

‘We owe the world good theology’: On Reformed faith and public theology

ABSTRACT

In this article certain perspectives found in the numerous publications by Dirkie Smit are related to three emphases in the legacy of German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In thought as well as in praxis, Bonhoeffer 1) emphasised the importance of *being there for and with others* and 2) responded to the challenges of the immediate, complex context – *the world* – in which he was called to live and witness. 3) Finally Bonhoeffer, as a dedicated student of theology, emphasised the need for *good theology* in order to make a well-informed and well-grounded response to public discourse and life.

“Good theology connects that which is *enduringly important* with what is *currently urgent*” (Wolfgang Huber, 2004:39. Italics – JGB)

1. INTRODUCTION

In this tribute to Dirkie Smit I present a perspective on Reformed faith and public theology as it is evident from his life and work.¹ Aspects gleaned from a selection of his numerous publications² are related to three emphases that are evident in the legacy of the well known German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.³

In his thoughts and praxis Bonhoeffer firstly emphasised the importance of *being there with and for others*. Secondly, his theological reflection and praxis were always related to the

1 We both began studying at the University of Stellenbosch in 1970 and later became ministers of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. As personal friend, gifted scholar and as dedicated mentor, Dirkie Smit inspired me through the years to take theology seriously and, as professor of systematic theology at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), he became my doctoral promoter (cf. Botha 1992a, 1992b, 1996; Botha and Smit 1991). Between 1990 and 1994 I was privileged to lecture on a part-time basis with Smit in the Department of Systematic Theology at UWC.

2 Smit’s profile on the website of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch lists more than 370 publications from his pen!

3 The theological discernment and the courageous witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the German church’s struggle against Nazism, inspired and guided many theologians in South Africa in fulfilling their vocations to witness faithfully to the Gospel of Christ during the turbulent 1970s and beyond. In my own attempt to clarify the relation between *sound theology* (theory) and *responsible action* (ethics) in the South African context of the struggle against apartheid during the 1980s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer became an important conversation partner. It was Dirkie Smit who added Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* to my doctoral reading list. In doing so he prompted the development of a serious, inspiring and fruitful relationship with a wise, experienced and faithful brother from whom I could learn and whose legacy I could continuously consult. I regularly consulted works by and on Bonhoeffer in my service to congregations and synods of the Dutch Reformed Church family from the middle 1970s and also during my ecumenical involvement since the beginning 1980s (e.g. with the Department of Faith and Mission of the SACC, cf. e.g. Botha (et al) 1989).

challenges of the immediate, complex context – *the world* – in which he was called to live and witness. Thirdly, he emphasised the need for *good theology*, as a *well informed and responsible* response to public discourses and life.

Through the years I observed similar emphases to Bonhoeffer's in the theological work of Dirkie Smit. He too consciously developed his own theological witness through serious conversation *with* numerous *others*. Secondly, he also thoroughly considers his context, the public within which he has to make choices and contribute theologically. Thirdly, Smit consistently produces thoroughly discerned *theological perspectives* of *high standard*.⁴ In what follows I will show the existence of these three emphases – which can be summarised in the statement in the title of this article: We owe the world good theology – in the methodology and content of Smit's theology.

2. WE OWE THE WORLD GOOD THEOLOGY ...

2.1 In 1929, in his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio (The Community of the Saints)* (*SC*), Bonhoeffer – only 21 years old at the time! – discerned the core foundations for living, for being involved in and for doing theology together, in community. The young scholar convincingly argued that the metaphysics of sociality forms the foundation of human community (*SC* 229). One becomes a person only in relationship with others. The individual does not exist alone but only “through others.” Bonhoeffer was convinced that one's entire spirituality is interwoven with sociality and is founded on the basic relationship of you and I.⁵ This existence in relationship *with* one another (*mit einander*) is a God ordained togetherness. It is a sharing of love; a longing not to have more than the other; a being Christ for one another.⁶ In his 1933 work, *Schöpfung und Fall (Lectures on Creation and Fall)* (*SF*), Bonhoeffer also insisted that one only has *freedom* in relation to others since one only is free “for the other,” i.e. for God and for the neighbour. This freedom is constituted by the image of God in each of us (*SF* 39-44; cf. also Botha 1992:46ff).

