

“Confession will always cause headshaking among serious people” – On Barmen, Barth and persevering in witness

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Abstract

Barth was always deeply aware that moments may arise in the life of the church when believers become convinced that the faith is questioned in such serious ways that there is a need to respond with acts of confessing and lives of public witness in the concrete here and now. He was also aware, over many years, that in such moments their confession would always cause headshaking among serious people, whether within or outside the church. He often considered factors that may lead to such headshaking. In this essay, three of these factors are briefly considered, firstly the reality that some may fail to see and name the threats of their time, secondly, the difficulties in recognizing the best moment for action, even when people agree on the threats and their seriousness, and thirdly the difficulty of understanding the motivation that may justify such acts of confession by the church. To persevere in its witness, the church should remain aware of this inevitable headshaking.

Keywords

*Barmen; Barth; discernment; status confessionis;
World Communion of Reformed Churches*

Sollte es wieder einmal zu einer Re-Vitalisierung von Barmen kommen, dann müßten es Menschen der jüngeren Generation sein, die davon reden würden, wie ihnen Barmen (etwa ... in der Befreiung aus dem altneuen Nationalismus ...) hilfreich und wichtig geworden ist. Diese Jüngeren sind offenbar noch nicht da und solange das nicht der Fall ist, verdrießt es mich, quasi den Museumsführer zu machen und einem sichtlich nicht interessierten

Volk wieder zu erzählen, wie gut wir es damals gemeint hätten und was hätte werden können, wenn – ja wenn die EKD willens und fähig gewesen wäre, das damals ausgesprochene Wort in die Tat umzusetzen,”

(Karl Barth, Feb 1964, declining an invitation to Barmen’s 30th commemoration, *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, 219–220).

Headshaking, but why?

In 1951, Karl Barth discussed “confession” in his creation ethics.¹ At the time, he did not mention the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* at all, but he was concerned with the nature of a so-called *status confessionis*, a moment of truth.²

In the preface of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik III/4* he had already explained that he was not interested in confessionalism which was again becoming popular at the time. Attempts to restore and repeat 16th-century Protestant dogma were for him “a blind alley.” It is one thing, he said, to take one’s bearings from the earlier traditions, “to learn from them and to accept their imperishable insights,” but quite another thing to try to think and

1 This paper was read on invitation as the plenary guest lecture during the Barth Graduate Student Colloquium of the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, 11–14 June 2024. The theme of the Colloquium was the 90th anniversary of the *Barmen Declaration*.

2 Barth offers this discussion of confession in the context of his views on “human freedom before God” – freedom to worship on God’s holy day, freedom to confess God’s holy name, and freedom to call on God in prayer, *Church Dogmatics III/4*, § 53, 1961, 73–86. For the use of the term, *status confessionis* in history and 20th-century ecumenical discussions, see my “What does *status confessionis* mean?” G.D. Cloete & D. J. Smit (eds), *A Moment of Truth*, Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1984, 7–32.

speak only according to their judgments.³ He was not interested in doing the latter and nobody should claim that they learnt this from him, he said.⁴

3 “‘Confessions’ exist so that we may go through them (not once but continually), but not that we should return to them, take up our abode in them, and conduct further thinking from their standpoint and in bondage to them.” The church never did well to attach itself stubbornly to one figure – whether Thomas, Luther, or Calvin, and in his school to attach itself to one form of its doctrine,” *CD III/4*, xiii. For Barth, this also applies to himself and his influence, reception and legacy, and to the influence, reception and legacy of the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*. See my essay on his final public letter to theologians in Southeast Asia, advising them to do their work for their contexts, and not to try to follow him, “Dogmatics ‘after Barth’? South African challenges,” in *Remembering Theologians – Doing Theology, Collected Essays 5*, ed. Robert Vosloo, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013, 17–28.

4 It was particularly during *three periods* of his life that Barth made major theological contributions concerning the nature of Christian confession. In the *early years*, after his commentary on Romans, in which he sees the world as facing a radical crisis, he is appointed as Professor for Reformed theology in Göttingen. For several years he submerged himself in Reformed theology and thought. He teaches several courses on Calvin and Reformed confessional documents. He speaks repeatedly on questions concerning Reformed identity, including the role and authority of the Bible, the Reformed confessional heritage, and whether it is desirable to write new confessions.

Very soon he is challenged by events taking place in Nazi-Germany. Together with other Reformed people, he plays a leading role in the *Confessing Church* and the writing of the *Barmen Theological Declaration* in 1934. In the following years he often reflected on *Barmen* in conversations, letters, papers and also in his lectures and the *Church Dogmatics*, for the first time in *CD I/2* in 1938 in the doctrine of the Word of God, on confession and authority.

Soon *after the Second World War* he participated in the initiatives by Reformed Christians to respond to the potential for destruction and war offered by nuclear arms in the form of the declaration of a *status confessionis*. He still reflects on *Barmen*, particularly when invited, but is now often far more restrained in speaking about its lasting significance, because of his disappointment with the actual reception history of *Barmen* in church and society.

He again treats confessional issues in his lectures and the *Church Dogmatics* during this time. In 1940 already he discusses *Barmen’s* first thesis in the context of his critique of natural theology in *CD II/1* on the doctrine of God. In 1951 he reflects on confession and freedom in his ethics of creation, in *CD III/4*. In 1959, in *CD IV/3/1*, he uses *Barmen’s* first thesis as motto when he deals with the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ and the witness of the church.

On Barth and confessions, see the extremely instructive dissertation by Hanna Reichel, *Theologie als Bekenntnis: Karl Barths kontextuelle Lektüre des Heidelberger Katechismus*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015; also, the earlier Georg Plasger, *Die Relative Autorität des Bekenntnisses bei Karl Barth*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2005; as well as my “Social Transformation and Confessing the Faith? Karl Barth’s View on Confession Revisited,” in *Essays on Being Reformed. Collected Essays 3*, ed. Robert Vosloo, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009, 295–306.

His concern was rather with the church's act of confessing, with its life of public witness in the world, and therefore with the issues concerning a so-called *status confessionis*. Such moments of truth arise whenever the church becomes convinced that its faith "is confronted and questioned either from within or without by the phenomena of unbelief, superstition and heresy." Confession occurs whenever it is given to the church to protest these powers.⁵

It is during such moments of truth that the church will find that their confession causes headshaking among serious people – whether within or outside of the church. "Why? they will ask themselves and us, and the more seriously we confess, the less they will find an answer."⁶

For Barth, this is a serious issue – repeatedly returning to this experience of headshaking, over many years and in diverse contexts. The church's confession is always questioned, contested, rejected, and even despised, not everyone agrees, not everyone is convinced, not everyone sees things in the same way, draws the same conclusions, accept the same consequences, embody the same convictions.

What is more, this is true not only of evil people but also of people of goodwill, serious people inside the church, sharing the faith, as well as people outside the church. But why – why this headshaking, and what about it, how does it impact the witness of the church?

It is possible to discern several responses to this question in Barth's work over the decades, from long before his involvement in *Barmen* in 1934 to long after those dramatic events. At least *three* such *responses* may be instructive when considering any lasting significance of the *Barmen* history.

For the nature and role of Reformed confessions more generally, see the authoritative study by Margit Ernst-Habib, *Reformierte Identität weltweit. Eine Interpretation neuerer Bekenntnisse aus der reformierten Tradition*, 2017; also, Georg Plasger, G & Matthias Freudenberg, (eds), *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005; and Marko Hofheinz, Meyer zu Hörste-Bührer, R J & Frederike Van Oorschot, (Hrsg), *Reformiertes Bekenntnen heute*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2015.

5 CD III/4, 79

6 CD III/4, 73–77

Failing to see and name the threats?

A first response would be that Barth was convinced that even the church itself – including many serious people – is often not able to discern what is at stake. They are unable to understand the *issues* they are facing. They are not qualified to interpret the movements of which they are part. They often fail to see the real challenges with which church and world are confronted, the threats and temptations. Many therefore shake their heads because they do not agree about what is happening.

In 1925, invited by the Alliance of Reformed Churches to address the question whether a single Reformed confession for the whole Reformed world was “desirable and possible,” this conviction is at the heart of Barth’s response. He develops a description of lasting influence of the nature of Reformed confession and then argues that such a general confession is neither desirable nor possible.⁷

It is not possible because in his opinion they would not be able to see and name the threats and the temptations they were facing. He sceptically asks whether they were ready to witness publicly about what he calls “the fascist, racist nationalism appearing in similar forms in all countries,” or whether they were ready to speak unambiguously on war and growing militarism – for this is what it would mean to be confessing church.⁸

7 He was in fact already invited to speak on the same theme by the Reformed Alliance, the organization of all churches of Reformed background in Germany, which he did in June 1925, in Duisburg-Meiderich. In his biography of Barth, Eberhard Busch later described this lecture as a summary of Barth’s course in the summer semester of 1923 on the theology of the Reformed confessions, published as *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, translated and annotated by Darrell & Judith Guder, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. For an instructive discussion of this work, see Freudenberg, *Karl Barth und die reformierte Theologie*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997, 217–272.

His address to the 12th General Council of the worldwide Alliance of Reformed Churches in Cardiff is later published as “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” in Barth’s second volume of collected essays, *Die Theologie und die Kirche*, Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zollikon, 76–105, again in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925. Gesamtausgabe III*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 604–643, with an English translation in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*, editor T.F. Torrance, London: SCM Press, 1962, 112–135.

8 “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 640–641.

It is not as if Barth thought that seeing and naming the threats and temptations should be a simple task. In fact, in a remarkable earlier passage he already defended himself against a superficial longing for simplicity in the Preface to the Second Edition of his *Romans*, in 1921.

“The simplicity with which Godself speaks, stands not at the beginning of our journey but at its end. Thirty years hence we may perhaps speak of simplicity but now let us speak the truth. For us neither the Epistle to the Romans, nor the present theological position, nor the present state of the world, nor the relation between God and the world, is simple ... In every direction human life is complicated... People will not be grateful to us if we provide them with short-lived pseudo-simplifications.”⁹

For Barth, what is needed is therefore discernment – theological discernment, which he often calls spiritual discernment. This is why it was so important to him that the full title of Barmen was “Theologische Erklärung zur gegenwärtigen Lage” – a theological declaration about the present situation. Nothing less was at stake.¹⁰

Years later, he would again stress this need for spiritual discernment in two remarkable contributions around the founding Assembly of the World Council Churches in Amsterdam, in 1948.

