.[12]

A reformed confession is seen as such because it wants and aspires to point beyond itself. Because it aspires to point beyond itself, it must be said that a reformed confession points beyond its history. It does not nullify and vilify this history, but because it knows that its purpose it simply to confess the revelation of Christ in scripture in a particular current context where this confession is made, it is unable to use history as a means of underpinning how Christ continues to reveal himself to his church. The principle of Scripture which retain a fundamental role in dealing with confessions, forces a confession against the wall and renders it so fragmented, so desecrated, so human and temporal, so minimally binding.[13]

2. REFORMED CONFESSION IS CONFESSION OF THE TRUTH OF SCRIPTURE.

For as long as a reformed confession is faithful to this principle it has not ceased yet to exist. For the reformed faith this principle is the article upon which the church stands and falls. It is quite interesting to note Barth's reference to the reformers – Zwingli and Calvin in stressing this point.[14] Put this way, it then follows that neither history, philosophy etc may be used as a means of supporting the scriptural principle when dealing with an interpretation of a reformed confession. In maintaining this, Barth is not suggesting that history and philosophy are not essential and given form to a reformed confession. It has recently been illustrated that on the contrary Barth had very high regard for the significance of context in theological deliberation. He however was careful not to let a particular context dictate his theology.[15]

---

11 K Barth cited in R S Tshaka, *Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar Confession*. Unpublished D. Th dissertation. University of Stellenbosch, 2005, 45.

12 K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 38.

13 K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 40.

14 Among others, Barth make reference to Zwingli who said with regard to the authority of scripture: "let no one attempt to contend with sophistry or trifle, but let him come having Scripture as judge, in order that the truth be found, or when it is found, as I hope it would be, that it be kept. Amen". Zwingli cited in K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 41. Barth also makes reference to Calvin and admits that he like most of the reformers was a man of the renaissance, and as such, admits that it must have been difficult to accept that there is only one holy book that contained the whole truth, but with his discovery of such a book nonetheless made that bold decision to be obedient to this discovery. Cf. K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 46.

15 In his doctoral dissertation, R S Tshaka demonstrate the essential role that Christian confessions played in the theological reflection of Barth. He argues that it was especially after his entry into the academic

Barth admits that a confession did not fall from heaven but that it had its retrospective history. However the scripture principle serves the purpose of reminding the church that it does not proclaim its confessions but rather the word of God as it is revealed to us through Holy Scripture. The emphasis placed on scripture contains according to Barth an assertion as well as a restriction.[16] With regard to the assertion, he argues that the church's proclamation is continuously dependent upon the Word of God, that it is grounded on it alone. Concerning the restriction of the church's proclamation, he insists that the church's proclamation is not the Word of God itself but rather a human word ruled by the Word of God to which this human word remains subordinate.

Put this way it is understandable why Barth persistently argues that a confession – which is a human deed – is merely a commentary on the word of God and not the word of God itself.[17] Karl Barth's ability to distinguish between the Word of God and the human word allows him to justify his claim that theology ought to be a modest and free science. With this he means that theology is modest because its entire logic could only be a human analogy to the Word of God.[18]

3. A CONFESSION AS A SERIOUS ACT OF FAITH

Although Barth insists that a confession is a commentary on the Word of God, he nonetheless stresses that a confession is a serious matter.[19] The commentary part of it is underpinned by the fact that it remains a human rendition of the revealed Word of God. A confession is not called into existence because it has an ulterior motif, but it is brought to light by a community of the faithful who are convinced that the gospel is at stake.[20] Because a confession is a serious act, it will always cause head-shaking among serious people who do not know the particular seriousness of confession.[21] Despite the fact that a confession is simply a commentary on the Word of God and not the Word of God itself, a confession has 'obligatory power'. McCormack understands that the response given to the Council alluded to here, illustrates a reformed confession as a serious statement of faith by a particular community of faith particularly when it remains faithful to Scripture which is its guiding principle.[22]

Since a reformed confession has to remain conscious of its temporality, it must then be added that a confession displays the tension between its particularity as well as its universality. Because of its humanness, a confession is an answer of a local Christian community at a certain time to the