In his lectures on the nature of the church (*Gesammelte Schriften V (GS V) 227-275*) Bonhoeffer relates theology, i.e. knowledge of God, with knowledge of the congregation, acknowledging the congregation and the togetherness of its members, as a pre-requisite for theology and as the triumph over erroneous Protestant subjectivism (*ibid* 239). At a time when the German ideology and theology of superiority and separation grew in popularity, Bonhoeffer argued that it is on the basis of the “we,” the togetherness of the congregants, the consciousness of being in community *mit einander* (with one another) and *für einander* (for one another), that theology becomes possible and meaningful.

2.2 The manner in which Dirkie Smit fulfils his task as student and teacher of theology reveals how highly he appreciates, values and practises this *being in community*. It resembles his own

4 As a diligent and very able teacher of theology, there are of course many more sides to Smit's theology, such as his focus on spirituality and liturgy, that are not included in the scope of this article.

5 In his reflections on human being and action *in community* Bonhoeffer focused on: sin and the broken community; the teaching of original sin; the corrupt nature of human action and being; creation and fall; the total corruption of humankind; the community of the saints and the need for the confession of guilt; the foundation of the community of the saints in the vicarious action of Christ; and vicarious action as foundation and practice of confessing guilt (cf. *SC, Akt und Sein (AS)* (1931) *SF, Das Wesen der Kirche (DWK)* (1932); also Botha 1992:46-94).

6 Cf. Botha 1992a:79 regarding *SC* 127 where Bonhoeffer refers to Martin Luther's Tesseradecas in W.A. X:1, 100; IV: 280 “Gott sind wir durch die Liebe, die uns gegen unseren Nächsten wohlthätig macht.”

conviction that knowledge of God, i.e. thorough, good theology is to be sought *with other* believers, *with other* members in the body of Christ, *with other* scholars in the field of theology.

Smit's 1988 tribute to his predecessor in the chair of systematic theology at Stellenbosch, Willie Jonker, clearly underscores this point of departure.⁷ It gives a clear and informative account of the broad and very influential teachings of Jonker. Furthermore, it serves not only as an excellent example of Smit's ability to identify the core arguments in the theological contributions of others, but also shows how frequently he himself chooses to defend the truth and applicability of their theological insights in contexts in which he himself works and is called to witness. At the same time the tribute clearly reveals Smit's own theological roots as well as his sensitivity for the foundational, catholic and inclusive nature of the church.⁸ Smit, for example, reminds the reader of Jonker's conviction that Reformed theology in essence is catholic in its striving to hold on to the complete truth ("*die katolisiteit van die waarheid*") (Smit 1989:21). Thus, in Reformed theology, we are taught to listen with fairness to viewpoints which, in our sincere efforts to comprehend fully, may be in conflict with our own, and to accept that they may contain hidden truths overlooked by ourselves. We have to listen carefully, stay constantly vigilant and guard against one-sidedness in our own perspectives and tendencies to adhere to only one truth or favourite subject since truth is more than only some important themes. In fact, we should invite dialogue and critique as it is essential in order for theology to stay alive. This is also why Smit recalls Jonker's outspoken pathos for the One Church of Jesus Christ, his continued positive attitude towards membership of the SACC by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)⁹ and his insistence that the ties between the DRC and the Dutch churches should be cultivated and not be broken. At a time when others strongly advised against it, Jonker was convinced that the DRC should participate in broader ecumenical involvement because he believed that: *a church that separates her from others dies* (In Smit 1989a:20. Italics – JGB). Differences of opinion may often lead to a clearer vision of the truth, since no single person or tradition has sole ownership of the truth. There therefore exists a certain tension in the relationship between truth and unity (cf. Jonker in Smit, *ibid*).