In 1947, in a preparatory paper, on “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” he delves into the Gospel of Matthew to argue that the church often fails to see what is at stake – for different reasons.¹¹

9 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, 6.

10 When Barth provides “a short historical commentary on the first article” of Barmen in CD II/1 on the doctrine of God, in 1940, he characteristically explains that “all this has to be appraised spiritually or it cannot be appraised at all,” 176. For a collection of Barth’s views on the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, see the helpful collection of writings and interviews introduced by Eberhard Jüngel, Karl Barth, *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984.

11 See “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” in Karl Barth, *God Here and Now*, translated by Paul van Buren with an introduction by George Hunsinger, London: Routledge, 2003, 75–104. In a footnote it is described as “substantially the address which Barth made in 1948 at the Amsterdam Assembly in which the World Council of Churches was established,” but that may be misleading, since the German version of this paper had already been published a year earlier, in 1947, while the Amsterdam address was published under the theme of the Council, “The Disorder of the World and God’s Plan of Salvation,” in German in *Amsterdamer Fragen und Antworten, Theologische Existenz heute* NF15, München: Kaiser Verlag,

The real threat to the church is that it can lose its existence as church – he will in fact conclude this paper with a discussion of the experiences of the Confessing Church.¹² This threat can “at all times and everywhere” become a temptation for the church. “This threat and temptation to the church can have many causes and take many forms” – and very often the church fails to discern them. Why? Because their eyes can become heavy with sleep,¹³ squint-eyed,¹⁴ even blind¹⁵ and Barth describes each of these failures to see what is at stake.

In August 1948, addressing the theme of the Assembly, “The Disorder of the World and God’s Plan of Salvation,” Barth argues that the assumptions

3–10 and in English in the *Christian Century* of 8 December 1948. This paper from 1947 probably served as preparation in the process leading up to the Council.

- 12 “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” *God Here and Now*, 91.
- 13 Their eyes can become heavy with sleep, like those of the disciples in Matthew. There are servants with “open eyes who are still sleeping inwardly and who therefore cannot in fact see.” They know the Bible, nod their heads in earnest faithfulness, and say obediently yes, yet they miss the point, namely that these old words of the witness of God “are an address directed to them, to which they themselves must answer here and now with their own words, with their own lives, in dialogue with the needs and tasks of the present world, as if they heard it for the first time in their situation here and now,” “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” *God Here and Now*, 85.
- 14 The church can also fail to see because they have become squint-eyed. Matthew 6 warns against eyes that cause the whole body to become full of darkness. They do see the light of God’s Word – but they also look elsewhere. They have no idea of denying God or being disobedient to God, perhaps they long to serve God with great zeal – but they also seek what pleases themselves and others along with them, and “they will not entertain the thought that these are two different things.” Somewhere along the way “they have fallen in love and become involved with themselves: perhaps in the interests and corresponding morality of their surrounding society, perhaps in just the natural and usual way it happens in this country or that,” or what is even worse and more dangerous, perhaps they may have fallen in love with their own Christendom, “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” *God Here and Now*, 86.
- 15 The church also fails to see because of the worst form of temptation, says Barth, namely that which Matthew 15 describes as the blind leading the blind. They are flooded by the light of the divine Word, but they are somewhere else, in a self-made world of their own religious dreams. The church itself has become the world, in a certain sense the prophet of the world, the church’s proclamation is of humanity that has become God, or in Barth’s moving words, “of flesh that has become the Word” – “and still they have not noticed that they have become nothing and completely meaningless for those about them,” “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” *God Here and Now*, 87.

behind the theme are already mistaken, and the churches assembled there not spiritually able to discern the proper answers.¹⁶ They are so divided because they fail to see the true threats and temptations.

The assembly theme should be addressed from back to front, he suggests, beginning with faith (and God's salvation) and not with fear (and the disorder of the world). First, seek the kingdom and its righteousness and then all we need (given the disorder of the world) will be added to us. To him, their theme sounds more like "a Christian Marshall Plan" – suggesting that the churches are not themselves part of the evil, that they are not the accused but the judges, that human beings can themselves create the needed solutions – all this, instead of acknowledging the log in their own eye.¹⁷

A focus is needed on "the question of the *mission* of the church in the *proclamation of the gospel*" (his italics). They should step out from under "a dark cloud of grief" and "a mournful shadow" – caused by their false belief that they must do what only God can and will accomplish – and see that they are (only) called to be witnesses. God has not called us to be all kinds of this and that. They need to free themselves from all quantitative thought, all statistics, all reckoning with visible success, "all striving after a global Christian empire." The church's only question should be "How we can shape our witness into testimony about the sovereignty of the *compassion of God*, from which alone we can indeed all live" – and so to a witness which the Holy Spirit will approve.¹⁸

16 The translation used here of "The Disorder of the World and God's Plan of Salvation" is by Matthew Frost. [Online]. Available: https://www.academia.edu/38565248/_The_Disorder_of_the_World_and_Gods_Plan_of_Salvation_1948_Translation_

17 The churches seem tempted by "the definitely non-Biblical" conviction that from their "sharp-sighted discernment of world history" the "agendas, actions, and triumphs" would follow to save the world from its disorder. This is why they are so nervous, "quite terrified, just like Peter, when he looked upon the storms and the waves." "In the end it is just this frightful, godless, laughable opinion – as though humanity were Atlas – that is the root and ground of all human disorder," "The Disorder of the World and God's Plan of Salvation," 2–4.

18 "The Disorder of the World and God's Plan of Salvation," 6–7.

It should be no surprise why this paper caused major headshaking among serious people.¹⁹

Blinded by the darkness of the times?

A second response would be that Barth understood the difficulty of reading the signs of the times, of recognizing the right *moment*. Even when people agree on the issues, their nature, even their seriousness, they may still disagree about the right moment in which to do what.

In many ways, his times were dark – characterized by uncertainty and headshaking.²⁰

19 Frost comments on some headshaking, “This address has appeared once previously in English translation, though under circumstances antagonistic to Barth’s message in it. It was published in the December 8, 1948, issue of *Christian Century*, which at that time was a theopolitically conservative mouthpiece in favor of American missionary-colonial dominance of the post-WWII world. Its editorial board combined that advocacy for global missionary “unity” under the umbrella of American interests with a staunchly anti-war posture of protectionist isolationism. At the time, this took the form of advocacy for Marshall Plan economic aid to Europe ... They ran Barth’s address under the title, ‘No Christian Marshall Plan,’ as though political opposition was his intent – and it appeared months after they had already run pieces attacking Barth ... particularly the response by Reinhold Niebuhr ... Objection to Barth’s address was presented as though Barth ... was suddenly advocating quietism ... Meanwhile Barth’s real critique was that American efforts to subordinate the church’s mission to its own political agenda bore a greater likeness to what he opposed in Germany than did Stalin’s outright persecution of the church,” “The Disorder of the World and God’s Plan of Salvation,” 1.

20 Perhaps it may be helpful to remember Hannah Arendt’s struggle with “thinking in dark times” – after all, the same dark times – and the uncertainty and headshaking which that caused. The challenge for Arendt was to think within “the grimness of the present.” She often spoke of “thinking in dark times” to describe this experience, for example in her collection *Men in Dark Times*. She originally used the expression for the title of her reception speech for the Lessing Prize, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts on Lessing,” in 1968. For her, the expression referred not so much to the horrors themselves, but to how they appeared in public discourse yet remained hidden – like comments in Barth and Bonhoeffer.

The expression itself came from the first line of her friend Bertolt Brecht’s moving poem “An die Nachgeborenen” (first in *Svendborger Gedichte* in 1939, again in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 4, 1967, 722–725), his plea to posterity not to judge their times and failures harshly, remembering that those were dark times, in which it was difficult to discern and understand, difficult to practice wisdom and judgment, difficult to see and know what was happening and who was who. Brecht’s poem remains a painful reminder of how everything may seem so different from what it truly is. This challenge, depicting Arendt’s life and work, was later used by friends to celebrate her 100th birthday in

On 9 September 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked Barth in a famous letter whether the *status confessionis* of which he spoke just two months earlier in his *Theologische Existenz heute!* of July 1933 had not arrived with the introduction of the Aryan paragraph in the church.²¹ He was asking “in the name of many friends, pastors, and students, please to let them know whether (Barth) considered it possible to stay in a church that has ceased to be a Christian church.”²²

Roger Berkowitz, Thomas Keenan & Jeffrey Katz (eds), *Thinking in Dark Times. Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, New York: Fordham, 2010.

Barth himself once remarked – while interpreting the *Heidelberg Catechism* – that they were doing their thinking “while fire was falling from heaven.” For an intriguing example of many studies that attempt to follow the changing reciprocity between theology and politics in Barth’s life and thought, see Timothy Gorringe, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony. Christian Theology in Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

- 21 The argument of Barth’s programmatic first essay, carrying the title of the series itself, *Theologische Existenz heute!*, was remarkable and controversial. In English its subtitle was “A Plea for Theological Freedom.” It was written on June 25, 1933, shortly after the final takeover by the Nazis and at a time when the influence of the German Christians in the Protestant Church was growing increasingly stronger. It was published as *Supplement 2* of the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* and then became the first volume of the series of brochures also called *Theologische Existenz heute*. On July 7 Barth sent a copy to Adolf Hitler. On July 8th, the second edition was published. Around 37000 copies were printed until its seizure on 28 July 1935.

This was Barth’s first direct public encounter with the Nazi-ideology. According to some observers, this is almost a kind of confession in embryo – sometimes called a *Barmen* before *Barmen*. Although not written according to confessional style or structure, some of the major ideas reappeared in later confessional documents during this period, including the authority of Scripture as the only revelation of Jesus Christ, the emphasis on obedience in the church to this Word and on complete trust in God, and the appeal to structure and organise the church according to this Word alone.

