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Confessional Theology? The significance of the theology of Karl Barth in dealing with the confessional quagmire of the Reformed Church

ABSTRACT

Since his induction into 'academic theology' Barth had come to appreciate the fact that Christian confessions were much more than mere statements of faith. His renewed appreciation for Christian confessions would later characterise the manner in which he dealt with his later theology. In his theological reflections about a confession, he discovered that a confession is always a serious act of faith. While firmly maintaining this view, he equally stressed that a confessional act should also be treated as a game. Viewed in this paradoxical manner, Barth argued that the strength of a confession is contained in its weakness. This paradoxical understanding of a confession is furthermore consolidated by what Barth believes to be our obligation to speak about God because we are Christian, as well as the inability to do so because we are human beings and are therefore unable to speak about God as if God is entirely known to us. Emphasising this quagmire, confessional theology is a theology that consists of five characteristics; the primacy of the Word of God, the church, its context, public witness to Jesus Christ as well as ethics. All these taken together constitute the confessional theology of Barth. When his theology is observed, it becomes evident that Barth never disregarded the essence of the socio-economic, cultural and political context when reflecting about theology.

INTRODUCTION

Christian confessions are frequently seen as statements of faith that have nothing to do with politics. In this paper an attempt will be made to argue that confessions have as much to do with the socio-economic and political contexts in which they originate as they have with theology. To interpret confessions as statements of faith that have nothing to do with politics on the one hand is justifiable given the overwhelming negativity that now characterises the concept politics. This paper will argue that Barth understood the relationship between Christian confession and politics to be inevitable but continued to argue that the fundamental nature of this relation is best appreciated when one interprets it in a particular manner. This particular manner of dealing with this relationship will be explored here. Contrary to insinuations that Barth's theology did not speak emphatically to the socio-political situation of its time, it will be argued that Barth never lost sight of the significance of this aspect in his theological reflections.

The particular manner in which Barth understood God and preferred to speak about God is contained in a maxim that he popularised during the 1920s. This maxim is also a helpful hint of how he came to view and understand his theology since then. The maxim reads as follows: 'as theologians we are compelled to speak about God. But we cannot speak about God because we are only human. We ought to concede to both our obligation as well as our inability and give God the glory'.¹

¹ Cf. E Busch, Karl Barth: His life from letters and Autobiographical Texts. Philadelphia: SCM Press. 1976,

It is this same maxim that underpins the confessional manner of speaking about God which Barth encouraged. This confessional manner of speaking about God is explained with reference made to some of the major themes that are identified throughout his theology. At least five of these themes characterise the confessional nature of his theology, viz. the centrality of the Word of God, the church as the subject of theology, the reality of the socio-economic and political context, the public witness to Jesus Christ, as well as the ethics which is always implied in this theology. This confessional manner of speaking about God is set out as a means of dissuading attempts to speak about God in a manner that suggest that God can entirely be known to human beings.

1. THE SEEDS OF CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY SOWN?

When Barth was invited to occupy the chair of reformed theology in Göttingen after having established himself as a pastor that took the socio-economic and political context in which he conducted his theology seriously, he was charged with the specific function of securing the confessional renewal of the reformed movement.² Prior to his entry into academia, Karl Barth had realised the inefficacy of liberal theology for dealing with the challenges that the ministry posed to him.³ His decision to put liberal theology to rest was consolidated by his teachers' moral and theological justification of the First World War. Barth describes his dismay with his teachers' endorsement of the war succinctly:

“The actual end of the 19th century as ‘the good old days’ came for theology as for everything else with the fateful year of 1914. Accidentally or not, a significant event took place during that very year. Ernst Troeltch, the well-known professor of systematic theology and the leader of the then most modern school, gave up his chair in theology for one in philosophy. One day in early August 1914 stands out in my personal memory as a black day. Ninety-three German intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war-policy of Wilhelm II and his counsellors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realized that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history”.⁴

140.

2 Cf. K Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*. Trans. D Guder and J Guder. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, vii.

