

Barmen and Belhar in conversation – a German perspective¹

ABSTRACT

This article is a discussion of the relationship between the Barmen Theological Declaration and the Confession of Belhar. It is done from the vantage point of the 2001 statement by the Theological Commission of the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany on the Confession of Belhar from the perspective of the Barmen Theological Declaration. In the first part of the article comments are made on points highlighted in the statement that pertain to the similarities and differences between the two documents, regarding their formal structures, their use of Scripture, and their rejections of objectionable theologies and ideologies. In the second half of the article the comparison is continued, but from the vantage point of each of the five theses of the Confession of Belhar. In this way issues are identified which in future need to be clarified in dialogue on the meaning and importance these documents for the church today.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the year 2001, the Theological Commission of today's *Union of Evangelical Churches* in Germany (then EKU: Evangelical Church of the Union) published a statement on the Belhar Confession from the perspective of the Barmen Theological Declaration. Its purpose was to examine how the UEK can "understand and receive the intentions of the Belhar Confession as a present-day confession in the tradition of the Barmen Theological Declaration". The statement brought to light some fundamental similarities between the two texts and concluded that the differences that do exist between them can be overcome. Therefore, the statement recommends a dialogue between the UEK and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. Such a dialogue could help to clarify outstanding issues regarding the two documents and prepare the ground for a common confession.

In the following article, I would like to discuss those aspects that were emphasised in the statement on the basis of the comparison that had been made between the two documents. I also will take the liberty to make some amendments to the statement in order to eliminate some misunderstandings due to faulty translations. Furthermore, I would like to add some of my own observations.

2. BASICS

2.1 The structures of the Barmen Theological Declaration and the Belhar Confession

As I have shown in my introduction on the Barmen Theological Declaration², the text has a definite *Christological* slant that is given to it by the phrase [that it confesses to] "the one Word of God",

1 Paper read at the Barmen/Belhar Consultation, Belhar, 18 October 2004.

2 See "Historical overview of the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934" in this edition of *NGTT*.

i.e. Jesus Christ. Although the Barmen theses on the church are important, the Confession of Belhar is much more “ecclesiological”. The latter confesses the belief in the Triune God, who “who gathers, protects and cares for his Church” (article 1). Against the background of the policy of apartheid, the text stresses the meaning of the unity of the church (article 2), its message of reconciliation (article 3), as well as the church’s obligation to justice (article 4). Article 5 of Belhar underlines the fact that the church cannot cease to confess as stated and should act in accordance with it.

The structure of the Confession of Belhar already shows that it does not move in the direction of a similar Christological concentration as one finds in the Barmen Theological Declaration. However, this fact does not in itself question Barmen’s Christological reasoning. Furthermore, Belhar also ends on a Christological note with the doxology “Jesus is Lord”. Everything that might change the situation in the church and in South African society, therefore, is expected through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. AC 4). But, this certainty immediately is tied to the confession to the triune God in Belhar’s first article. Thus it brings out a *universal* meaning of the faith in the God of the gospel as manifested in Jesus Christ. On the one hand, this is an important step beyond Barmen, but still remains within the spirit of Barmen. The questions regarding theology of creation and eschatology raised by the first thesis of Barmen indeed calls for a Trinitarian development. However, if the work of the Triune God in article 1 refers directly to the church, Belhar has a special accent. All Christological-soteriological statements in the remaining articles of Belhar are then at the same time ecclesiological statements that stress the unity between Christ and the church. This has more emphasis than the third thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration, which states that the “church of pardoned sinners” is dependent on Jesus Christ. This poses questions regarding the essential role of the church in salvation, which will have to be examined further in an analysis of these respective articles.