However, an important caveat in Jonker's theology that Smit mentions – and something that surely played a role in his own career when confronted with the situation facing the church that lead up to the formulation and acceptance of the Confession of Belhar – is that if the drive for unity, based on non-theological grounds, stands in the way of the truth, in Jonker's words, "the truth should have preference" (cf. Jonker 1987a on catholicity, unity and truth; cf. also Jonker 1984 specifically in the context of the Confession of Belhar).¹⁰ This attitude of Jonker's and Smit's also

7 Cf. Smit, D.J. 1989. "Om saam met al die heiliges Christus te ken." In Theron P.F. & J. Kinghorn (reds). 1989. *Koninkryk, kerk en kosmos: huldigingsbundel ter ere van Prof. W.D. Jonker*. Bloemfontein: Pro-Christo Publikasies, pp. 11-32.

8 Smit himself remarks that a tribute to someone else often reveals more of the way one understands oneself than of the person who receives the tribute (1989:11).

9 Smit's tribute to Jonker was published at a time when the DRC, of which Jonker was a prominent member and leading theologian, was very much in the ecumenical wilderness.

10 Smit (1989a:22) quotes Jonker: "... this [*i.e. truth above unity - JGB*] should not too easily become our point of departure. Of course the unity of the church is broken when the truth is denied. But we should not easily let one another go because differences arise. The truth itself is catholic and therefore unifying (Eph 4:11-16). The truth is grasped with all the saints (Eph 3:18). Because we know in part and prophecy in part (1Co 3:9) we need other Christians to assist us in knowing the truth. The lines of communication among the churches must increasingly be opened. The communion of the saints is not a luxury that one may opt not to practice, because both the love for our brothers and sisters and our zeal for the truth should

reminds one of Bonhoeffer who in 1935 opposed the notion in the ecumenical dogma of the time that claimed that each part of the Christian community contributes its perspective to the whole and that truth therefore only exists in unity.¹¹

What Smit learnt from and clearly appreciates in his mentor's theological oeuvre is evident in his own. Smit is highly respected in the church and by colleagues throughout the theological world for his ability to grasp historical and contemporary trends in the vast field of theology; for his impressive knowledge of so much of the theology that has been and is still produced today; for his sharp insight into contemporary debates and discourses; for his ability to discern and to integrate the insights contemporary theologians and of those from former times; and particularly, for his ability to relate fundamental theological insights to contemporary challenges and thus to facilitate the development of necessary discernment in the church. Despite this, Smit consciously and deliberately prefers not to work on his own, for himself. He prefers to do-theology-with-others, in community, with an openness to others, whom he sees as co-workers and co-witnesses to the truth, conscious of and continuously recognising that which is of value and worth in able older and younger voices.

As to his motives for working with and for deliberately giving credit to others for their contributions, Smit's inaugural address in 2002 at the Theological Faculty of Stellenbosch also serves an outstanding example.¹² The impressive subtext of this intriguing address is developed in numerous elaborate footnotes through which he indicates his relation to, his gratitude towards and appreciation of his fellow-theologians over the years. He for example, quotes Wainwright (1981)¹³ with approval saying that the theology *we* practice in essence occurs *towards God* (2002a:126), and uses Jean Leclercq's (1988)¹⁴ phrase to describe theology as something that unites *the love of learning with the desire for God* (ibid). Theology thus has to do with our worship of God and with our vocation. The study of theology, Smit continues, can only be done 'in service of the languages of Canaan,' in community and tradition; in and for discipleship; with friends and for friends; and, with reference to Noordmans (1980)¹⁵, for sinners and beggars, for *the world*.

3. WE OWE *THE WORLD* GOOD THEOLOGY ...

3.1 From works by Bonhoeffer it is evident that his theology, though originally more philosophical and academic in nature, e.g. *Sanctorum Communio* (1929) and *Akt und Sein*, (Act and Being) (1931) it became more focused from within and towards the church, as was the case with *Das Wesen der Kirche* (The nature of the church) (1932) and *Schöpfung und Fall* (Creation and Fall) (1933), *Nachfolge* (The cost of discipleship) (1933) and *Gemeinsames Leben* (Life together) (1938) and it eventually developed into a fully involved public theology as one finds in *Ethics*

urge us to seek the unity of the church ... The truth of the gospel is obviously more than our formulation of it." For Smit's own emphasis on the longing for and striving towards visible unity within the ecumenical world church cf. Smit 1992a. For and exposition of the nature of the church to which we belong cf. Smit 2002f.