What is remarkable is Barth’s explanation of the purpose of this work. The most important task for the church under these difficult circumstances is to continue with their theological work “as if nothing has happened” – *als wäre nichts geschehen*. This essay should also be understood as such a *Wort zur Sache* and not as a *Wort zur Lage*, a word about the theological issues at stake and not a commentary on the political situation. Even his participation, together with Reformed colleagues, in the writing of recent public declarations should be seen in this light. Those who criticized these declarations for their lack of relevance and direct references to problems of the day, in fact, gave them the highest praise possible, Barth said, since the most serious challenge facing the church at the time was not that the state would oppress it, but that the state might tempt and mislead it, eventually to lose itself in betrayal of Jesus Christ and the true nature of the church.

- 22 For Bonhoeffer’s letter with Barth’s response, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Berlin. 1932–1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works Volume 12*, ed. Larry Rasmussen, Minneapolis: 1517 Media Fortress, 164–169.

Barth agreed that the situation was unacceptable and that also in his opinion the *status confessionis* was there – yet still “he was in favour of waiting to see what comes.” He judged that it was time to allow the evil decision to have its effect. They should not play prematurely with ideas which perhaps could start events for which the responsibility was simply too great. Instead, for him, “we shall never have cause to regret having assumed a highly active, polemical position of waiting.” It was not a time to think in terms of tactics, but rather a time to think “in spiritual terms.”²³

One can almost imagine Bonhoeffer shaking his head.

It is obvious why discerning the right moment causes such a challenge – and such headshaking. After all, the moment was central to Barth’s description of Reformed confessing, “provisionally granted insight ... by a geographically circumscribed fellowship ... until further notice ... until further action.”²⁴

Such confession is the spontaneous and public witness of particular communities in particular times and places. It is not a system of doctrines in the plural, timeless truth-claims to be accepted and believed, but their witness to Jesus Christ, given to them for their times and circumstances, their conditions and crises, as answers to their questions, orientation in their confusion, public account of their convictions, guidance for their commitments. For Reformed people, Barth explains, appealing to Calvin, confession means to say “here, now, we” – this is what we believe, what we

23 For Barth’s original letter, *Karl Barth. Briefe des Jahres 1933*, hrsg. Eberhard Busch, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2004, 376–380.

24 The full definition reads, “A Reformed confession of faith is the spontaneously and publicly formulated presentation to the Christian Church in general of a provisionally granted insight from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ attested to in Holy Scripture alone by a geographically circumscribed Christian fellowship which, until further notice, authoritatively defines its character to outsiders and which, until further action, gives direction to its own doctrine and life,” “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 610.

About a decade later, in 1938, Barth would again reflect on these questions concerning a confessing church in his lectures on the Word of God, published as *Church Dogmatics I/2*. He now repeats several of these earlier themes and develops some even further, §20.2 “Authority under the Word,” 585–660, esp. 620ff. The church’s confession witnesses to Jesus Christ in Scripture, but it does not merely repeat biblical texts, it rather speaks in the words and speech of its own age while pointing at biblical texts to explain Scripture for here and now, *CD I/2*, 621.

believe *here*, what we believe *now*, in the face of the challenges that confront us *today*.²⁵

For Barth, this means that confession can only be the result of periods of struggle, times during which the church had fought a hard battle against theological lies and half-truths until it “won definite affirmations to present as the truth now available to it.”²⁶ Confession without such a pre-history of conflict is no Reformed confession. Confession is called forth by “a definite antithesis,” a controversy, a “confronting doctrine.” It is born in “a battle for the life and death of the church,” for the credibility of its witness and the integrity of its existence.²⁷

This leads him to the critical question where, in their time, such a struggle and such a heresy, such a history of conflict about the truth of God’s Word, is to be found. For him, their time simply still lacks this kind of seriousness. They find themselves in a crisis, yes, but their crisis is the crisis of living “between the times,” a time they must get rid of, and a time they do not yet see.²⁸ It is still too early for them to confess. Their moment of truth has not yet arrived.

25 See Margit Ernst-Habib, “‘We, here, now, confess this!’ – Karl Barth, Confessional Hermeneutics, and Reformed Identities around the World,” her plenary paper during the International Barth Conference “Embracing Things Past and Things to Come,” hosted by the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, the School of Humanities at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary (USA) in October 2018; also “‘Wir, hier, jetzt – bekennen dies!’ Kontext und Normativität reformierten Bekenntns – Ein Fallbeispiel aus den USA,” in: Maren Bienert et al. (Hg.), *Neuere reformierte Bekenntnisse im Fokus. Studien zu ihrer Entstehung und Geltung*, Zürich 2017, 237–253.

26 “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 1960, 635–636

27 “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 1960, 625–628

28 Already in August 1922 Barth, Friedrich Gogarten and Eduard Thurneysen founded a journal with the title *Zwischen den Zeiten*, as mouthpiece of their so-called “dialectical theology.” Over time, serious headshaking would develop between Barth and Gogarten. According to Barth, he “always got a whiff of something that didn’t make sense with Gogarten.” This feeling became stronger when the first article of the creed and creation theology became increasingly more central for Gogarten and Barth became “increasingly uncomfortable” until “it came to an eruption: the sun brought it to light when National Socialism came.” From “creation one also could and nearly had to become national,” Barth says, so that Gogarten “had nothing to do with the Church Struggle,” *Barth in Conversation, Volume 3, 1964–1968*, 75–76.

He is not convinced that the worldwide Reformed community already had the insight and clarity to speak the truth about the ethical crises of their time. He does not believe that the community is ready, able and willing to witness to Jesus Christ in their moment in history – to say publicly what had to be said, and to do what had to be done. He does not see the preceding battle for truth and against falsehood. He does not see any compelling concern for which the church is willing to bear witness in public. He does not think the church of the time is ready to “name the great heresy” of their times. He does not consider the church able and courageous enough to speak publicly and timeously.²⁹

Confession should not be premature – but it should also not be postponed.³⁰ The church should not confess afterwards, “thirty years too late,” but in the moment, during the confusion, in the face of the growing threats, “at the outset of the problems,” there “where the word of the church belongs.”³¹

Again and again, he would therefore underline the role of discernment and decision – and therefore also the risk involved. There is no guarantee, no objective criterion, that a moment of truth, a *status confessionis*, has arrived – therefore people will always disagree and shake their heads. Between false and true prophecy there is no final justification or argument or proof outside of the risk itself.

A moment of truth claims that adiaphora is no longer adiaphora, the indifferent is not so indifferent after all, in this moment the seemingly innocent is not so innocent any longer, pluralism may be more than just harmless pluralism, elements of truth may have been turned into falsehood – therefore serious people may disagree and shake their heads.

29 “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 1990, 641.

30 “To the situation in which the call to confess comes, there does of course belong an awareness of it ... There thus belongs also a willingness to be aware of it and therefore a readiness to act accordingly ... One should not deny the *status confessionis* which has arisen, nor put off its consequences to tomorrow or the next day, to a more serious situation in which one will undoubtedly have to confess and will do so, though the time is not yet ripe for confession ... There can certainly be a premature confession. But we must beware lest we make fear of this into an excuse for not confessing at all,” *CD III/4*, 79.

31 “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 1990, 640.

Without the risk of being seen as ludicrous, there is no confession, says Barth.³²

Tempted by ulterior goals?

Part of the risk is that the church may perhaps speak and act out of false *motives* – even unknowingly. This third answer was Barth's original explanation. It is because many do not understand *why* the church is confessing and fail to grasp what is moving the church to speak and act this way.

In 1951, in his creation ethics, he explained that confession is the praise of God “realised in definite moments of our history”³³ and always bears “the character of an action without an ulterior goal.” In such moments, human beings “temporarily step out of the sphere of purpose, intentions and pursuits. (They do) not confess with an aim in view nor to effect and carry out this or that ... They aim at no results and expect none. (They confess) because God is God ... (and they) therefore cannot keep silent ... In its freedom from purpose, it has more of the nature of a game or song than of work or warfare. *For this reason, confession will always cause headshaking among serious people ...* Why? they will ask themselves and us, and the more seriously we confess, the less will they find an answer, for as confessors we are not concerned with any end but only with the honour of God”³⁴

This is why the church runs the risk of being ludicrous. They are “not ashamed of doing something quite useless in a world of serious purposes.” What they say and do is “not even for the purpose of sincerity, or the proof of moral courage,” or the release and liberation that comes with a “heartfelt declaration of a strong religious experience or emotion,” or even because they “want to teach, instruct, convince and win others.” Confession is

32 Confession can be “not only contemptible in its lack of aim but correspondingly dangerous,” CD III/4, 78, 80.

33 CD III/4, 73–77.

34 CD III/4, 77.

concerned “to pass on a light received” and therefore “must be an utterance quite free of intention.”³⁵

By then, Barth had been concerned with such ulterior motives for a very long time. In 1923 he warned the Reformed Alliance in Germany against false motives for the longing to be Reformed.³⁶ In 1925 he warned the global Reformed World against false motives for desiring a common

35 CD III/4, 78.

36 Already two years earlier, in an address to the Reformed Alliance in Emden, on the nature and task of Reformed faith, Barth expressed the same doubt and skepticism. There are many reasons why church leaders want to be proudly Reformed and why they may reclaim and celebrate their Reformed identity, history and tradition, but most of these reasons are wrong reasons. It would be better for them to confess only their weakness and their guilt. It was rather a moment to pray for the renewal of the Holy Spirit, who alone can bring dead bones to life. In doing that, he concluded his speech with obvious sadness, they would at least join their forebears, “deren Erbe wir im übrigen noch nicht erworben haben, um es zu besitzen, Barth, “Reformierte Lehre, ihr Wesen und ihre Aufgabe,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925. Gesamtausgabe III*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 202–247. Over against many who no longer take Reformed theology and doctrine seriously, he affirms its importance. But what does this mean? How does one take Reformed faith seriously? He rejects three answers, namely those of people who define and defend Reformed faith out of antiquarian, ideological, or emotional reasons, respectively.

Some people, the antiquarians, simply use “Reformed” as description of who they are, of their own tradition and practices. They want the church to “remain” Reformed, by which they mean remain what they already are, believe and embody. Against them Barth argues that this is a denial of the Reformed tradition. It is not by accident that the tradition does not have a single authoritative interpretation of the Biblical message, but only confessions in the plural. Many of them includes an intentional acknowledgement of possible future improvements, and he lists a whole series of such confessions. The tradition does not even know doctrine in any strict sense of the word. Teaching authority for the Reformed does not reside somewhere in Christian history, but in Scripture and Spirit who are both outside Christian history. Loyalty to this tradition means, therefore, loyalty to the forebears also in listening to their reference to the revelation which is outside history. This means that appropriation of existing confessions could be their calling, but in principle also the writing of new confessions – should we have the necessary authority and insight. Both possibilities belong to the Reformed faith.