3 Barth participated wholeheartedly in the issues that affected the community of which he was pastor. Not only was Barth involved in organizing three unions in Safenwil, but he also set up the organizational groundwork in the Aargau region. The period of his pastorate in Safenwil 1911-1921 is a period to which a few important works penned by him belonged. These works catalogued how he related his theology with the politics of his time. Barth was involved in researching the history of the Bally shoe firm and the Sulzer munitions factory where many Safenwil workers were employed. He was involved in the authorship of a sixty-page exposé, “The Worker Question” which analyzed and comments on material gathered from newspapers, books, and encyclopedias concerning the social, economic and cultural plight of the European labor force – with special reference to conditions in Safenwil. Cf. F W Marquardt, ‘Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth’ in: G Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical politics*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976, 53. Barth’s sincere interest in the affairs that concerned his pastorate is well articulated in the exchange that he had with one of the factory owners of Safenwil. See some of the open letters written between himself and W Hüsey. K Barth, ‘Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice’ in G Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical politics*. 40ff.

4 K Barth, *The Humanity of God*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982: 12.

Another aspect that contributed towards Barth's decision to break theologically with liberalism was also his discovery of the quintessential nature of the Bible in dealing with theology. As early as 1916, Barth together with his friend Edward Thurneysen realised that the liberal reading of the Bible to which they had become accustomed to was a farce. An article that he wrote in the same year titled 'The Strange New World within the Bible' is a clear testimony of his renewed appreciation of the Bible as the Word of God. Fundamentally this essay displayed the view that he had begun to take seriously the shortcomings in liberal theology. In an article adjacent to the one mentioned Barth argued that:

"[W]hat the Bible has to offer us, above all, is insights to the effect that the knowledge of God is the eternal problem of our profoundest personal existence, that it is the starting-point at which we begin and yet do not begin, from which we are separated and yet are not separated ... No one compels us to turn from the quiet pursuit of our so-called religious or so-called cultural duties to the Bible; but once we have done so, there is nothing for it but that we should find ourselves in perplexity, and in fear and trembling come to respect the necessity under which, as we shall realise, we were living before we asked our question or heard the answer".⁵

This admiration of the essence of the Bible was facilitated by his discovery of the message of the Blumhardts. The Blumhardts who insisted on Christian hope in their theological deliberations impressed Barth a great deal. Therefore there can be no doubt that his discovery of the Blumhardts through his friend Thurneysen also assisted him on the path that he set himself on.⁶ It was their emphasis on hope that made their understanding of eschatology so impressive for Barth.⁷ Karl Barth's new way of approaching the Bible that led him to write his commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, which in turn made him a popular theologian to be reckoned with in Germany.

Barth's invitation to teach at Göttingen which was a predominantly Lutheran faculty, no doubt came as a result of the renewed manner that he dealt with the Bible as is evidenced in his first commentary on Romans. The new opportunity provided an impetus for him to do justice to the reformed tradition.⁸ Barth found solace in the works of many reformed people. McCormack

5 Cf. K Barth, 'Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas' in: K Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Trans. Douglas Horton. London: Hodder and Stoughton. 1928: 59-60.

6 Any serious reading of the influence that the Blumhardts had Barth cannot ignore the influence of the works of Franz Overbeck on Barth. This is arrived at because Barth had a tendency of putting the Blumhardts back to back with Overbeck. The Blumhardts as the ones looking forward in hope and Overbeck as the one critically looking backwards.

7 Christoph Blumhardt (1842-1919) was the son of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880). They left an indelible mark on the theological thinking of Barth. He never parted ways with them and his credit for their contribution cannot be ignored. Barth holds that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there was a reaction to the integrity of liberal theology. This reaction was manifested in the advocacy of eschatology. He maintains that one focus in this movement of discovery was the message of the younger Blumhardt. Furthermore, Barth maintains that the younger Blumhardt, H Kutter as well as L Ragaz challenged the positively church-centered Christianity when they linked their fight for the kingdom of God with eschatology and hope with the Socialist labour movement (cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. II/1, 1936: 633 and J Cort, *Christian Socialism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988: 199-201). In Barth's works that were published posthumously, an appreciation of the Blumhardts still remains evident. Barth reminds us that their main message was to prepare humanity for the world to come. He (Blumhardt senior) writes "very naively, but with axiomatic certainty, they were thinking of the reality of the risen and living Jesus Christ himself, acting and speaking as a distinctive factor no less actual today than yesterday" (cf. K Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics* Vol. IV, Part 4. Lecture Fragments. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981: 259).