11 Cf. Bonhoeffer's *Die Bekennende Kirche und die Oekumene* (1935), (GS I).

12 D.J. Smit. 2002a. "In diens van die tale Kanaans? Oor sistematiese teologie vandag." *NGTT*, 43 (1&2), March & June 2002, pp. 94-127.

13 Wainwright, G. 1981. "Towards God." *USQR*, Vol XXXVI, pp. 13-23.

14 Leclercq, J. 1988. *The love of learning and the desire for God. A study of monastic culture*. New York, NY: Fordham Univ Press.

15 Noordmans, O. 1980. "On Luke 8 & 16." In *Verzamelde Werken*, 8. Kampen: Kok cited in Smit 2002a:127.

(1940-1943) and *Letters and Papers from prison* (1943-1945). Bonhoeffer's theology informed his relationships with and for *others* as well as his choices and actions during extremely trying times (e.g. to become actively involved in the German resistance movement). He clearly understood that we owe our theology, our knowledge of God, to the other, to the public, to the world.

To put it differently: At no point is Bonhoeffer's theology understandable without pointing to the "here and now" of his time (Bethge 1979:144, 149; Botha 1992a:116ff). De Gruchy (1972:59) makes a similar remark when he indicates that although Bonhoeffer's theology supersedes the situation in which it was formed because of the quality of truth it usually carried, it can only be fully grasped in relation to its original context. Thus his biographer Bethge could convincingly show how Bonhoeffer's theology was essentially related to the questions of his day. For example, according to Bethge, in the 1920s Bonhoeffer said to the theologians: Your theme is the church! In the 1930s he said to the church: Your theme is the world! And, in the 1940s, Bonhoeffer said to the world: Your theme of abandonment is God's own theme and with that He does not trick you from experiencing full life, but indeed unlocks it for you! (cf. Bethge 1955:7-25; Botha 1992a:6-19)

3.2 Dirkie Smit, in a tribute to P.C. Potgieter (2002b), former professor of systematic theology at the University of the Orange Free State and moderator of the General Synod of the DRC, emphasises the fact that, unlike many other faith communities, the very nature of Reformed faith, its deepest convictions and pathos, makes it impossible for Reformed Christians to avoid involvement in society but obliges them to be consciously at the service of renewal and change (ibid 126). The essay demonstrates how a dual emphasis, of simultaneous affirmation and critical renewal, is rooted in the heart of the Reformed vision itself. The latter Smit describes, with reference to John Leith (1981),¹⁶ as "a way of being the Christian community in the world, before God" (ibid 127; cf. also Smit 2004d). No wonder that Smit, especially within the broader ecumenical context, over the years often reflected on the question of the contextualisation of Reformed theology and the importance of the contextualisation of theology from a Reformed perspective (cf. 1987a, 1989b, 2003a).

With this conviction of Smit's in mind, on closer scrutiny of some of his other publications since the 1980s, it is easy to identify certain prominent themes in his work which also mirrors some of the burning issues and challenges that faced South African society over the past almost three decades. A few examples will have to suffice: At a time of tremendous ideological and theological conflict in the country, Smit (1986) addressed a UNISA conference on reconciliation and construction, reflecting on the symbol of reconciliation and ideological conflict. In 1994/5 he took part in the public discourse on ethics, producing a series of four papers on the issue of the public morality: (a) discussing the question on what kind of ethics would be appropriate in this new era (1994); (b) asking whether we need a common moral language (1995a); (c) reflecting on developing suitable grammar for a life together (1995b); and (d) pondering on the nature and authority of church documents on public life (1995 with D.E. de Villiers; cf. also Smit 1997). Being deeply committed to the Bible as the revealed Word of God,¹⁷ Smit also focused on its relation to the ethos of the new South Africa, in particular the relationship between the ethics of the New Testament and life in our country (e.g. 1991, 1992b).