Some people, secondly, for ideological reasons, in an eclectic way and serving their interests, select specific ideas, trends or institutions and call these “Reformed.” They want people to “become” more Reformed, in that they adhere more enthusiastically to this corpus of truths, slogans or motifs. Barth offers a whole range of typically Reformed “truths” or institutional arrangements that have been used this way. Again, he rejects this approach as a denial of the tradition, since the church does not live from a plurality of truths, but from *one* truth, which is not an idea, principle or doctrine – from which all else can then be deduced – but *God*, and God alone. Again, this means that Reformed doctrine is neither a principle nor a system, but the willingness to listen, again and anew, the willingness to be taught rather than a teaching

confession. Confession for any other reason is from the devil, he said.³⁷ In 1933 he was deeply critical of the motives behind the formation of the Pastors Emergency League of Martin Niemöller and of the leading figures involved.³⁸ In January 1934 he warned those in resistance against their

Some people, finally, defend the Reformed tradition from an emotional perspective. They want people to “feel” more Reformed because they have experienced a Reformed “feeling,” piety or spirituality. They adore specific Reformed fathers, grounders or heroes. Their slogan is “spirituality.” Once again, he issues a strong warning. Reformed confessions do not appeal or refer in any way whatsoever to people, like Zwingli or Calvin. No interest at all was ever shown in Calvin’s conversion or spiritual life. Why not? Because, once again, the religious interest in Geneva was not in a person, in a kind of religious personality, in a spiritual type, but in the call to listen to and be obedient to the Word of God. The early leaders of the Reformed movement’s *only* role was as ministers of the Word.

In short, his criticism against all three of these views finally rests on the same foundation, known as *the Scripture-principle*. This is the beginning of the Reformed church and of all Reformed faith and teaching. Scripture is its unchangeable norm, not to be surpassed. Reformed doctrine is simply what must be said because Scripture itself offers no other choice. This is not merely the formal principle of Reformed theology, but, in fact, “present reality, the liveliest, fullest content.” That God speaks is the *content* of Reformed faith, the very foundation of Reformed faith and confession.

Their problem was, he continued, that the spiritual climate of his day and time was such that they compared like dwarfs to the original vision of the Reformation. They had lost almost all sense of what the claim that God speaks really means, and what it means when they call the Bible the Word of God – this is the misery of modern Protestantism. Their most urgent task was, accordingly, to recover this central and only claim of the Reformed faith and confession, namely that God speaks through Word and Spirit. When that would once again become reality, it would be possible to consider the possibility and necessity of confessing the faith in new ways. All this, he already said before 1925 and long before 1934.

- 37 Confession therefore only becomes possible “after all other possibilities are exhausted,” Barth explained. It is something which the church dares only do when it has no other choice. No other motives may justify acts of confession, however noble and important and praiseworthy such ulterior motives may be. “When struck on the mouth, I can say nothing except ‘I believe,’ Barth famously formulated this conviction. Confession for any other reason would be from the devil, he added, “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 634.

Whenever Reformed churches confessed in the past, he explained, they were always aware that they were “chosen out of destruction,” “called out of darkness,” “wholly and entirely the church of the desert.” If the Reformed churches in the 1920s felt the need to confess, for it to be genuine confession, it will again have to “come from the boundaries” – it had to be the confession of those who felt forsaken, lost, shipwrecked. Only then would confession be necessary and possible, “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 635.

- 38 This was the terrible experience of the long months of 1933 – months of internal division and differences and tensions, and weakness in the face of the falsehood all around. Eberhard Busch argues that Reformation Day of 1933 was one of the most

own motives.³⁹ By May 1934 he was of course only too aware of the weird

important dates in the history of the struggle, although this is often not acknowledged and understood. This was the day when Barth met the Pastors' Emergency League in Berlin and delivered his famous speech "Reformation als Entscheidung," published as *Theologische Existenz heute* 3, already in 1933. Although Barth had major differences with the leadership and viewpoints of the Emergency League, which were not really resolved during that encounter, Busch claims that a certain spirit of agreement was formed, in spite of the remaining suspicions and headshaking, without which the Confessing Church and Barmen itself would not have been possible, see the informative and moving Eberhard Busch, *Reformationstag 1933. Dokumente der Begegnung Karl Barths mit dem Pfarrernotbund in Berlin*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1998. For the broader background of Barth's own thought and positions during this dark time, see the fascinating volume with Barth's letters from 1933, *Karl Barth. Briefe des Jahres 1933*, Hrsg. Eberhard Busch, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2004.

- 39 On January 4, 1934, Bishop Müller published the so-called "muzzling edict," intended to suppress all opposition. In an ironic move, worship services were to be used exclusively for worship and not for "political agitation." Violation of the edict risked suspension from ministry. Precisely on that day the first Free Reformed Synod met in *Barmen*. Pastors and presbyters had been invited who could solemnly declare that they were free from all church-alien ties in matters of faith and confessed without reservation the Word of God revealed exclusively in the Old and New Testament. This was in line with Barth's repeated exhortation, also directed at Martin Niemöller himself, not to function politically but theologically.

Barth was invited to draft a statement and deliver the lecture intended as an explanation. Published as "Gottes Wille und unsere Wünsche," *Theologische Existenz heute* 7, 1934, the lecture was to interpret the nature of the church, to evaluate the new church constitution considering that interpretation, and to show how the German Christian theological failure. Significantly, the document was named "Declaration on the proper understanding of the Reformed Confession in the German Evangelical Church of the present time". In this title and the preamble, the "present time" or "the ecclesiastical events of the year 1933" is mentioned as the historical cause of their action – according to Rolf Ahlers, "The first Barmen Declaration," *The Reformed Journal*, May 1984, 14–20, "true to the best Reformed tradition."

The *content*, however, is the nature of the Reformed confession concerning the church. This ecclesiological focus is obvious from the structure and argument, intentionally following the structure and logic of earlier confessional documents, like the *Formula Concordiae*. It includes seventeen positive theses, followed by repudiations – always yes and therefore no.

In his introductory lecture, Barth underlines what is already clear from the *Declaration* itself. The "error" of the German Christians only superficially constitutes the main thrust of the *Declaration*. The far greater, underlying significance of their deviant theology lies in the fact that in it an error and deviation that had plagued Protestant theology for centuries became fully apparent. Their error reveals a most serious error for both theology and the church.

What is that error? The preamble makes clear: "Given the ecclesiastical events of the year 1933, the Word of God commands us to become penitent and to have a change of heart. In these events, an error has become ripe and visible that has corrupted the evangelical church for many centuries. That error consists in the view that besides

mixture of ulterior motives at work around the formation of the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* – both for resisting and for supporting the events and the *Declaration*.⁴⁰ Around July 1934 he still passionately remembers how these ulterior motives confused all of them and undermined their

God's revelation, God's grace, and God's honour, human authority also has the power to determine the message and the form of the church or the temporal path to eternal salvation. Therewith has repudiated the view: That the development of the church has since the Reformation has been normal and that the problems of our church today are only a temporary disruption, after the elimination of which that development can continue uninterrupted."

Time and again throughout the *Declaration*, different manifestations of this fundamental error are repudiated – regarding human arbitrariness in matters of the message and form of the church; regarding the acceptability of different, traditional "points of view" instead of confession and action against error and truth; regarding a divine revelation in nature and history, accessible to humankind after the fall; regarding Scripture as merely different witnesses to the history of human piety, and that the criterion of Christian piety is not the whole Scripture; regarding the view that the church should also recognize, acknowledge and proclaim the actions of God in events of the present time; regarding the view that the church should serve humankind by accommodating its message and structure to humankind's various convictions, desires and purposes; regarding the view that the church receives its temporal and visible form on the basis of its own arbitrariness or external necessities, such as religious association; regarding the view that membership and ministry of the church on the basis of race can be compatible with the unity and message of the church; and many others.

In short, Barth explains that the error consists in the tendency that has grown in Protestantism to confuse the confession of the church with the mere subjective interests of people who, in club-like fashion, want to canonize their interests objectively in a document like a confession. Confession is then based on the self-interests of people who religiously think alike. Religion is everyone's private affair – as Article 24 of the Nazi Party Platform stated. It is evident how central the question of their motives was for Barth in these dark times – whether their life and witness were truly based on God's Word or whether they resulted from ulterior motives and desires.

- 40 At times, he would even seem amused and speak jokingly about them. In his conversation with Tübingen students in March 1964 he says that the story about how *Barmen* came into being could only be told entirely when various people have died. This is one of the conversations in which he humorously remarks that the Lutheran Church slept, and the Reformed Church stayed awake – and that this was the process of *Barmen's* emergence. In the same conversation, he sounds amused about the extremely serious controversy at the time – and since then – about the nature and status of *Barmen*. "(I)t never was called the 'Barmen Confession' but rather a 'Theological Declaration'. It was what was called in the old times a confession, with all the contrariness of proposals and counterproposals (there are anathemas regularly included in the six articles, and that was intentional). But it should certainly not be called 'confession'! The dear Lutherans would not have that. They said, 'Wait, we have our confession! The precious Augsburg Confession is already there as well as Luther's Catechism, and now we cannot come and set up a confession.' All right, good, we will call the baby 'Theological Declaration'!" *Barth in Conversation. Volume 3, 1964–1968*, 70–79.

faith and witness before and at *Barmen*. It was the “fundamental problem (*Grundübel*) of our opposition that it was so unclear.” It was unclear whether they acted out of faith or some other motivation, and they all knew these ulterior motives only too well.”⁴¹

Since *Barmen*, this concern would continue to accompany Barth. He often expresses this by returning to the struggle between Yes and No as motives behind the church’s witness and life, this tension between the joy and good news which the church positively wants to express and the naming of the falsehood which the church feels compelled to unmask and reject.⁴²

In 1937, when he deals with confession in KD I/2, discussing authority under the Word of God, he still stresses the only *why* which may motivate acts of confession.⁴³ It could only happen without calculation – determined by neither calendar nor clock⁴⁴ – when the church simply has no other