8 The position which Barth was invited to occupy at Göttingen envisaged that he would specialize in

makes extensive mention of the influence that Heinrich Heppé's reformed dogmatics had on him.⁹ Another important reformed theologian that influenced Barth was undoubtedly John Calvin. While Barth did not show much interest in Calvin both when he was vicariate in Geneva and later when he was a pastor of a church in Safenwil, it can nonetheless not be denied that his interest in Calvin was triggered at a much earlier stage.¹⁰ Bromiley has illustrated this point when he argued that "Calvin's own character appears not to have made any immediate appeal to Barth's sympathy, and his theology had both formal and material features that could not command Barths' wholehearted approval".¹¹

His decision to deal with Calvin seriously is an interesting decision especially when it is remembered that until his discovery of the essence of the Bible and his obligation to teach reformed theology, he had interpreted Calvin through Hermannian lenses. His Göttingen Dogmatics is an innovative display of his renewed interest both in reformed theology and it is a stunning reflection of how he incorporated and appropriated the theology of the reformers especially that of Calvin.¹² Among the many aspects that Barth came to value in the theology of Calvin, he was particularly impressed by Calvin's ability to wrestle with the text. It was because of this amazement that he said the following of Calvin in his preface to the second edition of his commentary on Romans: "if one was to place the works of (a modern theologian) such as Jülicher, for an example side by side with that of Calvin: how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to rethink the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the 16th century from the first century becomes transparent! Paul speaks, and the person of the 16th century hears".¹³

This statement reveals Barth as someone who had high regard for the exegetical labour that Calvin invested in his theological reflections. It is therefore not by chance that Barth reserved most of his lectures on Calvin in 1922 for probing Calvin's exegetical practice, and it was this that in turn influenced his own theological exegesis.¹⁴ Barth's fascinating respect for Calvin is conspicuous. This fascination of Calvin was latter epitomised in a letter written to Thurneysen where he said the following about him: "[Calvin] is a waterfall, a primitive forest, a demonic power, something straight down the Himalayas, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I just don't have the organs, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, let alone to describe it properly".¹⁵

Karl Barth's enthrallment with Calvin should not mislead one into thinking that it prevented teaching Reformed confessions, Reformed doctrine of as well as Reformed church life. These were all subjects which Barth felt ill-prepared for that time to teach in a predominantly Lutheran faculty (cf. E Busch, Karl Barth, 128-9).

9 Cf. B McCormack, Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: its genesis and development 1909-1936, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997: 304

10 The influence that Calvin had on the theology of Karl Barth is sometimes discounted. Although much has been done to catalogue the influence of theologians such as Luther and Heppé (as Hunsinger and McCormack respectively does). In his dissertation R S Tshaka attempt to deal with this deficit arguing that Calvin played a tremendously important role in Barth's theology and that this is best illustrated in the work that he did on reformed theology. Cf. R S Tshaka, Confessional Theology? A Critical Analysis of the Theology of Karl Barth and its Significance for the Belhar Confession. Unpublished D Th dissertation. University of Stellenbosch, 2005, 1ff.

11 Bromiley cited in K Barth, The Theology of John Calvin. Trans. G. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1995, x.

12 Cf. K Barth, The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian religion. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

13 Cf. K Barth, The Epistle to the Romans. 6th ed. Trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1977: 7.

14 Cf. J Webster, Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001, 92.

15 K Barth cited in E Busch, Karl Barth, 138.

him from engaging with Calvin critically. Barth's exchange with Calvin's doctrine of predestination, among other issues is fundamental in that it exemplify the degree with which he engaged critically with both the person of Calvin as well as his theology.¹⁶ It is the view of this paper that Barth's engagement with reformed theology as well as reformed confessions provided an impetus for dealing with theology in a confessional manner. Let us thus consider the essence of confessional theology of Barth concisely.