There is no statement on the church’s relationship to the state in the five articles of the Confession of Belhar. This is remarkable considering the fact that the confession is directed against state-sanctioned racism. The state is only negatively present in the way it presented itself in the time of apartheid. The church must witness against the selfish interests of “the powerful and privileged” (article 4). Prohibitions and punishment threatened by “authorities and human laws” must not prevent one from confessing the truths contained in the confession (article 5). The fact that the state is not positively mentioned is a shortcoming in Belhar insofar as it demands that the church take a political stand. This would require that some idea should be given of the manner in which the political power should be exercised and the purpose thereof. A theological clarification of the duties of the state is necessary in all of the initiatives the church should take, together with its possible political implications and consequences. The fifth thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration also leaves some room for improvement in its passages regarding the state’s special “God-appointed” tasks, in order to prevent confusing the spiritual power in the church’s political statements with a self-claimed exercise of political power by it. Therefore, a dialogue on the theological intentions of Belhar and Barmen will need to include further reflection on a Christian understanding of the state.

2.2 Use of Scripture

As in the case of the Barmen Theological Declaration, a particular situation gave rise to the Confession of Belhar Confession: an ideology that was irreconcilable with the Church of Jesus Christ had infiltrated it. In Germany in 1934 this ideology was the false doctrine of the “German Christians” and, with it, the ideology of the national socialists. In 1986 in South Africa it was the ideology of apartheid. Both confessions agree that it is only *in hearing Scripture* that a Christian church can recognise such false doctrines and then prevent it from being preached in it and being

incorporated into its customs. Therefore, both confessions are to be understood and evaluated as interpretative of Scripture.

The Accompanying Letter (AL paragraph 2) to Belhar reads: “*We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God.*” However, the confession itself does not mention this in such an explicit manner. Article 1 should, like the first Barmen thesis, be understood as an introduction to the theology on which the entire confession is based. It abstains from quoting Scripture and does not explicitly mention Scripture at all. But, doubtlessly Scripture is implied when the confession says that God “gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit”. However, the question arises whether the repeated phrase in Belhar, “[God’s] Word and his Spirit,” may not be indicative of an understanding of Scripture that differs somewhat from that in the Barmen Theological Declaration. According to Barmen, Scripture in its entirety is human witness to the One Word, which is Jesus Christ himself (thesis 1). By means of the Holy Spirit, this witness brings about the presence of Jesus Christ in the Christian community (thesis 3). Belhar, on the other hand, does not seem to use the phrase “the Word of God” in such a pointedly Christological way. In Belhar Scripture, which works together with God’s Spirit, is the Word of the Triune God. Thus, the question remains how this Spirit of God, mentioned in articles 1,2 and 3, is to be understood in relation to the Holy Spirit in its precise, Trinitarian sense. I will later return to this question.

The use of Scripture in the Confession of Belhar must be understood as the use of spirit-led Scripture. This seems to be the reason why, in contrast to Barmen, the authors of Belhar did not follow a structure that has the “Word” on the one hand and the “response of a church hearing Scripture” on the other. Rather, the Confession of Belhar develops with an abundance of literal quotes from the Bible that, even if they are not interpreted in detail in the text, are obviously taken to be self-evident. The advantage of this use of Scripture is that the Confession of Belhar has a wider range of the Scriptural witness than Barmen has. What is especially important is that the 4th article of Belhar also includes passages from the Old Testament (Dt 32,4; Ps 146; Is 1,16f.; Am 5). The silence regarding the Old Testament in the Barmen Declaration is indeed a great deficit. A dialogue on the theological intentions of Belhar and Barmen will have to come to a shared understanding on the basic principles applicable to the use of Scripture. However, the common basis for this understanding is already clear: there can be no church confession without hearing Scripture.

2.3 The Problem of “Rejections”

Articles 2 to 4 of the Confession of Belhar end with rejections of “doctrines” which are in contradiction to the confession. Article 4 also rejects an “ideology”. Unlike the “rejections” in Barmen, which are (to be understood) in the tradition of the “anathema” of the church, the Belhar rejections, if I understand them correctly, do not entail that those who adhere to such an ideology are to be evicted from the church. Because the Confession of Belhar defines itself as a *plea for reconciliation*, it is meant to help people to turn away from and change their erroneous views. Belhar intends to be a call to a “continuous process of soul-searching together” (AL 3) or to a “process of reconciliation” (AL 4). In a way, the rejections too are an impulse towards this end. And so, the rejections in Belhar leave some room for dialogue on the correction of the erroneous views *inside* the church. The Barmen Theological Declaration did not leave this option open to the German Christians, and that was a good thing at the time. On the other hand, the embedding of the rejections within concerns for reconciliation turned out to be a beneficial way to deal with the rejections that, for the sake of the truth, cannot be omitted. It breathes trust in the greater power of truth. In the long and often unfortunate history of Christian rejections and condemnations Belhar is an exemplary step forward in the spirit of the Gospel.