41 In the fragment from 1934, with his first commentary on *Barmen*, Barth says, “Wer von uns kennt diese Motive nicht? Wen hätten sie nicht bewegt? Nur daß sie nun nicht gerade aus dem Glauben kamen, wie berechtigt sie im Übrigen sein mochten. Auf Grund dieser und alle derartigen Motive konnte und kann man nicht im Namen der Kirche reden. Der Widerstand gegen die Deutschen Christen mußte wohl so schwach und verworren sein, wo er wesentlich von solchen Motiven getragen war. Man konnte dann im Grunde doch nicht recht wissen, für was und gegen was man eigentlich kämpfte ... Dies war aber auch da der Fall, wo man sich zwar in einem klaren kirchenpolitisch-kirchenrechtlichen Gegensatz gegen das deutsch-christliche System zu befinden meinte, ohne doch um eine Glaubensnotwendigkeit zu wissen, in welcher dieser Gegensatz begründet gewesen wäre ... Es war aber der Opposition gegen die Deutschen Christen auch da noch nicht geholfen, wo sie vermeintlich wohl im Glauben geschah, aber in einem dumpfen, erkenntnislosen, sprachlosen oder vielmehr, was Erkenntnis und Sprache betrifft, directionslosen Glauben, in einem Glauben, der sich jederzeit beschwatzen lassen könnte, Sätze des herrschenden Irrglauben (mindestens in Form von allerlei Konzessionen) zu anerkennen und nachzureden, weil er sie als solche nicht erkannte, weil sie ihm doch so fromm und feurig vorgetragen wurden,” “Die theologische Erklärung der Barmer Bekenntnissynode. Fragment vom Sommer oder Frühherbst 1934,” *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984, 31–32.

42 CD I/2, 628ff.

43 The confession, although deeply contextual, does not want to be the voice of simply one group or one party representing only their own interests, but rather longs to speak the truth of the gospel and with the whole church. Confession is not merely another theological contribution or subjective opinion longing for more authority, but a compulsion imposed on the church by the Word. The church feels that it can say nothing else but *credo*, CD I/2, 624.

44 See Piet J. Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock. Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. He discusses Barth at great length. The book’s title

choice, when it is struck on the mouth, when it cannot do anything else but say *credo*.⁴⁵

In 1951, when he again deals with confession in KD III/4, discussing freedom within the ethics of creation, he still argues in the same way. Again, he argues that the church's protest will be in the form of "no" but always motivated by "yes." By now he explicitly warns against those who always want to confess, who seem to be in permanent *status confessionis*, always looking for something and someone to be against, to be critical of, to say "no" to, to oppose, resist, reject and condemn. Disturbed by such a mentality, he calls this "sickness."

Such people forget that the God whose name they confess is the gracious God. They misunderstand confession as seeing others as enemies and themselves as "God's detective, police officer and bailiff." Confessing then becomes a war against others and words of faith get "the flavour of pepper." How can confession be from God if it is against all things human – he asks

comes from CD III/4, 85, and a part of the book is based on an earlier essay on the question of whether Barth would have signed *Belhar*.

- 45 Referring to the *Theological Declaration of Barmen's* repeated rejections of false doctrine, he now explains that it is natural that such formulae are not pleasant reading for those who defend the doctrines concerned, and they certainly should not hear only the no, for the point is that they should hear the yes behind the no, although they should certainly hear the no as well. It is not the case that this "no" can and will disturb and destroy an existing unity, so that it therefore must be condemned as a sin against love, as many claim, he argues. Confession does not cause but merely reveals the divided nature of the church. Confession intends to restore the unity of the church which has become obscured and threatened by the falsehoods and half-truths. Confession should therefore be regarded as an act of love, in which the "no" is important. When those who are misled by the falsehoods and half-truths hear our joyful "yes," they should always also recognize the "no" implied in it. If we try to speak only yes to them but somehow want to conceal the no, to make it easier for them, then we do not act out of love and we do not truly witness to the truth of the gospel. The confession is a call to renew the unity of the whole church and in particular an invitation to the representatives of the counter-doctrines to return to the unity of the faith. For the sake of unity, it must be made clear to all those that they need the confession because they find themselves outside the unity of the gospel and the truth. For sick people to be treated they must know and accept that they are ill. The point of the confession, argues Barth, its acid test, is therefore the "no," the "we reject." Without the clarity and confidence and courage to say "no" the time for confession is never ripe. However, the church should not say "no" and "we reject" simply to support its own opinion or for emotional reasons or to claim more authority or to judge and condemn others. This is indeed a serious risk and danger to us. We may easily pass judgment on ourselves and sin against the unity of the faith when we judge one another, CD I/2, 630–631.

with exclamation marks – as if God were not *for all* that God created. Such confession is perversion, Barth exclaims.⁴⁶

Called to persevere in witness?

It is when one turns to the history of reception of confessing moments and confessional documents and to their potential lasting significance that the headshaking becomes even more prevalent – as in the case of the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*.⁴⁷

Around the original writing and acceptance of *Barmen*, there was much disagreement and tension and headshaking – and this does not even

46 81–82.

47 For the relevance of *Barmen* today for “Living Reformation,” see the catalogue published at the opening of the permanent exhibition on *Barmen* in the Gemarkte Church in 2016, *Gelebte Reformation. Barmer theologische Erklärung*, hrsg. Martin Engles & Antoinette Lepper-Binnewerg, im Auftrag der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2016, and for the ongoing significance of *Barmen* for Protestant ecclesiology and ethics, see the very instructive essays by Wolfgang Huber, *Folgen christlicher Freiheit. Ethik und Theorie der Kirche im Horizont der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985.

For the reception history in Germany, see Wolf Krötke, *Barmen Barth Bonhoeffer. Beiträge zu einer zeitgemäßen christozentrische Theologie*, Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 2009, in particular the first three essays, 15–62; Manuel Schilling, *Das eine Wort Gottes zwischen den Zeiten. Die Wirkungsgeschichte der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung vom Kirchenkampf bis zum Fall der Mauer*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005.

See also the well-known work by Arthur Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982, reprinted Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1976. On 22 October 1984 Cochrane gave the public address during the special celebration of the 50th anniversary of the *Barmen Declaration* together with John Mackay's “Letter to Presbyterians” at Princeton Theological Seminary; also Fred Dallmayr, ed. *The Legacy of the Barmen Declaration: Politics and the Kingdom*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019; and the informative essay by Arne Rasmussen, “Barth and the Nazi Revolution,” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth in Dialogue. Volume II*, eds. George Hunsinger & Keith Johnson, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020, 965–977.

See also my essays “Barmen and Belhar in conversation – A South African perspective,” in *Essays on Being Reformed. Collected Essays 3 Dirk J. Smit*, Robert Vosloo (ed), Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009, 325–336; as well as “What does Barmen have to say to us today?” the commemorative lecture at the launch of the Exhibition of the Barmen Theological Declaration, Barmen, Wuppertal, Germany, 30 June 2014, in *Essays on the Real Church. Collected Essays 8 Dirk J. Smit*, Sipho Mahokoto (ed.), Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2024, 359–362.

include those who supported the false teachings rejected by *Barmen*, this only includes serious and sympathetic people.

Although this headshaking also had to do with the content of this theological interpretation of the historical moment, most of the differences probably had more to do with the fact of drafting and accepting a common statement and with its nature and official status. Lutherans and Reformed were deeply divided, based on their different understandings of confessions and confessional identity – and these differences continued over the decades, albeit in changing forms, until today.⁴⁸

Some of the differences obviously had to do with different ways to read and interpret the document, even among those who all so surprisingly signed the *Declaration* in what was regarded as little less than a miracle – someone commented that they were forced together by Godself, and Barth agreed. In the drafting of the text, finally composed and edited by Barth, Lutherans requested specific phrases to be added, and as an ironic result, some of the text became even more Calvinistic, so that Barth, clearly with some humour and pleasure, often pleads innocent to this accusation.⁴⁹

48 For events at the time, see for example the documentation in Martin Heimbucher & Rudolf Weth, Hg., *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung. Einführung und Dokumentation*, 2009 (7th edition, with an introduction by Wolfgang Huber and several historical introductions), Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag; also Ernst Wolf, *Barmen. Kirche zwischen Versuchung und Gnade*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957.

For contributions to the ongoing discussions concerning the status and role of *Barmen* in the German Protestant Church (EKD) as well as in several of the regional churches that form the EKD, see Markus Büning, *Bekenntnis und Kirchenverfassung*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002; as well as the informative essay by a leading ecumenical figure from Lutheran background, Bernd Oberdorfer, “Barmen in Bayern. Zur Einfügung der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung in die Kirchenverfassung der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Bayern,” *Kerygma und Dogma*, 67. Jhrg. 2021/4.

49 Pastor Graeber from Essen famously commented at the time, “Gott hat uns zusammengeprügelt, und vielleicht brauchen wir noch mehr Prügel,” God has beaten us together and perhaps we need to be beaten some more, in Alfred Burgsmüller & Rudolf Weth (Hrsg.), *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998, 28. Barth obviously agreed and quoted this on more than one occasion, clearly amused and grateful.

To the Tübingen students, Barth briefly explains the changes made to his original draft during the consultation of the commission. In Article 2 Hans Asmussen wanted to add the expression that we are liberated to grateful service to God’s creatures, to which Barth agreed, although this “is no longer my voice,” and at the end, Asmussen also requested the Latin formulation *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum*. In Article 3, the Lutherans asked that word, and sacrament should be added to which Barth replied that

Some of the differences developed in the way *Barmen* was received and used, since people showed preferences for some of the claims and thus used the *Declaration* for different purposes and in different ways. Barth himself, for example, always saw the first thesis as the key to everything and a summary of the whole *Barmen*, but later increasingly also commented on thesis five and thesis six, in their relationships with the first thesis.⁵⁰

Some of the disagreements were the result of different views on how to stay faithful to *Barmen*. Barth was particularly critical of those who wanted to celebrate and remember *Barmen* and rejoice in and commemorate *Barmen* – but were unwilling to engage new threats and temptations with

in such a case the Holy Spirit should also be referred to. In this way, the new formulation now sounds very Reformed. In fact, during the discussion, Wilhelm Niesel (according to Barth the most ardently Reformed person in Germany) whispered in Barth's ear that now Calvin is rejoicing in heaven! He is therefore falsely accused of making the text sound so Reformed, Barth tells the students, that it is the result of the Lutherans' interventions. Whenever people blame him for this, he has to say, "Lord, I am innocent." Barth also tells the students that he did not utter a single word at Barmen. He sat quietly by as Asmussen introduced and explained the text and he was in complete peace with the explication – "later it became a bit different," *Barth in Conversation. Volume 3, 1964–1968*, 70–79.

