



The reception and relevance of Karl Barth in South Africa¹

Reflections on “doing theology” in South Africa after sixty years in conversation with Barth

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Abstract

The article traces the reception of Barth's theology from the Second World War through to the present in ecumenical and missiological circles, and in theological education. But the major focus is on the resistance to Barth on the part of theological advocates of apartheid, and his positive influence of key participants in the church struggle against apartheid. In addition, there is discussion of the black theological response to Barth and the significance of his legacy for democratic transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Key words

Apartheid; The Message; Belhar; Ben Marais; David Bosch; BB Keet; FJM Potgieter; DS Bax; Beyers Naudé; Takatso Mofokeng

1. Introduction

How is it possible to ascertain the reception of Barth and evaluate his relevance in South Africa, so far removed from Basel in geographical and cultural space from Barth's historical context? Do we survey academic courses and dissertations, consider the ways in which his work has inspired preachers, informed theological educators, influenced mission or energized

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political witness? And is his relevance dependent on whether he has been named or on the extent of his anonymous influence, Barth *incognito*? After all, Barth was a major figure in the revival of biblical theology and in the shaping of the ecumenical movement both of which have influenced us all probably without knowing about his role. But, in any case, of “which Barth” do we speak – the Barth of *Der Römerbrief* or *The Humanity of God*, or the Barth read through the lens of one of his many and sometimes quarrelling interpreters? And who are we who do this reflection? Descendants of European colonists, indigenous people, products perhaps of the legacy of Swiss missionaries from the Basel Missionary Society with which he had much to do, or visitors from many lands who have never set foot before on the soil where we gather?

At one level, the reception of Barth’s theology in South Africa has not been different from elsewhere, but there are two reasons why it has been distinct. The first is the predominance of the Reformed tradition and the role played by Calvinism in shaping colonial and modern South Africa. The second is the resonance between the social, economic and ideological forces at work during the first half of the twentieth century in both Europe and South Africa. But perhaps most important for the reception of Barth’s theology in South Africa has been its “prophetic” rather than systematic character.³ Not that Barth’s theology was un-systematic, but because it was not an idealist academic exercise. Theology, for Barth, was about discerning and proclaiming God’s Word in response to worldly events and human needs, and therefore his theology was decidedly political and contextual, while always striving to be subject to the Word alone.

2. The early reception of Barth in South Africa

An early indication of Barth’s possible relevance is found in the April 1941 edition of the *South African Outlook*, an English-speaking ecumenical missionary journal, which published extracts from Barth’s letter to French Protestants in 1940 shortly before France capitulated to Nazi Germany. In it, Barth exhorts his fellow Christians to engage in the struggle against

3 Quoted in Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

National Socialism because Christians cannot remain neutral in the fight against such evil.⁴ Political neutrality is not an option for Christians. The fact that Barth's letter was republished in the *Outlook* and seven years before Afrikaner Nationalism came to power, is significant. For what Barth had to say was as significant in the struggle against British colonial racial policy as embodied in the Constitution of the Union of South Africa (1910) well before the advent of apartheid. And just as the editors were mindful that the Versailles Treaty had spawned the rise of National Socialism in Germany, so they were mindful that the British defeat of the Boer Republics in 1902 had contributed to the rise of right-wing Afrikaner Nationalism. Both, colonialism and nationalism had to be resisted.⁵

Barth never wrote a letter to Christians in South Africa nor did he visit the country. And there is only one reference to South Africa in his *Church Dogmatics*, in volume IV/1, published in 1953, five years after apartheid became government policy. Having rejected segregation in the church by insisting that when nationality, race, class or culture determine the character of the church it denies its catholicity, Barth goes on to ask: "How much longer will it be possible in the United States and South Africa to ratify the social distinctions between whites and blacks by racial segregation in the Church?"⁶