2. THE ESSENCE OF CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY

Dialectical theology and Karl Barth can easily be seen as interchangeable concepts. Dialectical theology assumed significance after Barth had realised the essence of reformed theology and had come to see reformed confessions as manifestations of the Christian community's consistent need to speak about God. The dialectical theology of Barth is no more clearly articulated than in a lecture that he gave at Elgersburg on the 3rd of March 1922 entitled "The Word of God and the Task of Theology". In that lecture Barth summarised the essence of dialectical theology when he said: 'As theologians we ought to talk about God. But we are human, and so we cannot talk of God. We ought therefore to recognise both our obligation and our inability, and in so doing give God the glory'.¹⁷

The intentions of Barth are clearly summarised in this quotation, but more importantly the intention of dialectical theology is illuminated as well. Dialectical theology makes it clear that it is impossible to speak about God unless God is spoken of in an analogical way – that is in a way that merely makes reference to God but does not leave the impression that God is fully comprehensible in such talk. It is for this reason that it is argued that God can only be spoken of if this speech about God happens in a confessional manner – that is in a manner that acknowledges the quagmire of being called to speak about God and yet being unable to speak about God.

To concede that one cannot speak and think about God in such a way that the whole essence of God is comprehended should not be interpreted to suggest that confessional theology is a form of escapism. In the framework of Barth's confessional theology there are definite characteristics that make up this theology. It is only when these characteristics are considered that it is realised that Karl Barth's confessional theology is a theology that acknowledges the concrete reality in which reflection about God takes place. These are the very characteristics that remained consistent in the entire theological reflection of Barth since his farewell to liberal theology. These characteristics are; (a) the centrality of the Word of God, (b) the church as the subject of theology, (c) public witness to Jesus Christ, (d) the reality of the socio-economic and political context as well as the (e) ethics that is implied in such reflection.¹⁸

The confessional theology of Barth falls within the era of his engagement with the question of the essence of reformed confessions. His response to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches on the question of the desirability and possibility of a universality reformed confession contains the very characteristics of confessional theology. The response given by Barth is cited at length:

"A Reformed confession is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which until further action, defines its character to outsiders; and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian

¹⁶ Balthasar went to great lengths in dealing with the differences of interpretation of this doctrine. His work on this subject clearly exhibits the different approaches that these two theologians employed and how Barth's rendition of the doctrine in question differed from that of Calvin. cf. H Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*. Trans. E.T. Oakes, San Francisco: Communion Books, Ignatius Press. 1992.

¹⁷ Cf. E Busch, *Karl Barth*, 140.

¹⁸ Cf. R S Tshaka, *Confessional Theology?* 45ff.

church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures alone".¹⁹

The following confessional elements inherent in this definition should be briefly considered:

(a) Confessional theology is a theology which is anchored in the Word of God. This characteristic emphatically stresses that a confession is to be based on Holy Scriptures alone. Explaining why he replaced his Christian Dogmatics with Church Dogmatics, he maintained that with this latter work he began anew to emphasize the fact that scripture is to be understood as the controlling written authority for dogmatics and exegesis in their entirety. With this he suggested that scripture was fundamental not only for the comprehension of the text but also for the situation in which scripture was written.²⁰

The seriousness with which Barth wrestled with scripture impelled him to realise that the strength of Reformed confessions lies in their weaknesses. This came about simply because he realised that a confession can never take the place of Holy Scripture. It should therefore come as no surprise as to why Barth asserts that the significance of a confession in the Reformed Church lies in its essential *nonsignificance*.²¹

He compares a Reformed confession with a bell and the mighty sound that it makes. The mighty sound dies away gently; likewise a Reformed confession, if it is to understand its place and significance, should look out for a time when it dies away gently. In his opinion one can only come to this insight when one comprehends that a confession points beyond itself, and that its centre of gravity is not in itself but rather beyond itself.²²

(b) A Reformed confession is a spontaneous and publicly formulated statement by a Christian community. This view was informed by Barth's changed attitude towards the doctrine of the church. McCormack argues that at the beginning of his academic career, Barth's attitude towards this doctrine had become more positive and, largely as a consequence, the church came to be seen by him as the locus of authority in theology instead of simply the locus of judgment as revealed in Romans II.²³ For him, the church then plays a pivotal role in that it is the only organ that is charged with the task of deciding when a confession is in order. Looked in this way, it becomes understandable why Barth later retreated to rename his Christian dogmatics the church dogmatics.