- 50 For studies that develop the continuing significance of the different theses, see for example Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses Then and Now*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010; also the contributions delivered in the Berlin Cathedral to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Barmen by the United Protestant Churches (UEK) in 2009, *Begründete Freiheit – Die Aktualität der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009.

The most comprehensive commentary on the different theses was also an official series of the United Protestant Churches, namely *Zum politischen Auftrag der christlichen Gemeinde – Barmen II*, 1975; *Kirche als – Gemeinde von Brüdern. Barmen III*, Bd. I und II, 1980; *Der Dienst der ganzen Gemeinde Jesu Christi und das Problem der Herrschaft. Barmen IV*. Bd. I und II, 1999; *Für Recht und Frieden sorgen: Auftrag der Kirche und Aufgabe des Staates nach Barmen V*, 1986; *Das eine Wort Gottes – Botschaft für alle. Barmen I und VI*. Bd. I und II, 1993, all of them Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag.

For Barth's attempts to develop theses five and six, see for example his small studies called *Rechtfertigung und Recht* from 1938 and *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* from 1946 (both translated in Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church. Three Essays*, Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1968), together with his essays "Die Botschaft von der freien Gnade Gottes. These 6 der Barmer Erklärung" and "Die These 5 der Barmer Erklärung und das Problem des gerechten Krieges," both in *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, 137–158 and 185–212.

Barmen. He even declined to join some events, explaining while he was so disappointed in *Barmen's* reception.⁵¹

Some differences grew when people were drawing further consequences in the years to come, in what Barth called *weiterdenken*. For them, their new claims were the direct implications of *Barmen* for new places and times. They claimed that they stood in a living tradition and were speaking and acting in the spirit of *Barmen*. They were saying more than *Barmen*, literally, even something different, but for their understanding, they were still saying the same – and not everyone was convinced. *Barmen* was often described as a call forward – a call for embodiment, a call to be done and lived, but on how that was to be done there would often be headshaking when facing new threats and temptations.⁵²

51 In a radio talk during the 20th commemoration of *Barmen* on 30 May 1954, Barth bemoaned the differences between those who all shared in the gratitude and joy, “Es gab auch in jenen Barmer Tagen viel allzu menschliche Schwäche, Eitelkeit und Uneinigkeit,” “Was bedeutet uns Barmen heute?” *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, 180.

Perhaps some reference to Luther may be instructive. Luther already claimed that our whole life is confession, *tota nostra operatio confessio est*, WA 57, Hebr. 137,5. Everything we say and do, even refrain from, is confession. Still, for Luther, there may be moments of such significance that everything can be at stake, “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved. To be steady on all battle fronts besides is mere flight and disgrace if one flinches at that point,” WA-BR 3, 81ff. This – tragically – proved to be true even about his own work, legacy and reception. During the Nazi period, Luther was hailed as heroic figure by those responsible for the atrocities. In 1937 Bonhoeffer famously remarked that “Luther’s words are everywhere, but with their truth perverted into self-deception.” In 2017 the Stiftung Topographie des Terrors and the Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand in Berlin, Germany, organized a moving exhibition commemorating the events of the Nazi period and used these words by Bonhoeffer as title for the catalogue of their exhibition, “Luther’s Words are Everywhere ...” *Martin Luther in Nazi Germany*, Berlin, 2017. The same may be the case with confessions, and even the words of Scripture themselves.

52 Already in his first comments on *Barmen* in the summer of 1934, Barth emphasized that it would still have to be shown whether the Confessing Synod would indeed *remain* confessing. That would depend on whether they were indeed willing and able to keep standing with their convictions, not in the sense that the words were merely forever repeated without change, but in the sense that these words were seriously *reflected* on and actually followed and *done* (*bleibt, stehen wird, bedacht, gehandelt*), in *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, 33–34.

Barth echoed the famous depiction by Ernst Wolf of *Barmen* as “a call forward”, a call into the future. In an interview in February 1964 he said, “My friend Ernst Wolf

Some differences – of major significance – were caused by what *Barmen* did *not* say, by its silences, many, including Barth, would speak about its failures, it's tragic and shameful shortcomings. Of particular importance would be its complete silence about the treatment of the Jews. It was still long before the Kristallnacht of 1938 and subsequent events, but the first concentration camps were already established shortly after January 1933, and Barth himself later expressed remorse and self-criticism for *Barmen's* silence on all of this. Some would later call the building of the new Bergisch Synagogue directly adjacent to the Gemarker Church in Barmen “the missing seventh *Barmen* Thesis erected in stone.”⁵³ Confessions may clearly be speaking truth without claiming to speak the whole truth and to see everything there is to see – they are limited geographically, temporally, but also materially.

Some deep differences were dramatically revealed when some church leaders standing in the tradition of *Barmen* later publicly confessed their co-responsibility and guilt. The *Stuttgart Confession of Guilt* of October 1945, together with the Protestant Church's *Word from Darmstadt* of February 1947 concluding the *Stuttgart Confession*, until the *Ostdenkschrift* of the Protestant Church of October 1965, were all controversial yet influential moments – causing major headshaking.⁵⁴ Perhaps confession always

once put it this way: ‘Barmen’ as a call forward means above all ... the task of self-critical theological introspection, which knows that the truth in which it trusts can only be known to the extent that it is *done*. Theological reception of ‘Barmen’ thus constantly goes along with ‘exercising’ Barmen. There is no other way.” I agree with this formulation. What can that mean in this context: doing and exercising? ... It is only valuable as those who speak it live it out,” (his italics, in *Barth in Conversation. Volume 3, 1964–1968*, Eberhard Busch (ed), Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019, 15–16. This call can lead to new differences of opinion, sometimes serious.

This headshaking happened with *Barmen* regarding race and peace issues, it also happened with the South African Belhar Confession regarding gender issues – for some, including the well-known Black Theologian and political activist and member of the drafting committee of *Belhar*, Allan Boesak, *Belhar* clearly speaks to gender issues, for others, *Belhar* only speaks about apartheid, even though apartheid was intentionally not mentioned in the text, for precisely this reason.

53 In the celebrated words of the then moderator of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland, Peter Baier, “the missing seventh Barmen Thesis stands here built in stone”.

54 See the instructive volume *Im Zeichen der Schuld: 40 Jahre Stuttgarter Schuldbekennntnis*, Hrsg. Martin Greschat, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985, with historical introductions and the documentation; also Bertold Klappert, *Bekennende Kirche in ökumenische Verantwortung. Die gesellschaftliche und ökumenische Bedeutung*

involves a yes and a no and a sorry, an acknowledgement of complicity and responsibility, and that the sorry can be as disturbing and divisive as the yes and no.⁵⁵

Much confusion and deep disagreement was caused by the question of whether *Barmen* was political, or not. For Barth this was truly important, and he expressed himself about this on more than one occasion, although in such nuanced and qualified ways that it could almost seem as if he was contradicting himself.⁵⁶

des Darmstädter Wortes, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1988. Martin Niemöller was also involved in the *Stuttgart Confession*, which famously confessed amongst others, “Through us infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries. That which we often testified to in our communities, we express now in the name of the whole church: We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; but we accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently” (my italics).

- 55 Based on Barth’s work, it seems even possible to interpret *Barmen* itself as already a form of confession of guilt, a confession of complicity and co-responsibility for false teachings and eventually bitter fruit in the order and life of the church. He repeatedly argues that *Barmen* was a theological word directed against teachings of natural theology – albeit in many and complex forms – that had been allowed to develop and flourish in Protestantism over several centuries. For him, more was at stake in the moment at *Barmen* than just resistance against the present realities. This was indeed why not everyone present understood what they were in fact saying and doing and why not everyone would agree. For Barth, after all, confession of guilt is exercise in naming, in seeing and acknowledging who oneself is and naming oneself.
- 56 His views on the political nature of *Barmen* were, however, nuanced – and therefore controversial, leading to more headshaking. Already in his earliest, almost immediate “short explanation” of *Barmen* of 9 June 1934, he is at pains to emphasize the theological and indeed the spiritual nature of the moment, event and document. They were not driven by political motives, but by faith, they were not about political opposition, but about church and gospel, *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, 9–24. In the Fragment of a commentary on *Barmen* from summer 1934 he argues in the same spirit, it was a theological response, not merely political opinion, *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, 25–58.

Thirty years later, however, in interviews, he seems to make a distinction between what the Synod intended to do and at the time was able to do, on the other hand, and what the Synod did and achieve, even against their intentions and self-understanding on the other. He seems even somewhat critical, if not cynical, about what they at the time were thinking about what they were doing. “The Barmen Synod and this theological declaration were at the time a strictly theological-ecclesial matter, and the greatest stress was laid on the assertion: safeguard us, God, from the fact that this could have something to do with politics, perhaps even with oppositional politics. No, it was only about the church, only about the gospel and its purity. *Factually, however, whether we wanted it to be or not, the Barmen Synod did have a highly political significance at the time*” (my italics), *Barth in Conversation*, Volume 3, 1964–1968, 15–16.

This volume in fact offers fascinating information (in footnote 15 on page 16) on how intentional the Confessing Church was to make it publicly clear that they were not involved in political activity, even in their official announcements from pulpits. At the same time, it also quotes voices from disappointed pastors asking how Barth could be involved in such political statements, endangering theology, while he was the one who taught them that theological doctrine does not lead to political judgment. The confused headshaking is evident.

Barth continues to explain how *Barmen* was indeed political. “It was really a minimum, what we achieved at the time, but all the same – it was a minimum of *opposition* against the entire National Socialist regime as such and in a very small area. It wasn’t an act of heroism. All the same, one can say, if only every area of German life had also achieved such *minima* (his italics)! Where did the German press remain at the time, the German theatre, the German judiciary system, might I even say the German army? The German Evangelical Church, with a soft voice and in a small sector, at least put the political issue on the agenda, which in Germany itself and the rest of the world was also regarded as a political issue. Because when the church makes its confession ... it speaks in the world to the world and its problems, whether it mentions it by name or not. *National Socialism is not called by name in Barmen, but practically something was said about National Socialism – and it was heard as such*” (my italics), *Barth in Conversation, Volume 3, 1964–1968, 15–16*.