Barth gave the opening plenary address at the First Assembly at the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 attended by delegates from South Africa, including Dutch Reformed theologians. He also influenced many of the ecumenical and missiological leaders of the time, among them Wilhelm Visser't Hooft, Hendrik Kraemer and Hans Hoekendijk, and Ben Marais, professor of Missions at Stellenbosch, who was also a member of the International Missionary Council.⁷ And it was probably Marais who

4 Karl Barth, "The Present Struggle," Extracts from an open letter to French Protestants, October 1940, republished in *Outlook on a Century: South Africa 1870–1970*, eds. Francis Wilson and Dominique Perrot, (Alice, Eastern Cape: Lovedale Press, 1973), 664–668.

5 *Outlook on a Century*, 404–5

6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1961), 703.

7 See Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs* (London: SCM, 1973), 279. 283; Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1976), 357–61 et.al. See also P.J. Maritz, *Ben Marais (1909–1999): The Influences*

first made Barth aware of the ecclesiological consequences of apartheid in South Africa. Marais alludes to this in his book, *Colour: The Unsolved Problem of the West*, published in 1952. In response to his question whether segregation in the church could be biblically justified, Barth tersely answered: “Nein! Nazi-theologie!”⁸

Marais’ influence in teaching DRC missionaries first at Stellenbosch and then at Pretoria was considerable. Which leads me to the observation that Barth’s influence in South Africa was initially mediated largely through white ecumenically-minded missiologists of the DRC. Apart from Marais, others were J.A. van Wyk, who taught at Turfloop (now the University of Limpopo), and most notably David Bosch, who studied in Basel in the 1950’s, and regarded Barth as “the father of the modern theology of mission.”⁹ Certainly, the South African Missiological Society, founded by Bosch, was far more open to Barth’s influence than the South African Theological Society (*Dogmatologiese Werkgemeenskap*) which, in those years, was dominated by neo-Calvinists who were decidedly anti-Barthian, anti-ecumenical, and pro-apartheid.

A notable exception was the professor of dogmatics at Stellenbosch, B.B. Keet, who, in those post-war years, was introducing his students to Barth’s theology in a positive light. In his opening lecture at the centenary celebration of the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology in 1959, Keet traced the development of Reformed theology over the past century and concluded with words of appreciation for Barth’s contribution. This was a courageous note on which to end, given the fact that most DRC theologians regarded Barth as a heretic and a threat. But this was also Keet’s valedictory lecture, and as such brought an end to an era in which Barth’s contribution to theology was at least sympathetically taught at Stellenbosch. Fortunately, by then, Keet had had a profound influence on at least one of his students,

and Heritage of a South African Prophet during two periods of Transformation. DD Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2003, 159

8 B.J. Marais, *Colour: Unsolved Problem of the West* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1952), 301ff.

9 David Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980), 167.

Frederick Beyers Naudé, the future leader of the church struggle in South Africa.¹⁰

Whether regarded as a heretic or a hero, it was not only in DRC theological circles that Barth's theology was taught in South Africa at that time. A few years before Keet's retirement, a Scottish theologian, Norman Robinson, was appointed professor of theology at Rhodes University.¹¹ As a result of his teaching, at least one Presbyterian student, Douglas Bax, fell under Barth's spell. Bax later studied at Princeton and Göttingen and wrote his dissertation on the Barmen Declaration. Despite never completing it, his research, teaching and later prophetic leadership greatly influenced the church struggle in South Africa. In his extensive and carefully constructed critique of the DRC's theological defence of apartheid he not only provided a critical analysis of the biblical texts used to defend apartheid, but also drew on the writings of Calvin and Barth as well as the Reformed Confessions.¹²