16 Leith, J.H. 1981. *Introduction to the Reformed tradition. A way of being in the Christian community*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox, quoted in Smit 2002:127.

17 Smit is co-editor of an authoritative and instructive series, *Woord teen die lig*, of which 22 volumes were published since 1981. It contains guidelines for preaching, that emphasizes thorough exegesis, serious accounting for context and clear homiletical guidance.

Other complex and important issues caught Smit's attention late in the 1980s and early in the 1990s. Of particular importance was the development of his thoughts on the guilt question, for example with reference to the theology and praxis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Equally important were his insights on guilt in the light of the truth and reconciliation process, the function of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995a), and his fundamental perspectives on truth and reconciliation from the Christian tradition – the latter includes reflections on memory and confession; confession and guilt; guilt and truth; truth and forgiveness; confession to and forgiving one another; public confession and objections to confession-guilt-truth-and-forgiveness (1996a).

The unique public role of the church (1996b, 1996c, 2003c, 2004a, 2006a); our vocation as Christians in the world of work (2001, 2002d); social challenges, such as poverty, that face or faced the church have and still receive Smit's attention (2004c, 2004e). In addition, regarding economic challenges, he reflected on the matter of Reformed ethics and economic justice (1996d); gave a Reformed perspective on the challenges facing Protestantism and ecumenism in a time of global transformation (2002c); discerned the need for a possible confession in relation to justice and the global economy (2003b); commented on the question of whether human dignity and human rights can be applied as possible guiding principles for the economy (2004 with Nico Koopman). Finally, Dirkie Smit has for years provided substantial and precious spiritual guidance to Christians by way of the popular press in his weekly column, *Geestelike Waardes*, in a major Afrikaans daily newspaper.¹⁸

All of the above convincingly illustrates Smit's deep conviction that theology also has to do with what occurs in the world around us and should therefore be highly interested and deeply involved in what goes on in society, in the fullness of culture, in economy and politics. Theology wants to serve the open and public church, public life in the polis and the salvation of the world. Although it should always clearly present its contributions with humility, *faith - and therefore theology - is irrevocably contextual*, meant for everyday life. Theology can and should help the faithful to see the fullness of life, to reflect on it and to discuss it according to the grammar of faith, the rules of the gospel for speech and life. This should be done within the community of the faithful as well as in society at large. Theology must result in the communication of the gospel. But this communication has to be filled with a good grasp of the essence of the matter, of that which essentially matters, of the content of the gospel (cf. Smit 2002a). This brings the *good theology* that we owe the world into focus.

4. WE OWE THE WORLD GOOD THEOLOGY ...

4.1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasised the need for good theology. In the July 1932 Bonhoeffer, amidst extremely dangerous developments within and outside Germany, in reading these 'signs of the times,' addressed a youth conference on peace in Ciernohorské Kupele in Czecho-Slovakia. His contribution was titled: "On the Theological basis of the work of the World Alliance." (Bonhoeffer referred here to the World Alliance of Churches, a forerunner of the WCC.)¹⁹ Even if, according to Eberhard Bethge (1985:183ff), his contribution may have seemed unimportant and tedious to some in the audience, it was however extremely important to the ecumenical movement and with that to the Christian witness of the time. In his address Bonhoeffer was critical of the lack

18 Collections of these "spiritual values" from Smit's pen have also been published, the most recent being *Stukkies van die hemel op aarde* (2004d).