---

world that Barth developed a greater interest in reformed theology and reformed confessions. Making the argument that Barth's whole theological oeuvre can be read in a confessional way – as a theology that vigorously insist on the primacy of the Word of God as its point of departure, taking the church very seriously, being aware of the socio-economic and political context in which it is applied, conceding to its public witness to Jesus Christ and assuming the ethics that flows from such a theology. When all are taken together, he argues that Karl Barth's theology is confessional. The confessional tone is influenced chiefly by a constant predicament that is present in Barth's theological reflection – the command to speak about God because we are Christians and the inability to do so because we are human. Cf. R S Tshaka, *Confessional theology?*

16 K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 41.

17 Cf. K Barth, *Evangelical Theology: an introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1963, 16-17.

18 Cf. R S Tshaka, *Confessional theology?* 57.

19 Cf K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol III/4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1961, 77.

20 Cf. M Opocensk_, (ed.), *Proceedings of the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)*. Debrecen, Geneva: WARC, 1997, 198.

21 Cf K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol III/4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1961, 77.

22 Cf. B L McCormack, 'The end of Reformed Theology? The voice of Karl Barth in the Doctrinal chaos of the Present' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2003, 62.

self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.[23] But more importantly, and this is where the issue of the ecumenicity of the church is called to mind, a confession is also ecumenical. Ecumenism here is informed by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture.[24] It is therefore because of this latter aspect that a confession can claim its ecumenism.

It is Barth's view that in so far as we merely want to satisfy our own need to confess, we are not really confessors at all. He adds that we are also not confessors in so far as by confessing we want to teach, instruct, convince and win others.[25] This should not be construed as suggesting that Barth was not interested in Christian instruction, on the contrary, Barth's interest in Christian instruction and his works on catechism contains testimonies of his interest in the subject of Christian instruction.[26] Barth's argument that a confession should not have other motives in view is informed by his conviction that a confession is a free word of a free human being and not that of a psychologist, pedagogue, pastor or preacher.[27]

The idea that a confession is a human word and therefore not invulnerable from error is an idea that is conspicuous in Barth's reflection on the subject of confession. Reference was already made to his view of what constitute a confession. What is most significant is that Barth stresses that the geographic location in which the idea of a confession entertained plays a fundamental role. This suggests that what is considered by a community of faith elsewhere as something that threatens the gospel, might not be seen in another location as such.

Because a confession is temporal, it then follows that sentiment, history etc ought to play a limited role in testing the relevance of a confession in a changed context. Still on the temporality of a confession, McCormack is correct when he maintains that 'if the commentary that *a confession* offered were perfectly sound, the "until further action" would never come into play'.[28] To say that a confession is a human statement (albeit a serious one especially since is its informed by its faithful interpretation of Scripture), it is also implied that it is fallible. It goes without saying that history and the sentimentality that accompanies it also has to be questioned from time to time to ascertain whether it is not used to the detriment of the scriptural principle. In this way caution is applied in preventing that in addition to Scripture a 'holy tradition' becomes important in dealing with confessions.

With regard to confessions, Busch reminds us of the 'denominational narrow-mindedness' which existed among reformed people who tended to judge things according to criteria that only existed according to them. He argues that this tendency was supported by the tendency of reformed Christians who tried to endure the present by conserving the past.[29]

4. TOWARDS A CONSENSUS ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF A CONFESSION: CONCLUSION

To suggest that reformed Christians should create for themselves a space to deal with the understanding of a confession does not suggest that a unison reading of a confession will be

23 Cf. J Rohls, 'Reformed Theology – Past and Future' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2003, 37.
24 Cf. B L McCormack, 'The end of Reformed Theology? 63.
25 Cf K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol III/4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1961, 78.
26 Karl Barth's word on the Heidelberg Catechism is fundamental in illustrating this point. See K Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg catechism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964; see also K Barth, *The Heidelberg catechism for today*. London: Trinity Press, 1964.
27 Cf K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol III/4. 78.
28 Cf. B L McCormack, 'The end of Reformed Theology? 62. Emphasis added.
29 Cf. E Busch, 'Reformed Strength in its Denominational weakness' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2003, 22-23.

arrived at. This paper has attempted to illustrate that within reformed deliberations on this subject it was never expected that a unison reading of a confession is normative. The suggestion of a consensus is informed by a view that the histories[30] that traditionally accompanied confessions sometimes act as impediments for dealing with the essence of a confession.