(c) A Reformed confession witnesses Jesus Christ publicly to the world. Barth's definition of a confession maintains that a Reformed confession is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed by the Holy Scripture alone. A Reformed confession does not bear witness to itself, politics or the ingenious way that it was arrived at, but vigorously witnesses Jesus Christ to the world. Gorringer put this into perspective when he said that Barth's theology, from first to last, is an attempt to witness God; that it resists all attempts to find interpretive master keys which would bring it under theological-cultural hegemony.²⁴

(d) A Reformed confession has to be mindful of the context in which it is called to life. By being mindful of its context, Barth concludes that it is perhaps possible to institute a creed or a confession that will be binding to all who stands within the Reformed tradition. In accepting this confession as binding, it ought to be kept in mind that it does not remain flawless.

19 K Barth, *Theology and Church*. London: SCM Press Ltd.1962: 112.

20 K Barth, *How I Changed my Mind*. Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1966: 43.

21 K Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*. Trans. D. Guder and J. Guder. Westminster: John Knox Press.2002: 38.

22 K Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*. 38-9.

23 Cf. B McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1997, 303.

24 Cf. T Gorringer, *Karl Barth against Hegemony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1999, 5.

A Reformed confession, albeit important to the life of the Reformed church, is in Barth's view extremely difficult to be called into existence because, among other issues, a confession will have to be translated into the language of the civil community.²⁵ Although Christians are united because of one baptism, they nonetheless find themselves scattered around the globe. For Barth any road to a universal creed which bypasses the concrete actuality of unitedness would not be a Reformed road. It is for this reason why he holds that the reluctance of the old Reformers to take inclusive creedal action is to be understood.²⁶

While admitting that classical Reformed confessions were acts and events which responded to God in his revelation, Barth is of the view that they were nonetheless also demonstrations of tangible human-earthly unitedness.²⁷ It is at the backdrop of this that Barth's restriction of "a Christian community geographically limited" should be understood. More than anything, this restriction displays the essence of context in theological matters.

To speak about the confessional nature of Barth's theology begs some further clarification. It is initially fundamental to appreciate that Barth sees his theology as taking place within a particular context. This concession therefore implies that his theology is contextual. Barth was suspicious of the emphasis which is usually placed on the context in determining the manner in which theology is employed. This is probably because he held the view that natural theology took different forms and that it was also a form of contextual theology.²⁸

Such suspicion nonetheless does not demonstrate that Barth remained opposed to the significance of the context in adding colour to his theology. It must then be said that Barth was not opposed to a theology that is contextual in as far as it called upon theology to take "context" seriously – this contextual theology however needed to be conducted in such a manner that the Word of God was taken as its point of departure. Barth's suspicion of contextual theology was triggered by his conviction that, because theology is undertaken by human beings, it runs the risk of becoming diabolical.

Making the confession that Jesus Christ is the only Word that we have to hear and obey in a context that threatens those who do this, it has to be remembered at all times that our utterances are fallible. Our utterances of this confession in whatever context are fallible because they always remain at the mercy of Leviathan²⁹, and are always accompanied by Mammon, a very close relative to Leviathan.

(e) A Reformed confession until further action defines its character to outsiders and gives guidance for its own doctrine and life. By being mindful of its task to define its character to the outside world, this confession remains aware of the ethical implications which are implied in this function. It defines its character to the outside world with its back against the wall, because it is

25 K Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York: Philosophical Library Press, 1949: 31.

26 K Barth, *Theology and Church*. 125.

27 K Barth, *Theology and Church*. 125.

28 E Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004: 71-72.

29 Barth employs this concept in his work 'The Christian life' where he focuses especially on the 'Lordless powers'. It was Thomas Hobbes who made this notion famous in a book that he entitled 'Leviathan' which was published in 1651. In his attempt to answer the question 'who' and 'what' Leviathan is, Hobbes asserts that Leviathan is the epitome of the rise and existence, the past, present and future, the essence and reality or state as the only earthly potentate and sovereign with one or more heads. People have handed over and entrusted to it all their political, social, economic, intellectual, and even ethical and religious freedoms, possibilities and rights. By their consent Leviathan is safeguarded against every possible protest, thus he rules in their place over them. Essentially Leviathan is an ideology and Barth held that this very Leviathan was detectable in totalitarian states such as Fascism, National Socialism and Stalinism (cf. K Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics Vol. IV, 4. Lecture Fragments*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982: 220-221).

convinced that it has to do this. However, in defining this character, it remains aware of its own limitations in confessing. These limitations challenge it ethically to confess until further action. Its ethical inclination impels it to look at the signs of the time.