Already in the summer of 1946, when he developed the relationship between “Christian Community and Civil Community” based on the 5th thesis of *Barmen*, in his “Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde,” he explains that “the existence of the church is political ... (W)e are entitled and compelled to regard the existence of the Christian community as of ultimate and supremely political significance,” *Community, State, and Church, 154*.

He responded in this same spirit in 1962 during the question-and-answer session in Princeton University Chapel, after his Warfield Lectures on *Evangelical Theology*. “Would you elucidate how ‘evangelical theology’ is related to politics?”, someone asked. “How are eschatology and sanctification related to political action?” “What do we mean when we speak of politics?” Barth responded and provided his own seemingly simple answer. “Politics is an aspect of what we have just called culture. Politics means the human attempt to create and uphold some sort of order and peace in the world. Even at best, politics will create only *some* sort of order or *some* peace, no more. The purpose of politics is to realize to some degree something like a human commonwealth. Now since ‘evangelical theology’ deals with God’s justice (God has revealed the justice of the covenant in Jesus Christ), it confronts all human attempts to create justice, order, peace, and so on with this superior justice. Thus, there is an encounter here and to this extent ‘evangelical theology’ has to do with politics. Now, we also say that Jesus Christ is a King who came once and who will come again. If we look at the fact that he came – we then understand our sanctification. He came; and since he came, we are sanctified for the service of this King. But He will come again – here we then have eschatology. Christians look forward in hope to the new coming of the same King. So, from both sides – from sanctification completed in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection to eschatology or his second coming in glory – Christianity has to do with politics. If Christians serve the King of Kings, then politics is something straightforward. Thus, theology is itself a political action. There is no theological word, no theological reflection or elucidation, there is no sermon and even no catechism for children which does not imply political meaning and as such enters into the world as a little bit of political reality. You cannot

believe in the Kingdom which can and will come without also being a politician. Every Christian is a politician, and the church proclaiming the Kingdom of Jesus Christ is itself a political reality,” Karl Barth, “A Theological Dialogue,” *Theology Today* Vol. XIX Number 2, July 1962, 171–177, specifically 175–176.

In November 1963 Barth gave an interview in Paris for French television with Georges Casalis, when he received an honorary doctorate from the Sorbonne. When asked about the why behind the witness of *Barmen* and about risk and adventure and personal cost, Barth answers that to witness like this will always be a risk and an adventure. “(T)he moment had come to say a word over something brilliant, a seduction, a distorted idea not only of human life but of Christianity. Something had to be said, and luckily some people dared to join the adventure, to voice these six theses of Barmen, which was indeed an adventure.” He was not talking of personal risk and adventure – of concentration camps and the Gestapo – but of “spiritual adventure” and risk. Saying these theses – repeating that the only foundation of the church is Jesus Christ as witnessed in Holy Scripture four hundred years after the Reformation – was a spiritual risk and adventure “of greater weight.”

The gospel, Barth explains, “is a very simple thing.” It is no system or this or that truth or theory on life and eternity or metaphysics, but “simply the sign that God has blessed the world, this poor world in which we live, with all its difficulties, with all its misery, with this whole ocean of death. And in this world, we dare to live with the knowledge that God loves us, but not only us Christians who believe that God loves the world (cf. John 3:16). Every person, even the most miserable, even the evillest, is loved by God. This is the privilege: to be commissioned and enabled as Christian to proclaim that.”

Casalis responds by reminding Barth how he taught them about the public and political implications of this simple gospel when he urged them to read the Bible and the newspaper together. For him, *Barmen* was, therefore, a very positive declaration, although it appeared to be negative, and he, therefore, asks Barth to explain “how one can say yes, because Christians are often reproached, undoubtedly with good reason, that they are only naysayers regarding this world.” Barth’s reply is characteristic – and cause for much headshaking. “Yes, as far as we Christians are concerned, we are not simply naysayers. *One could also say that we Christians are only yes-sayers.* There is a Yes of God that implies a No, and this need not be expressly said. On the other hand, there is surely a No of God, what the Bible calls God’s judgment. But it is the judgment of his grace, and so there is a Yes implied in this No. *And the great problem for preaching as well as for catechetical instruction of the church is to proclaim strictly what the Bible indicates: this Yes that includes a No and this No that includes a Yes*” (my italics, in *Barth in Conversation, Volume 3, 1964–1968, 214–218*).

Shortly afterwards, on 22 December 1963, in his own house in Basel, Barth also gave an interview for German radio with Johannes Kuhn, on the significance of *Barmen* given the upcoming 30th anniversary in May the next year. Barth is asked whether Barmen was a turning point in recent church history and he says that he would not consider it the most important event of modern times for three reasons, namely the sad reality that it failed to unify the confessing churches and overcome their many and even growing internal headshaking and disagreements; that it had not been internalized and practised by the theologians and church leaders themselves, so that they were still, thirty years later, not “able or willing to live with this focus as it was meant”; and thirdly, that the political nature of *Barmen* was misunderstood. His explanation of this political nature after thirty years is intriguing.

In a remarkable development, Barth seemingly began to think that people who did not sign or claim or appropriate *Barmen* could be more faithful to *Barmen's* intentions than those who did sign and claim and appropriate *Barmen*. In quite moving comments, he seemed to suggest that this could in fact be the case with the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church – while many Protestants may fail to see what is happening.⁵⁷

In yet another remarkable development, Barth thought it would be better if the public did not know that he was the author of new texts, written in the name of *Barmen*, since that could cause too much unnecessary headshaking, instead of attention to the issues at stake. This was particularly true of his

“You see,” Barth tells Kuhn, “‘Barmen’ was in fact and in practice not only a church issue but also, amid rising National Socialism, a *political* one” (his italics). He again reminds listeners how “everything in Germany in 1933 and 1934 fell apart” and all areas of life were taken over – yet still, “The Barmen Declaration stood there and factually embodied a protest, without protesting against Hitler, and so forth; it asserted that the church recognizes as God’s revelation to ‘other events, powers, figures, and truths’ besides Jesus Christ.” Despite this, “no serious opposition to the prevailing system, not even an internal one, came of it.” If something had, then it would have been possible to say that Barmen was a politically noteworthy event, since a statement of faith was at the same time a political issue. But also, in this third way, they failed their theological declaration and spiritual discernment. “Nobody wanted to say that it was political. People were ashamed of it. Indeed, one avoided interpreting it in this way. One probably muttered, ‘Yeah, the man from Switzerland, that democrat, he could have meant it that way, but *we didn’t!*’ And so ‘Barmen’ did not take on this third significance either,” *Barth in Conversation*, Volume 3, 1964–1968, 222–225 (his italics).

- 57 In the same interview on *Barmen* on 22 December 1963 in his house in Basel, Barth concluded with the self-critical observation, “How remarkable was the speech by Pope Paul VI at the opening of the second session of the council, where the Christological focus certainly played quite a considerable role. He said a few sentences there that quite oddly harked back to Barmen I. Should we one day have the pope explain to us what the significance of Barmen might have been?” *Barth in Conversation*. Volume 2, 1963, edited by Eberhard Busch, translated by the Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies, Princeton, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018, 225.

Earlier that same year he already expressed himself in the same spirit in his “Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council,” observations sent to the Protestant leadership in Geneva at the request of Visser ‘t Hooft. “(H)as not Jesus Christ inevitably stepped anew into the centre of faith of the Roman Christians and the thought of the Roman theologians ... (A)re there not among us all too many offensive movements that have made no progress ... after the brief awakening during the time of the church struggle ... (R)enewal means repentance. And repentance means turning about: not the turning of those others, but one’s *own* turning” (his italics), Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1969, 65–79.

involvement in new *status confessionis* debates concerning nuclear arms and peace – in the 1950s.⁵⁸

So, there was headshaking about what they were doing at the time; what they were saying at the time; how to read *Barmen* as a whole; how to read the different theses; about the lasting significance and practical implications of these theses; about how to stay faithful to the spirit of *Barmen*; about the implications of *Barmen* in new struggles; about the silences not addressed by *Barmen*; about responsibility and guilt involved; about the political nature of confessions, or not; about the acceptance of *Barmen's* content without accepting its text; about *Barmen's* usefulness in new moments of truth.

Headshaking belongs to the living history of reception. It would be futile to wish it away. It is integral to the process itself – and this ongoing process is what is important. Karl Barth understood that well.⁵⁹

58 In 1958 Barth wrote, at first anonymously, several theses in which he objected to the godless character of nuclear arms. He concluded that any other position, or even a neutral attitude, was impossible for Christians because it would mean a denial of all three articles of the Christian faith. He later prepared a draft for a church confession concerning nuclear armament for a meeting of the Bruderschaften in Frankfurt. This was accepted with certain additions and laid before the Synod of the EKD. In the debates, the different viewpoints were so diametrically opposed to one another and the clear-cut evidence necessary for a situation of confession so profoundly lacking that the Synod finally rejected the draft in their balanced and calculated statement “to stay together under the gospel.”

Barth helped edit a text a month later in June 1958 called “Barmen Today” which was an extended attempt to actualize the rejections of *Barmen*, one thesis after the other, now applied to the new moment. In October 1958 the Bruderschaften adopted a *Theological Declaration* in Frankfurt which was a shortened version of these rejections. Barth took part in several planning sessions at his house but was unable for health reasons to attend in Frankfurt and to deliver a paper. The official commission of the Protestant Academy in Heidelberg (FEST) studying this issue eventually used theses written by the well-known physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker for their influential *Heidelberg Theses*. Barth’s crucial role in these conversations and process of confession was clearly inspired and informed by his own experiences around and his understanding of *Barmen*, for everyone involved, this whole process “war ein konsequentes Weiterdenken der Barmer Theologischer Erklärung,” Martin Rohkrämer, “Editionsbericht,” *Texte zur Barmer Theologischer Erklärung*, 251.

59 For this spirit in Barth of active waiting, see the study of his ethics or reconciliation by Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

The church should not allow the headshaking to silence its witness and obstruct its ongoing actions.