The Confession of Belhar and its rejections have also taken an important step forward in another way. I earlier mentioned the unfortunate fact that the Barmen Synod was not capable of directly rejecting the ideology of national socialism. It only stated that the church must not hand itself over to “the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day” (thesis 3). Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar speaks of “any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice” and does not hesitate to reject such ideologies. With this the confessing church of Belhar commits itself to the necessary political argument regarding this ideology. It goes beyond Barmen by taking an ethical-political issue as an issue for church confession. A dialogue on the intentions of Belhar and Barmen will have to look into the question of what circumstances or events today may challenge our churches to make such a confession.

3. THE INDIVIDUAL STATEMENTS OF THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR

3.1 Article One

I already hinted at possible questions regarding this article. Faith in the Triune God is depicted as merely expressing the work of God’s Spirit and it remains unclear whether this is identical to the work of the *Holy Spirit* in the Trinitarian tradition. In any case, the church appears to be the ultimate work of the Triune God. By adding that God, as Creator, has been doing this work “since the beginning of the world and will do to the end” – meaning when God’s kingdom comes – we find ourselves asking: what is meant by *this*? Has the Creator already “gathered” and “protected” the church? In Genesis 1:1 we read: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” – not the church. Therefore, the work of the Creator has to be distinguished from his election of Israel and from his Spirit-led gathering of the community and his witnessing the salvation work of Jesus Christ.

The second article itself meets those differentiations, calling the church “*the communion of the saints called from the entire human family*”. The church lives in a broken world, “*a world full of injustice and enmity*” (article 4). This is in accordance with the statement in the third Barmen thesis that the church has to “testify in the midst of a sinful world”. This, Barmen says, it does “in expectation of” the appearance of Jesus Christ or, as in article one of Belhar, because of what God had done and will do for the church “to the end”. Therefore, in its statement on Belhar the Theological Commission of the UEK interpreted the first article of the confession as follows: In his work as Creator, Reconciler and Perfected of the world, the Triune God electing humankind, aims towards the founding of the church. Because of the reconciliation brought by Jesus Christ, God gathers and protects the church by his Word and the Holy Spirit. This happens in the face of the perfection of the whole world into his kingdom. Correspondingly, in article 3 of Belhar, the church is characterised in eschatological terms as a “witness [...] to the new heaven and new earths”.

Thus, the church would be seen as a community of people representing the *community of Creation* willed by God and a *glimpse* of life in God’s kingdom. In this sense, article one could be considered an *ecclesiological exclusion* of a specific form of “natural theology”. What is excluded here under the reference to God the Creator, is that human conditions are shaped in a way that is contradictory to the human community willed by God, as is the case for example with racism. However, the theological danger of such reasoning is that it may create a certain *image* of the (although still fallible and subject to the temptation to sin) church, instead of making Jesus Christ himself the criterion for evaluating the condition of the world.

3.2 Article Two

The second article of the Confession of Belhar articulates the faith “in one holy, universal Christian Church”, particularly with regard to the *Unity of the Church*. This unity is based on the reconciliation brought about by Jesus Christ when he reconciled believers “with God and with one another”. Following the logic of the text, this unity of the Church, which is brought about by God’s Spirit, is to be understood as the *invisible* reality of faith. However, the article emphasises “that this unity must become visible”. The statement that this is necessary so that “the world may believe,” requires some clarification when we look at it with Barmen in mind. The aim of the proclamation of the Word of God is to awaken faith and the witness of the visible shape of the church can at best only be subordinated to it. In Belhar this order is turned around. The *witness of the visible unity* of the church is mentioned first, and later, in article three, it mentions the *message of reconciliation*. Article two is in accordance with the third thesis of Barmen insofar as a character of witness is assigned to the visible shape of the church, its order and obedience (i.e. its life). This witness expresses that the church “belongs to” Jesus Christ alone or, as Belhar 4 puts it: is “the possession of God”.