Bax was a final year student when I began my theological studies at Rhodes in 1957, but I was scarcely aware of Barth or his role in the struggle against Nazism, let alone his potential significance for South Africa. By then Robinson's place had been taken by William Maxwell who was not an admirer of Barth, though he did suggest that we read Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline*. But much of my knowledge of Barth at that time came from reading John Baillie's critique of his theology,¹³ which illustrates that most of us white English-speaking theological students learnt about Barth second-hand. And most of what we learnt was half-baked, as was true also of the ministers in our churches, most of them trained in Britain. An editorial in *The Congregationalist* at that time described Barth as a died-in-the-wool Calvinist whose theology aided and abetted Afrikaner Calvinism in its support for apartheid! Maxwell's successor at Rhodes, an Australian, Angus Holland, who was much under Barth's influence, introduced the

10 See Colleen Ryan, *Beyers Naudé: Pilgrimage of Faith* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990), 37.

11 N.H.G. Robinson, *Christ and Conscience* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1956).

12 Douglas S. Bax, *A Different Gospel: A Critique of the Theology Behind Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa, 1979).

13 John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

next generation of students to Barth, but most students found Holland incomprehensible, and probably assumed that Barth was equally so!

Meanwhile, back at Stellenbosch, Keet's place had been taken by F.J.M. Potgieter, a neo-Calvinist and theological apologist for apartheid. Potgieter had studied at the Free University of Amsterdam in the late 1930's when German Nationalism was gaining traction, and where Barth came in for severe criticism from Potgieter's neo-Calvinist teachers who gave Barth a rough time when he visited Holland. So much was this the case, that Barth was left "wondering why he had not died long ago as a result of all their refutations!"¹⁴ But Potgieter swallowed their refutations and, until his retirement in 1977, taught several generations of DRC students to do the same. For him, Barth's theology undermined not only the authority of the Bible but also the doctrine of election which, for Potgieter as for Barth, though understood very differently, was the cornerstone of dogmatics. In short, Potgieter and his neo-Calvinist colleagues agreed with Cornelius van Til of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, that Barth was a heretic of classic proportions.¹⁵

But the problem with Barth went further in South Africa than it did in neo-Calvinist Holland, Michigan or Pennsylvania, because Barth's theology also undermined the cornerstones of the DRC justification of apartheid. For that reason, opposing Barth was necessary for the future of the *volk*. It was a nationalist's theological duty to say "Nein!" to Barth as well as to Catholicism and liberalism!

Despite this patriotic pressure, there was a small but growing handful of theologians, ministers and especially missionaries in the DRC for whom Barth had opened windows into the "strange new world of the Bible," a window difficult to shut, and had offered them new perspectives on the ecumenical church and its mission. Without necessarily mentioning his name, perhaps for strategic reasons. Barth's influence was becoming evident in various publications at the time, most notably *Delayed Action!* in

14 Busch, *Karl Barth*, 381.

15 Cornelius van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962); Busch, *Karl Barth*, 380.

1961, which was edited and included an opening essay by Keet titled “The Bell has already tolled,” thus striking a distinctly Barthian note.¹⁶

At the same time, something was happening in the Netherlands that was of concern to those DRC leaders and theologians in South Africa who defended apartheid. One reason for this apprehension was the work of theologians like Kornelis Miskotte,¹⁷ Hendrikus Berkhof, and G.C. Berkouwer who in *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (1956) rejected Van Til’s critique of Barth and reminded his readers that “Barth’s main concern” was “to speak of the all-conquering grace of God in Christ Jesus.”¹⁸ While fewer DRC theological students were now encouraged to study at the Free Amsterdam, some did, and among them was a new generation who had begun to find that Barth, instead of being a heretic, was a breath of fresh and evangelically authentic air. One of these was Jaap Durand who, though nurtured in neo-Calvinism, became its trenchant critic, and later influenced several generations of theologians within the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (now URCSA), including Dirkie Smit and Allan Boesak.¹⁹

In addition, by the end of the nineteen-fifties, Professor Keet’s student Beyers Naudé had not only become a leading minister in the DRC, but also increasingly aware of the injustices of apartheid and the parallels between National Socialism and Afrikaner Nationalism. And then, in March 1960, the Sharpeville Massacre took place, which led to the WCC Cottesloe Consultation that December, and the subsequent rejection of its decisions by the DRC. In an act of defiance which then cost him his ministerial status, Naudé launched the journal *Pro Veritate* in 1962 and established the *Christian Institute* as an anti-apartheid ecumenical confessing movement.²⁰

16 B.B. Keet, “The Bell Has Already Told,” in *Delayed Action: An Ecumenical Witness from the Afrikaans-Speaking Church*, ed. B.B. Keet (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1961), 5–12.