It is for this reason that the World Communion of Reformed Churches has learnt to speak of *processus confessionis* – when a *status confessionis* is not yet clear enough.⁶⁰ It was used during the ongoing process – in the spirit of *Barmen* and with the help of Barth – to witness in the face of nuclear threats and temptations,⁶¹ and it was used in the ongoing process – in the spirit of *Barmen* and with the help of Barth’s legacy – to face the threats and temptations of global economic injustice and ecological destruction.⁶²

60 In Seoul, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches described a *status confessionis* as follows, in 1989. “Any declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error into truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching or practice as heretical. The declaration of a *status confessionis* refers to the practice of the church as well as to its teaching. The church’s practice in the relevant case must conform to the confession of the gospel demanded by the declaration of the *status confessionis*. The declaration of a *status confessionis* addresses a particular situation. It brings to light an error which threatens a specific church. Nevertheless, the danger inherent in that error also calls into question the integrity of the proclamation of all churches. The declaration of a *status confessionis* within one particular situation is, at the same time, addressed to all churches, calling them to concur in the act of confessing.”

In Debrecen, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches described a *processus confessionis* as follows, in 1997. “In the past, we have called for status confessionis in cases of blatant racial and cultural discrimination and genocide. We now call for a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction. We call upon WARC and its member churches: a. to give special attention to the analysis and understanding of economic processes, their consequences for people’s lives, and the threats to creation; b. to educate church members at all levels about economic life, including faith and economics, and challenge them to develop a lifestyle which rejects the materialism and consumerism of our day; c. to work towards the formulation of a confession of their beliefs about economic life which would express justice in the whole household of God and reflect priority for the poor, and support an ecologically sustainable future; d. to act in solidarity with the victims of injustice as they struggle to overcome unjust economic powers and destructive ecological activities, see Milan Opocenský (ed), *Debrecen 1997. Proceedings of the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)*, Geneva: WARC, 1997.

61 See the informative and fascinating study by Ulrich Möller, *Im Prozeß des Bekennens. Brennpunkte der kirchlichen Atomwaffendiskussion im deutschen Protestantismus 1957–1962*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999.

62 The way in which the world Reformed community used and explained the discourse of “empire” in Accra and afterwards showed the influence of *Barmen* and Barth. In order to name the contemporary challenges and in the process of receiving the Accra

It was defined as an ongoing process in which believers, congregations and member churches all over the ecumene were called to study, educate, confess and act, grounded in their faith.

This story has often been told – Belhar, Kitwe, Debrecen, Accra – and is still informing and inspiring the life of the worldwide communion.⁶³ In recent years, it was often told as a story of dreaming a different world together – as confessing the God of life in a world falling among thieves.⁶⁴

document, South African and German Reformed churches together for example defined empire by speaking of a spirit of the time, “We speak of empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a *spirit* of lordless domination, created by human kind yet enslaving simultaneously; an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding, even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation; a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed; the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a *spirit* lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life,” see Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann & Charles Amjad-Ali (eds.), *Dreaming a Different World. Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth. The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches*, Stellenbosch: Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche, Germany & Uniting Reformed Church, South Africa, 2010.

The “spirit of lordless domination” clearly refers to the well-known § 78 of Karl Barth’s ethics of reconciliation, see Barth, *The Christian life. Church Dogmatics Vol. IV, Part 4, Lecture Fragments*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981, 205–272. For the discussion on empire, see also Martina Wasserloos-Strunk, “Empire – provocation with a perspective,” in *Europe covenanting for justice*, ed. Martina Wasserloos-Strunk, foedus-verlag for The Communion of Reformed Churches in Europe, 2010, 69–80.

63 See for example Allan Boesak & Len Hansen, editors, *Globalisation – The Politics of Empire, Justice and the Life of Faith*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009, as well as Allan Boesak & Len Hansen, editors, *Globalisation II – Global Crisis, Global Challenge, Global Faith. An Ongoing response to the Accra Confession*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2010; also, Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali, editors, *Dreaming A Different World. Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth. The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches*, Stellenbosch: Evangelisch Reformierte Kirche, Germany/Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, 2010.

64 The current strategic plan of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, adopted by the Executive after the General Council in Leipzig in 2017, stands under the heading “Confessing the God of Life in a World Fallen among Thieves” and describes the WCRC as a global *koinonia* based on four verbs and five actions. The four verbs are discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed together. These four verbs take up the theological trajectories that have guided the work of the World Alliance and now the World Communion from the beginning. The five actions describe the areas in which the WCRC will strive to confess the God of life, namely “cultivating a just communion,” “covenanting for justice,” “doing theology for transformation,”

It is the story of an ongoing process of confession – and the process itself, even “a highly active, polemical position of waiting,” may sometimes be spiritually wiser and theologically more discerning than claiming a premature moment of truth.⁶⁵

The theme for next year’s General Council in Chiang Mai, Thailand – exactly one hundred years after Barth’s ground-breaking paper in Cardiff – is “persevere in your witness.” This theme clearly continues the story of *Barmen* and Barth – using the notion of witness which was so key for Barth.⁶⁶

“engaging God’s mission in contexts of crisis,” and “working with all the partners God provides.” For these recent developments in the self-understanding and vision of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, see my “On dreaming a different world together?” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal. Mirrors and Windows*, Vol 9, No 3, 2023, 1–21 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2023.v9n3.a6> [Online ISSN 2413-9467/Print 2413-9459].

- 65 See my “Confessing Church Today?” from the twenty-year commemoration of the partnership between German and South African Reformed Churches sharing *Barmen and Belhar*, *Acta Theologica* 2023, Volume 43(1), 14–31, reprinted in *Essays on the Real Church. Collected Essays 8*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2024, edited Siphoh Mahokoto, 307–316.
- 66 For the important role of witness in the life and thought of Barth, see for example the Princeton Seminary doctoral dissertation by John Flett, *The Witness of God. The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010; and David Haddorff, *Christian Ethics as Witness. Barth’s Ethics for a World at Risk*, Eugene: Cascade, 2010; also earlier, the doctoral dissertation by Reinhard Hütter, *Evangelische Ethik als kirchliches Zeugnis*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993. It is interesting that Barth’s lectures on the Gospel of John, in fact only on chapter 1, later published as *Witness to the Word. A Commentary on John 1*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 198, was given (for a second time) in 1933, in Bonn. It is here where he discerned “the relation in the Gospel between revelation and the witness to revelation” (Bromiley, translator), the relation which would play such a key role in his own life and work. The editor comments on this period in the dark times of 1933, “Every morning ... he gave his very important lectures on John to a large and attentive audience; members of the Stahlhelm and Nazis sat there in their uniforms (their caps on the walls), listening and taking notes (hearing) things that really had very little to do with the Third Reich,” xi.

For the important role of the proclamation of the church in the life and thought of Barth, see for example two intriguing studies on his homiletics, including his seminar in Bonn in 1932–1933, during the crisis years around *Barmen*, namely Hartmut Genest, *Karl Barth und die Predigt. Darstellung und Deutung von Predigtwerk und Predigtlehre Karl Barths*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995; and the Princeton Seminary dissertation by Angela Diethart Hancock, *Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic, 1932–1933. A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. More generally on preaching in the Confessing Church, see also William Skiles, *Preaching to Nazi Germany. The Pulpit and the Confessing Church*,

For him, however, to persevere in witness did not mean celebrating the past, merely holding on to what was then and faithfully repeating what came before – whether for antiquarian, ideological, or emotional reasons. For him, to persevere means to be received again. The public witness is insight given for the moment. It becomes God’s truth for the church, yes, from generation to generation, but always must be given again, received again, purer and deeper, considered and pondered again and again, grasped more completely and better, anew, by new generations.⁶⁷

Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2023. For Barth’s homiletical approach, see Karl Barth, *Homiletik. Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt*, Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1966. For volumes with his own published sermons, see Karl Barth & Eduard Thurneysen, *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben!*, Bern 1917; Barth & Thurneysen, *Komm Schöpfer Geist!*, München, 1924; Barth & Thurneysen, *Die große Barmherzigkeit*, München, 1935; Barth, *Fürchte dich nicht!*, München, 1949; Barth, *Den Gefangenen Befreiung*, Zollikon, 1959; Barth, *Rufe mich an! Neue Predigten aus der Strafanstalt Basel*, Zürich, 1965.

For the so-called *prophetic* role of the church in the thought of Barth, see the flood of literature on his doctrine of reconciliation, since he constructs his Christology around the threefold office of Jesus Christ and then develops Christ’s prophetic ministry (“Jesus Christ, the True Witness”), including the prophetic role of the church, around *Barmen*’s first thesis as motto, *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, first half, §69, 1961, 3; see for example Annelore Siller, *Karl Barths Lehre vom prophetischen Amt Jesus Christi*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2009. By now the distinction between revelation and witness to revelation showed its deep significance, for Barth Christ’s office as priest and as king is the content of the gospel while Christ’s office as prophet is solely the witness to this content. The prophetic ministry for Barth is thus not the public voice of the church speaking so-called truth to power, as it is so often seen in popular opinion, but in fact nothing else than the witness to Jesus Christ, the proclamation of Christ’s priestly and royal work. This witness certainly has public and political consequences, but the prophetic church is not called to have the authoritative say on all human life and it should be careful not to claim that competence or create that false perception.

The nature and importance of this aspect of the life and calling of the church – witness, preaching, proclamation, prophetic ministry – for Barth has often been illustrated by the attraction for him of the figure of John the Baptist, for example as depicted in Matthias Grünewald’s famous altar piece from Isenheim, see the fascinating study by Reiner Marquard, *Karl Barth und die Isenheimer Altar*, Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1995. He kept this image – of John the Baptist, pointing with his finger to the Lamb of God in the cross – above his desk in his study, and it has been argued that contemplating this image informed and inspired Barth already between the first and second versions of *Romans*, in 1920.

67 “The confession should never be turned into “a beautiful flag which is left in the barracks when the regiment is on the march,” a confession that says nothing and that accomplishes nothing, a confession “without the scars from the preceding battle (and) without a compelling concern” is not a Reformed confession, “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses,” 1960.

Eberhard Busch also stresses the importance of this, “(C)onfession does not mean to hold on to a confessional text that had been achieved at some earlier time in the