In describing the active realisation of the visible unity of the church one aspect stands out: Through Jesus Christ, “separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups” are overcome. Such matters are declared *sins*, meaning that sin is the enemy of unity among people. Sin has “no place in the Church and must be resisted”. In accordance with the universal tendency of the Confession of Belhar, we find that the intention to declare *all* matters destroying unity among people to be sinful can already be found in article one and will become more prominent in subsequent articles, thus going beyond Barmen’s third thesis. With the realisation of unity in the church in view and employing a biblical pattern, the confession mentions a variety of things, for example: the experience of community with one another and of mutual dependence; the one faith; the one baptism and the one bread and the one cup (this is the only place where the sacraments are mentioned!); praying and suffering together. What is essential is “...that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint”. The issue of the *freedom* of the church that is so central in Barmen is also highly noticeably here in Belhar. Also, the description of the mutual dependence of the members of the church reminds of the fourth Barmen thesis that demands that various offices in the church should be understood as being entrusted to “the whole community”.

The rejections of theological positions, which are justified because they cause a sinful separation of people within the church, correlate with the rejection in the third Barmen thesis. The church cannot leave “the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day”. Therefore, the church also cannot leave these matters to the ideology of apartheid. Apartheid can be justified neither with reference to creational diversity, nor with reference to the inevitability of sin. Apartheid also cannot be made a principle for membership of the church. If the latter should be the case, in the sense of the rejection in Barmen 2, the loyalty of the church and the ownership of the church do no longer belong to its lord, Jesus Christ.

3.3 Article Three

The structure of the third article of the Confession of Belhar is somewhat unbalanced, because it does not strictly keep up the distinction made between the articles of faith and the rejected doctrines anymore. Under the caption “we believe” views justifying apartheid are qualified as “ideology and false doctrine” and as an issue of faith itself. This applies in a similar way to the dissociation from the allegedly “Christian” apartheid regime. However, these statements can only be a conclusion of the principle that God “entrusted” the church with the message of reconciliation!

It is probably no coincidence that the term *entrust* was chosen instead of the terms *task* or *duty*. The message of reconciliation is meant to become part of the church and shape it “by word and by deed”. In this way, the church is given a conciliatory quality. In this way too it is still clear that God “by his life-giving Word und Spirit has [*already*] *conquered* the powers of sin and death”. The church, “in a new obedience”, can only be subordinated to this divine act. And yet, the emphasis is on the conciliatory quality of the church itself. The church is the “salt of the earth and light of the world”. It “is called blessed because it is a peacemaker”, as the Sermon on the Mount has it – in a slight problematic interpretation of the beatitudes as referring to the church. Its obedience (!) can open new possibilities for the world.

This still is in line with the second and third theses of Barmen. Christians in this world have to act in accordance with the Word of God and his claim. The visible shape of the church shows itself as belonging to Jesus Christ. Still, in Barmen the distinction between Christ and the church is more pronounced. It is the commission of the Church in Christ’s stead to “deliver all people (...) the message of the free grace of God” (Barmen 6). Instead of reconciliation, the soteriological basis terms of Barmen are God’s “free grace” and thus “forgiveness of sins” on which the church also depends. Of course this is not a contradiction, but Belhar understands reconciliation as a reality brought about in human words and acts within the church and from there on into the world. In the face of apartheid, there is a greater urgency to realise more directly the reality created by Jesus Christ. In the face of apartheid, “the road of new obedience and reconciliation” has to be travelled. Whoever does not do so, acts faithlessly; whoever teaches otherwise, teaches falsely.