19 For a summary of this address cf. *Gesammlte Schriften IV*, 159-161.

of thorough theological discernment in the ecumenical movement. His introductory statement, “there is no theology of the ecumenical movement” made this abundantly clear (cf. *GS I*, 159-161). He criticised the older leaders of the ecumenical movement for refraining from establishing a theological foundation for their work and judged ecumenical committees to be ad hoc bodies that depend on the changes in political climate (Bethge 1985:184). Without an ecumenical theology, Bonhoeffer was convinced that the ecumenical movement was defenceless against attacks on world peace from political powers. Bonhoeffer argued that at the time, i.e. the early 1930s, ecumenical thinking was clearly dependant on political influences like nationalism and internationalism and in this context he pleaded for greater theological responsibility. He stated that the down-playing of theology by its “practitioners” should be stopped and appealed for *good theology* on behalf of the German youth who were living in extremely difficult and dangerous socio-political times. In 1933 the National-Socialist Party of Adolf Hitler won political power in Germany and nationalism associated with denominationalism was propagated by German theologians with high public standing, such as Althaus and Hirsch (Bethge *ibid*, 183ff). Bonhoeffer realised that the ecumenical movement did not give the youth any *theological anchors* against these waves that rolled over them from all sides, since those within the movement neglected to produce the substantial theological guidance within which ecumenical work should be done (cf. *GS I* 141).

The address above was given not long after Bonhoeffer was prompted to take ethics more seriously and ascribe greater value to social involvement during his studies at Union Theological Seminary in the USA in 1931/2 – this did however not prevent him from being deeply troubled by what he perceived as a lack of real theological discernment in the training of the American theological students.²⁰ In his later lectures on the essence of the church, Bonhoeffer reiterated that no Protestant sermon or confession is possible without theology. For him theology was the first task of the church. He was convinced that neither creed nor cult nor real religiosity brings forth a good sermon and so he judged an arrogant attitude towards theology as both misplaced and distasteful (*DWK in GS V* 260).

In 1933, when the so-called ‘German Christians’ took over the government of the German Evangelical Church, Bonhoeffer stopped teaching theology at the University of Berlin and became a congregational pastor in London. As a small parting gift Bonhoeffer gave his students a fine essay titled *What must a student of theology do today?* (cf. Bethge 1985:251; Rothuizen 1970). In it he expressly forbade them to speak contemptuously of theological learning, urged them to test the spirits of the Church, and ‘... to live not by superior knowledge or self-righteousness, but by forgiveness alone’ (Bethge 1985:252).

Later, in June 1934, when Bonhoeffer was requested to teach theological students for the Confessing Church, his remarks in a letter to his friend Sutz are significant. In it one sees not only that he thought the teaching of theology was important, but was convinced ‘... that young theologians ought now to be trained throughout in conventional seminaries where the pure doctrine [orthodoxy – JGB], the Sermon on the Mount [orthopraxis – JGB] and worship [doxology – JGB] are taken seriously as they never are at a university’ (Bethge 1985:334).

20 The American Bonhoeffer scholar John Godsey (1960:25,26) remarks that at the time Bonhoeffer was critical of the American church-society and in particular their indifference to the quest for truth, the search for the right confession, their superficial, non-theological definition of the church and the general inefficient scientific preparation of pastors for the ministry (cf. also Bethge, 1979:39-43; 1979:107-125 and Botha 1992a:123).

4.2 As with Bonhoeffer, Dirkie Smit does not only take the current context very seriously, but is equally serious about understanding the fundamental theological questions that have bearing on the challenges that face the church in the world today. This can again be substantiated by taking note of some of the recurring emphases found in his publications since the 1980s. I will illustrate this with reference to Smit's development of three of these emphases in fundamental theological reflection.

Over time Dirkie Smit developed a keen interest in hermeneutics, in how we come to know and really grasp the meaning of the Biblical text we read. Smit frequently endeavoured to shed light on the complicated hermeneutical process, not only because of the differences in which individual believers, churches, and traditions read and understand Scripture, but also because of the possibilities these differences present for discussion, communication and mutual understanding as well as for real community, for life together and for working together. At the same time the question as to the boundaries of tolerance of differences in understanding, as to where the limits of the meaning of Biblical texts in one's own community and traditions are overstepped also occupied Smit's mind. (cf. 2002:111).