These ideas are continued in Barth's Church Dogmatics. Karl Barth began his Church Dogmatics maintaining that theology was a critical reflection on the importance of preaching. Intrinsic to this understanding of theology, Barth suggested that this activity had chiefly to do with the Word of God, that since it was addressed to humanity it presupposed ethics which emanated from talk about God. This consequently implied that the public witness component of the preaching could not be ignored,³⁰ that the socio-economic context in which this critical reflection was taking place needed to be acknowledged, and that this function belonged primarily to the church.³¹ The significant role that ethics played in the theological reflection of Barth cannot be understated. Apart from the inevitability of ethics in any theological reflection, Barth insists on the importance of ethics and claims that it is complemented by theology. For this reason any ethical deliberation that purports to be independent from theology is impossible. The seriousness with which he carried this claim is underpinned by the fact that each of his major dogmatic divisions in his Church Dogmatics contains a section on ethics.³²

4. CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY VS CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY?

By its very nature theology is contextual. The notion context is used as an umbrella notion, since it refers to a plethora of theologies that purports to be contextual. Black theology, Feminist theology, Minjung theology etc are all contextual forms of theologies in their own rights as they seek to deliberately and intentionally address issues that affect those that reflect theologically from particular contexts. While conceding to the appropriateness of such theologies in dealing with specific issues that threatens the gospel, it is impossible to ignore the shortcomings of such theological approaches. A case in point is Afrikaner theological project in South Africa and the consequent reactionary theological reflections to it.³³ Black Liberation Theology is South Africa is

30 This view is informed by the fact that we cannot speak about God in a binding way, but can at least listen to this binding Word of God and be a witness to the world about this (cf. E Busch, *Verbindlich van Gott reden: Gemeindevorträge*, 2002: 20).

31 The characteristics of confessional theology correspond with Karl Barth's criteria for preaching. For a detailed overview of these criteria see K Barth, *Homiletik: Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt*. Verlag, Zürich, 1966: 32-69.

32 In his prolegomena under the rubric 'the theology of the Word of God', an ethical section follows with the theme "the Life of the Children of God"; (See Church Dogmatics I/2 pp. 362-457); subsequently under the title of 'the doctrine of God' follows an ethical part entitled 'the command of God', (See Church Dogmatics II/2 pp. 509-782), Under the subject of the doctrine of creation is the ethical part entitled 'the command of God the creator' (See Church Dogmatics III/4 pp. 3-685), under the theme 'the doctrine of reconciliation' we find the ethical section which is entitled 'Ethics as the task of the doctrine of reconciliation' (See Church Dogmatics IV/4 pp. 1ff).

33 Chief among the reactionary theologies against Afrikaner civil religion in South Africa was black liberation theology. Black theology emerged in South Africa during the late 1960s. As a project, it was inspired by the civil rights movement in the USA, the prophetic voice of Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the pioneering work of James Cone. It was transported from the shores of the United States of America to South Africa as an intellectual project which was made possible by the University Christian Movement (UCM) in 1971. All this occurred under the directorship of Basil Moore and was first spearheaded in South Africa by Sabelo Ntwasa. Black theology was expressed under the banner of the Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa which owes its being students such as Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, Harry Nengwenkulu and others who were galvanized by the then political situation into organising themselves into being a vanguard for the black peoples' total emancipation from the political pangs into which they were plunged by white racism in South Africa. Although Black

a chief reactionary theology against the dormant white theology.

Because black theology is aimed at the emancipation of the black people, it finds it difficult to include in its liberating attempts those that are not black. This defect has been noted in black theological circles in South Africa. It was because of this defect that the notion black theology was replaced with contextual theology. Others have questioned this new term arguing that the racial problems in South Africa have not yet changed dramatically so that the black theological project can be abandoned. For this reason Tlhagale argued that "while the term 'contextual theology' remains an evasive expression in so far as it accommodates the self-justification of the oppressing group, 'black' in black theology underlines the unique experience of the underdog."³⁴

From the little that has been said about contextual theology it can be argued that the weakness of contextual is manifested in its strength. Where contextual theology must be applauded for its attempts to deal with the issues without retreating to some sort of spiritual realm, such an approach which takes its point of departure from a particular context runs the risk of becoming pompous and exclusive. Fundamentally it runs the risk of claiming that its manner of speaking about God ought to be used as a yardstick to determine God's revelation to humanity. Because it insists emphatically on the particularity of a context as its point of departure, it lacks flexibility and becomes redundant once its so-called objective is reached.