17 The Dutch theologian with whom Barth had most in common. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 469f.

18 G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster Press, 1956); see also G.C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 39–74.

19 J.J.F. Durand, “Church and State in South Africa: Karl Barth Vs. Abraham Kuyper,” in *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988), 121–38.

20 Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. de Gruchy (eds.), *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip;

In those early years *Pro Veritate* regularly carried articles by Keet and Naudé on the confessing church in Germany and its relevance for the struggle against apartheid, in which Barth, the Barmen Declaration, as well as Bonhoeffer's involvement in the German resistance, were frequently mentioned.

Perhaps the most avid of all South African "Barthians", a very appropriate label in this instance, was Johannes Lombard, who studied under Barth in the nineteen-fifties, and even lived in his house in Basel for some of that time. He is the only South African referred to in Eberhard Busch's biography: "Among the foreigners" writes Busch "the cheerful South African Johannes Lombard stuck particularly close to Barth, persistently alternating between 'Sister Charlotti' (sic) and 'little father' (that's me), always pursuing his rapid course either 'in the seventh heaven' or 'worried to death'."²¹ Lombard was, in many ways, a tragic figure, but during his tenure as professor of dogmatics at UNISA he structured his entire three-year course on Barth's *Church Dogmatics* and so introduced many students of all denominations, confessions and races, to Barth's theology as if it were the only theology worth studying. When I registered for my doctoral degree at UNISA in 1968, and presented my proposal on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, Lombard insisted that I had to do so in dialogue with Barth.²² By this stage I was on the staff of the South African Council of Churches and in daily contact with Naudé and the *Christian Institute* as the confessing church struggle was reaching a critical point of no return.

3. Barth, the church struggle and Black Theology

In 1966 Naudé attended the WCC Conference on Church and Society in Geneva together with Bishop Bill Burnett, the newly appointed General Secretary of the Christian Council, renamed the SACC shortly after. On their return to South Africa they initiated a series of nation-wide conferences on Pseudo-Gospels which led to the publication of *The Message*

Grand Rapids, 1985); Colleen Ryan, *Beyers Naudé: Pilgrimage of Faith* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990).

21 Busch, *Karl Barth*, 403.

22 John W. de Gruchy, *The Dynamic Structure of the Church: A Comparative Analysis of the Ecclesiologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, doctoral dissertation, Unisa, 1972.

to the People of South Africa August 1968.²³ Sometimes referred to as the South African Barmen Declaration, the *Message* insisted that apartheid was a false gospel offering false hope of salvation based on racial segregation; by contrast, the gospel of Jesus Christ was the good news that in Christ God broke walls of division between God and humanity, and between divided humanity. While the *Message* did not reference any theologian by name, and while the influence of Barth is apparent, the *Message* was different to the Barmen Declaration as drafted by Barth in that it addressed the “people of South Africa,” not only to the church, and was explicitly political in its denunciation of racism, while Barmen, though an act of political defiance, said nothing about the persecution of the Jews.

The *Message* evoked heated theological debate and wide-spread criticism in church and political circles.²⁴ Some criticism came from black theologians because the *Message* was largely drafted by white theologians and primarily addressed white South Africans who were by no means the majority of “the people of South Africa.” It was also a “liberal” theological document; a label also attached to it by conservative neo-Calvinists. But for Naudé and those who gave it their support, the *Message* was a prophetic declaration that categorically rejected apartheid as a false gospel and insisted that the gospel of Christ was not just about personal salvation but had direct implications for justice in political and social life.