The thorough research and reflection that characterise all of Smit's work is also evident in the various articles and books he published on this topic (cf. e.g. Smit 1987b, 1998a, 1998b). In his recent, highly acclaimed and informative book on hermeneutics, *Neem, lees! Hoe ons die Bybel hoor en verstaan* (2006b), Smit explores the ways in which the Bible relates to our everyday lives and indicates how Scripture, as God's *Word*, speaks to multitudes of people finding themselves in different circumstances with real, life-changing effect²¹ He also aligns himself with Willie Jonker's view that for the Reformation, the Bible alone had the highest and final authority for the life and teaching of the church – it was the norm by which everything else is measured, the last referee in all disputes, the source and norm for the confession and proclamation of the church (2006b:182).

A second frequent emphasis in Smit's published works is on the identity and nature of Reformed theology and spirituality (cf. e.g. 1989c, 1998c, 2002b). Well aware of the multifaceted and complex character of the Reformed tradition he recently again picked up on the theme he addressed earlier, namely Reformed theology as a story of many stories (cf. 1992c, 2004f). However, as is clear from another recent article, he also continues to deal with the important question whether or how we can still be Reformed in our encounter with the broader ecumenical church (cf. 2003d).

Finally, Smit served the church locally (in particular the churches in the DRC family) and internationally (particularly those within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches) with his valuable and informative reflections on the nature and reception of confessions in general (cf. 1984a, 1984b, 1998d, 2000, 2002e, 2006d). In addition to this Smit, as co-author of the Confession of Belhar (1982), diligently and skilfully explain its origin, content, reception and relevance for Reformed churches. This he does in lectures to his students and to the church at large in addresses in various church forums and in regular, illuminative publications (cf. esp. 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 2006c). Smit's continuous efforts in this regard are particularly valuable and meaningful because confessions, always focus our attention on the heart of the Biblical teaching, on the heart of our faith. In addition, deliberations on and decisions in favour of or against the adoption of a particular confession by churches, their individual members or congregations, as was the case with Belhar in

21 In fact, the phrase *Neem, lees!* (Take, read!) in the title of the book refers to the command Augustine heard in 386 after which he read Rom. 13:13ff which resulted in his conversion to Christianity! Cf. also Smit 2006b:109-110 for remarkable consensus in world ecumenical church on role of the Scriptures in history.

the former DRMC and is currently the case in the wider Reformed family, ask for exceptional discernment and wisdom.²²

5. CONCLUSION

In a recent publication *Was ist gute Theologie?*, of which he also was the editor, Wolfgang Huber (2004:39) argues that good theology connects that which is *enduringly important* with what is *currently urgent*. Good theology, he writes, serves the Christian faith in drawing from the latter's origins and historical shapes in its encounter with the consciousness of truth in the present. Furthermore, according to Huber, good theology involves itself in this process with a scientific spirit (*Wissenschaftlichkeit*) in order to discern wisely. In good theology: accuracy is as appropriate as intelligibility; both passion and the sober gaze of scientific critique imprint the quest for God (*Gottesfrage*); serves both those who are at home (*beheimatet*) in the faith as well as the many who do not know this home. Good theology subjects itself to the norms of good science, but at the same time it is open to public debate; it knows that theology is not the only language of faith, since the language of prayer points beyond it, and it knows what the differences are between the languages of theology and prayer; and finally, good theology does exist. However, continues Huber, it is clear that there is no over-supply thereof, as those who read theological texts, are involved with theological examinations, or hope for discernment at theological conferences, are indeed conscious of.

In my opinion Wolfgang Huber accurately captures the essence of good theology and it applies remarkably well to the theological legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as well as to the theological contributions of Dirkie Smit. It is obvious – from the issues Smit chose to reflect upon amidst a myriad of contenders for his theological attention, from his methodology of consciously doing theology with others, and the contents of his reflections – that his theology continuously connects that which is *enduringly important* with what is *currently urgent*.

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22 Cf. in this regard also Botha and Naudé 1998.

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Dirkie Smit
Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Teologiese bydrae en metodologie
Publieke teologie
Gereformeerde geloof

Dr JG Botha
Privaatsak X 8
7535 BELLVILLE
Tel.:(021) 975 7184
E-pos: kga2@kaapkerk.co.za