Contrary to contextual theology which takes its point of departure from a particular situation of a person [or a group], confessional theology appreciates context as one of its aspects among others. For confessional theology the revealed word is considered its point of departure. One of the most significant concerns for confessional theology is the manner in which we speak about God. It is this concern which prevents it from falling into the snare of speaking about God as if God is known in his totality to humanity. Since God is never known in his totality this theology accepts that God revelation is beyond human comprehension. It is then suggested that our speech about God which is always human, has to acknowledge that God's speech is not confined to the preset but transcends it. This is the essence of confessional theology, its flexibility in accepting that which it confessed today might not be so relevant tomorrow. Since its point of departure is the revealed word, this project is perpetually challenged to re-examine its speech about God in different contexts.

5. TOWARDS A CONFESSATIONAL THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY: CONCLUDING REMARKS

It was argued in this paper that confessional theology is an initiative to speak about God. As much as it is an initiative to speak about God, it realises that it is impossible to speak about God in a manner that renders God entirely known to us. During the theological milieu of Barth, confessional theology under the guise of dialectical theology challenged attempts of speaking about God which left impressions that God can be known in his entirety through human efforts. Karl Barth had remained faithful to this ideal (of always knowing that as theologians we have to

theology propagated itself chiefly by means of seminars and ministers' caucuses, it produced some significant publications and continued into the Kairos period. A number of the first-generation black theologians endeavoured to develop Black theology in relation to their confessional traditions. Among these theologians were Manas Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak. This project was carried on by theologians such as Buti Tlhagale, Takatso Mofokeng, Bongajalo Goba and Itumeleng Mosala, to mention but a few. Cf. J W De Gruchy, 'African Theologies: South Africa' in: D Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*. 2nd edition. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1997: 447. Some of the fundamental collections that this theology produced included B Moore, (ed.), *The challenge of Black theology in South Africa*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976; I Mosala and B Tlhagale (eds.), *The Unquestionable Right to be Free*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

34 See. B Tlhagale, 'Toward a Black theology of Labour' in: J R Cochrane and G O West (eds.), *The Three-fold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour*. Johannesburg: Cluster Publications, 1991, 142.

talk about God but we fail in this regard since we are only human). The 'German Christians' during the Nazi regime had attempted through their natural theology to speak about the being of God in ways that rendered him fully comprehensible.³⁵ Subsequently during the apartheid regime, attempts were made to speak about God in manners that rendered God comprehensible.

An attempt was made to indicate that inclinations to speak about God as if God is entirely known to us can only be disastrous. Nonetheless church and Christians in particular are called to reflect and to talk about God. By looking at the different eras where theological reflection had occurred [and where such reflection led to the 'imprisonment of people' since it insisted that God can be known in his entirety to humanity through human effort], this paper is not oblivious of the fact that a time might still arise when the church shall inquire whether its reflections of God are still in line with Holy Scripture. While it was easier for the struggling churches to do this theological reconsideration during the apartheid regime, it must now be asked whether these churches can maintain their prophetic character in democratic South Africa. Once the church realises the need to maintain her prophetic character and at the same time acknowledge her existence in this world, she will do justice to her ambiguous existence [of being of the world and at the same time not be of the world]. Furthermore confessional theology can provide her with a helpful apparatus of detecting when one form of idolatrous theology which contains God in a canopy is exchanged for another that essentially does the same.

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³⁵ In his dissertation of which ample reference has already been made mention to in this paper, Tshaka reserves a whole chapter where he explores the theologized politics of the 'German Christians' and the challenges that this theology posed to the independence of theology and the church from other factors. He then continues to juxtapose the German theological situation during the German Christians with a theological project in South African that tended to justified Apartheid. Cf. R S Tshaka, *Confessional Theology?* 82ff.

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TREFWOORDE

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