We have seen the interplay between the particularistic aspect of a confession and the ecumenical aspect thereof. Although as it was argued, the particularity of a confession is of paramount importance, this important aspect is secondary to the ecumenical aspect of a confession. The significance of the latter aspect vis-à-vis the former is underpinned by the fact that a confession is ecumenical simply because it displays its faithfulness to the scriptural principle. Because of this, a confession is therefore an appeal. It is an appeal to others and does not want to encroach itself on others because it points beyond itself, to the revelation of Jesus Christ through the Holy Scripture.

The Belhar Confession illustrates this appeal succinctly when it invites others to see in this confession the importance of the unity of the church, reconciliation between human beings as well as the justice which remains at the heart of the gospel. This appeal is made out of this confession's regard for its faithfulness to scripture. Those who make this appeal do this because they are aware that the church cannot be a healthy church unless it remains faithful to the head of this church. Being faithful to the head of this church is to realise that issues such as unity, reconciliation and justice are issues that the church is called to align itself with.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barth, K 1961. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol III/4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

———— 1962.*Theology and Church*. London: SCM Press.

———— 1963. *Evangelical Theology: an introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

———— 2002. *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. Trans. D Guder and J Guder. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Busch, E 'Reformed Strength in its Denominational weakness' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.), 2003. *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Buys, J. Kerkbode, 13 May 2005, part 174, no. 7.

De Klerk, W A 1975. *The Puritans in Africa: The story of the Afrikanerdom*. England: Penguin Books.

Kolb, R and Nestingen, J (eds.), 2001. *Sources and contexts of the Book of Concord*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Leith, J 1973. *Creeds of the Churches: a reader in Christian doctrine from the Bible to the present*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

McCormack, BL 'The end of Reformed Theology? The voice of Karl Barth in the Doctrinal chaos of the Present' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.) 2003. *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Moodie, T D. 1975. *The Rise of the Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

30 To be able to comprehend the current squabbles that had become the trademark of the reformed churches in South Africa, it is fundamental that one considers the history of these churches. To mention but one factor, the question of race and how it was used to influence the theology of the reformed tradition in South Africa. Numerous studies have already been conducted in this area, to entertain them thoroughly will defeat the purpose of this paper. Suffice it to refer to some works on this area. A detailed view of the rise of Afrikanerdom that latter made the DRC a powerful church in South Africa is contained in T D Moodie, *The Rise of the Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975; see also W A de Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa: The story of the Afrikanerdom*. England: Penguin Books, 1975. From a black perspective see especially the works of No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation: The national question in South Africa*. London: Zed Press, 1979, see also a much later study on this subject, R S Tshaka, *Confessional theology?* 214-226.

No Sizwe. 1979. *One Azania, One Nation: The national question in South Africa*. London: Zed Press.
Opocensk_, M (ed.), 1997. *Proceedings of the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)*. Debrecen, Geneva: WARC.
Rohls, J 1997. *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
———— 'Reformed Theology – Past and Future' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.) 2003. *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Smit, DJ 'Social transformation and confessing the faith? Karl Barth's views of confession revisited. *Scriptura* 72 (2000), 67-85.
Pelikan, J and Hotchkiss, V (eds.) 2003. *Creeds and Confessions of faith in the Christian tradition*. *Vol II*. *Reformed Era*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Tshaka, R S. 2005. *Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar Confession*. Unpublished D Th dissertation. University of Stellenbosch.

KEY WORDS
Karl Barth
Confessional theology
Reformed confessions
Lutheran church
Holy Scripture
Dutch Reformed Church
Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

TREFWOORDE
Karl Barth
Belydende teologie
Gereformeerde belydenisse
Luterse kerk
Heilige Skrif
Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk
Vereenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider Afrika

Dr Rothney S Tshaka
Maphallastraat 221
Motswedimosa
8701 RICHIE

hensan@mango.zw