I think Barth would have given his assent to the *Message* as suggested in an editorial in the October 1968 issue of *South African Outlook* shortly after the *Message* was published. In it the editors observed that there is no difference between the “philosophy of Apartheid” and that of Nazism and challenged their readers to “take to heart the warning of Karl Barth who with “Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, provided the theological backbone of the church under Hitler.”²⁵

This reference to Niemoller, who had recently visited South Africa, and Bonhoeffer in the same sentence as Barth, illustrates that by 1968 Barth’s

23 See John W. de Gruchy, “Revisiting the Message to the People of South Africa, 1968–2018,” *The Ecumenical Review* (September 23, 2018): 198–203.

24 *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, eds. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986).

25 *Outlook on a Century*, 691.

legacy was regarded by some as more than a theological critique of apartheid, it was a call to resist tyranny.

By the early nineteen-seventies the *Message* was overshadowed by the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) led by Steve Biko, and the rise of Black Theology, influenced by James Cone in the US.²⁶ The days had passed when white liberals or anti-apartheid confessing Christians, could lead the internal resistance to apartheid as they had since Sharpeville and Cottesloe.²⁷ A new generation was developing a theology rooted in the black experience of the gospel as the good news of liberation from oppression and, so it might have seemed, the white Swiss Reformed theologian from Basel had little more to offer. After all, Cone, who had taken Barth positively in his early theological development, no longer engaged Barth in conversation because, as he said, white theologians involved in that exercise “did not acknowledge black humanity in their theology.”²⁸

Barth’s theology posed a serious problem for black theologians who were engaged in developing an African theology. His rejection of natural theology and insistence that there is no such thing as a German, Swiss or “African Christianity” was unacceptable. Christian faith could not avoid becoming embodied in culture if it was to be relevant, for Christ cannot redeem what he has not assumed. Do we not have to hear the gospel each in our own language, idiom and therefore culture? So while Barth’s theology may have been helpful in the struggle against apartheid, it was unhelpful in enabling black African Christians to affirm their true humanity. The counter to that argument came from a leading Black theologian of the time, the Lutheran Manas Buthelezi. Black theologians should not get bogged down in a debate about whether theology should be “black” or “white”, African or European, Buthelezi said, but rather reflect “on the reality of

26 *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, ed. Basil Moore (Atlanta: John Knox, 1973).

27 Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964–1979*, A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990, vol. 5 (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997).

28 James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 34. See also James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 48–52.

God and his Word which grows out of that experience of life in which the category of blackness has some existential decisiveness.”²⁹

Barth’s theology was not against either liberation or humanization, as Gustavo Gutiérrez noted at the beginning of *A Theology of Liberation*, for at the core of Barth’s theology was the affirmation that God became a human being.³⁰ In fact, in the same text from which Gutiérrez quotes, namely Barth’s essay “The Christian Community and the Civil Community” (1946), Barth also categorically speaks about the equality and liberation of women,³¹ and the need for the church to regard the poor, the socially and economically weak, as its “primary and particular concern.”³² This meant that God’s election could be understood as God’s preferential option for the oppressed. So, while the advocates of African Christianity were right to insist on the indigenization of Christian faith, as Cone said after long conversations with John Mbiti, they had to take “the political ingredient of the gospel” as seriously as its indigenization.³³ The same reason why Bonganjalo Goba, another pioneer of Black Theology in South Africa, insisted that: “the Barthian theology of the Word is crucial for the black Christian community”.³⁴

Buthelezi, a one-time colleague of Beyers Naudé, was fully aware of the role played by Barth and Bonhoeffer in the German church struggle, and of their discussions about the *status confessionis* that confronted the Protestant Church in 1933.³⁵ And it was Buthelezi who persuaded the sixth

29 Manas Buthelezi, “African Theology or Black Theology?” in *Essays in Black Theology*, ed. Mokgethi Motlhabi (Johannesburg: Black Theology Project of the University Christian Movement, 1972), 3–9.