The actual rejection in article three only states that the justification of apartheid “in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ”. However, this low-key phrase is probably owed to the already described tendency in the rejections to ask the representatives of the rejected doctrine to dare to engage in the process of reconciliation or to venture onto path of reconciliation. Sure enough, the churches that confess Belhar will *themselves* be afflicted with faithlessness and irreconcilability on such a path. This “weakening” that afflicts the reconciliation within the church until the kingdom of God comes will remain a matter of concern. In this situation in particular, and with Barmen in mind, it is essential to emphasise that the free grace of God precedes all human endeavours to be obedient to the commission of Jesus Christ and that this grace will not cease to forgive the sins of the church. To this effect, article three of Belhar states that “...we know we are not liberated by the seriousness, sincerity, or intensity of our certainties, but only by the truth in the Son”.

3.4 Article 4

This article deals with the question of how the church should react in the face of prevailing social and political injustice and the spread of famine, suffering and poverty in the world. It was an inevitable issue for the Confession of Belhar to address against the background of apartheid. Although the issue of reconciliation is not taken up again, the church’s commitment to social justice, which is founded on our faith in the righteousness of God, has to be taken in a context of a human realisation of reconciliation. The latter again is founded on the reconciliation brought about by Jesus Christ. With the second thesis of Barmen in mind, it would have been preferable if this context had been shown explicitly. God’s righteousness, which by God’s grace reconciles people, has an essentially social dimension. It shows itself in the biblical witness that God cares for the poor, the wretched, the disadvantaged, and the oppressed and in God’s call upon people to freely serve His creatures.

Article four of Belhar stresses the *urgency* of the church’s commitment to the cause of the oppressed against the powerful that are responsible for these oppressive conditions. It uses the extreme formulation: “The Church [...] must stand where He (God!) stands.” This seems to be in

direct contradiction to the 5th thesis of Barmen where the “unredeemed world” is described as the place “in which also the Church is situated”. And so, we need to ask if the church, although it preaches in Christ’s stead, isn’t accrediting itself a task that it cannot fulfil at all and thus succumbs to an overestimation of its own possibilities as a “church of pardoned sinners”.

Of course, the alternative cannot be that the church neglects its commitment to social justice. The “joyful deliverance [...] for a free, grateful service to his creatures” (Barmen 2) refers to the responsibility of all Christians and the church for shaping, as far as humanly possible, the social conditions in accordance with the work of Jesus Christ. What is also implied here is the responsibility of the church to remind the state of “God’s Kingdom, God’s commandment and justice” (Barmen 5) in its exercising of political power. Furthermore, there may be emergency situations when the church itself needs to be ready to intervene and act politically against injustice and oppression - I know what I am talking about when I think of autumn in 1989 in the GDR.

And still, the exercise of political power as such is not the commission of the church. Rather, it is to challenge the governing bodies to perceive their political power in a way that serves social justice. Against the background of South Africa under apartheid, the Confession of Belhar is more courageous than Barmen because it expresses this challenge unambiguously and it clearly sides with the oppressed and suffering.

3.5 Article 5

The final article of the Belhar Confession has the character of an encouragement to churches to confess as stated. This was necessary in the face of the expected repressions of such a confession by a racist regime. We should not forget that, at the time this confession came into being, all who stood by it risked life and limb (cf. article 4). Today this may remind us that a true confession of the church in the face of human violence, intolerance, and selfishness also always requires a letting go of the securities of this world.

4. CONCLUSION

All in all, going through the Belhar Confession from the perspective of the Barmen Theological Declaration has shown that one can legitimately say these two significant church confessions of the 20th century have much in common. The different emphases that were identified need to be discussed on this common basis with a forward orientation. The Barmen Theological Declaration qualifies the tendency of Belhar to directly realise reconciliation through the church and in society. The Belhar Confession lifts the barriers of church that limit the Barmen Theological Declaration. However, in both texts there are sufficient places where the concerns of the one text may be anchored in the other. And so, a dialogue on the intentions of the Belhar Confession and Barmen Theological Declaration has all the existing premises to become a fruitful dialogue and a blessing to the Church of Jesus Christ and our world today.