30 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. by Matthew J. O’Connell (rev. ed, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), 6. See fn. 24, p 179 where Gutiérrez references Barth’s essay “The Christian Community and the Civil Community,” in *Against the Stream*, 15–50. See also Gorringe, *Karl Barth*, 268–90.

31 Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946–52* (London: SCM, 1954), 38.

32 Barth, *Against the Stream*, 36.

33 James H. Cone, “A Black American Perspective on the Future of African Theology,” in *African Theology en Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 182.

34 Bonganjalo Goba, *An Agenda for Black Theology* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1988).

35 See D.J. Smit, “In a Special Way the God of the Destitute, the Poor, and the Wronged,” in *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church*, 1982, ed.

Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, meeting in Dar-es-Salaam in 1977, that a *status confessionis* existed in South Africa. This prompted the LWF to declare that the theological justification of apartheid was a heresy. In turn, it led Allan Boesak and his associates to launch ABRECSA (Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa) in 1981, and to the drafting of the Belhar Confession in 1982 which led to its adoption by the Synod of the DR Mission Church in 1986.³⁶ The main drafters of Belhar, both strongly influenced by Barth, were Jaap Durand and Dirkie Smit, who consciously modelled it on the Barmen Declaration.

In such ways, black and white anti-apartheid Reformed theologians were demonstrating that Barth's influence was alive in doing theology in South Africa during the final years of the struggle against apartheid. Reformed theology was being reworked as a liberation theology,³⁷ as was powerfully evident in the work of Allan Boesak,³⁸ and Takatso Mofokeng for whom Barth was his chief interlocutor in writing his dissertation on Christology.³⁹ Mofokeng was not uncritical of Barth, but Barth's Christology resonated with Black Theology in its affirmation of God's solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the suffering. Such work led Durand, the mentor of many black Reformed theologians, to write: "This much at least of Karl Barth's message has come to be accepted within influential South Africa theological circles as a genuine Reformed concept."⁴⁰ Later, in his book *Confessional Theology?* Rodney Tshaka would provide a *Critical Analysis of the Theology of Karl Barth and its Significance for the Belhar Confession*.

In 1985, while the Belhar process was still being finalized, a further confessing document was launched, namely *The Kairos Document* in which prophetic theology was clearly distinguished from "state theology" which supported apartheid and "church theology" which promoted "cheap

G.D. Cloete and D.J. Smit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 53–65.

36 *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 47, June 1984.

37 See John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids; Cape Town: Eerdmans; David Philip, 1991).

38 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984).

39 Takatso A. Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the cross bearers: Towards a black Christology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1987).

40 Durand, "Church and State in South Africa," 135.

reconciliation” but refused to engage in the resistance to apartheid. *Kairos* was not a Reformed Confession like Belhar, and those who drafted it came from different theological and confessional traditions. But for those of us who endorsed it, Barth’s shadow was apparent. At that time, Charles Villa-Vicencio and I gave regular graduate seminars at the University of Cape Town on Barth and Bonhoeffer, and often discussed the *Kairos Document* positively in relation to their theology.

This was also evident in some of the papers given at a conference at the University of South Africa in celebration of the centenary of Barth’s birth in 1986, and in the publication in 1988 of a book of essays entitled *Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, edited by my colleague Charles Villa-Vicencio.⁴¹

In his introduction, Villa-Vicencio made this observation: “We have discovered that what until now has been regarded as secondary in the theology of Barth – namely, his quest for a theological basis for his socio-political engagement – is, in fact, primary.”⁴² Indeed, it did not go unnoticed that in the final fragments of his *Church Dogmatics* Barth argued that the church had the obligation not only to pray for the state, but also to revolt against disorder created by the state.⁴³ A year later, encouraged by Barth, our prayers for the downfall of apartheid were answered when the apartheid regime admitted defeat.⁴⁴

4. Barth and democratic transformation

Theologically-speaking we were unprepared for the dramatic changes that occurred in the early nineteen-nineties. The struggle against apartheid was clear-cut, demanding a resounding “Nein!” without having to deal with ambiguities that required a qualified “Ja!” But as Barth insisted, saying “No” to the “principalities and powers” only prepared the way to say “Yes” to the good news of God’s renewing grace that follows liberation.⁴⁵ Having

41 Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

42 Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid*, 5.

43 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/4: The Christian Life* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 205ff.

44 *When Prayer Makes News*, ed. Allan A. Boesak and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986)..

45 Gorringe, *Barth: Against Hegemony*, 1

tasted freedom, how could we avoid falling into bondage again? But Barth had become passé in the academy where religious studies often replaced doing theology. The climate was not receptive to Barth's theology in the way it had been during the struggle against apartheid.

Nonetheless, my colleague, Charles Villa-Vicencio and I continued to engage Barth's legacy. We knew that Barth resisted aligning the gospel with any ideology, political programme or culture, and that as a social democrat he had important things to say about the character of a just democratic state. This was precisely the issue Barth addressed many times after the Second World War because, for him, the Cold War "raised questions about human dignity, human rights, and the relationship between people, in a new and urgent way."⁴⁶ So, although we drew on other sources as well, Barth's insights informed both Villa-Vicencio's *A Theology of Reconstruction* (1992),⁴⁷ and later my *Christianity and Democracy* (1995).⁴⁸ But now we were not only addressing the local situation but also a South Africa that was trying find its way in the rapidly changing global scene that began with the simultaneous fall of the Berlin Wall and the ending of Apartheid in 1989.

In my Introduction to *Christianity and Democracy* I quoted Barth's comment that Christianity, when faithful to the gospel, "betrays a striking tendency to the side of what is generally called the 'democratic' state."⁴⁹ Democracy was, for him, the best available antidote to totalitarian dictatorship, but should not be equated with liberal individualism or capitalism. But the church should not try to control the democratic process or speak of the will of the people as the will of God. On the contrary, said Barth, the tasks the Christian community is called to share in as part of its political responsibility, are secular, even though the norm by which the church evaluates the state is a theological and prophetic one. If the church

46 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2: The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 228.

47 Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

48 John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

49 Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays*, trans. Will Herberg (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960), 181.

become uncritically allied to a political movement, party or president, it surrendered its freedom to be a prophetic witness to the gospel. We should have heeded that warning much better than we did in those heady days of post-liberation, but we had yet to learn the hard way that victorious liberation movements too often become power-hungry and corrupt. But perhaps as some theologians have begun to recover their prophetic voice, so Barth's theology has become, once again, an important resource, especially given the global threat of resurgent right-wing nationalism, fascism, and tribalism

In 1925 Barth anticipated that such a resurgence might destroy peace in Europe yet again. That happened with devastating effect in 1939, and it could happen again in our times. So, we need to heed his words given in a speech to a meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches back then:

The church must have the courage to speak today upon the fascist, racist *nationalism* which since the war is appearing in similar forms in all countries. Does the church say yes or no to this nationalism?⁵⁰

We should be in no doubt what Barth would say to us today as we respond to white supremacy and right-wing Nationalism, and their theological legitimisation. But at the same time as Barth calls us to oppose them, he calls us to resist despairing and losing hope in the humanizing power of the gospel. For if it is true that in Christ God became truly and fully human, then it must be the case that reconciliation with God in Christ is also the restoration of our common humanity, the defence of human dignity, and solidarity with all the struggling people of the earth who seek justice. That is why Barth's theology is ecumenically significant, and why it challenges us today in South Africa when the ecumenical church is called to be prophetic by speaking truth to power and resisting injustice, and to proclaim the good news of liberation to the oppressed and hope for the world.

50 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1961), 133.

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