

**Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology
of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar Confession**

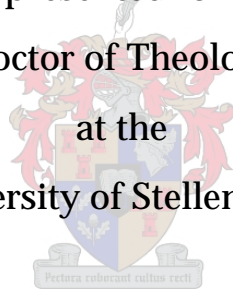
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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Rothney Stok Tshaka, herewith declare the content of this dissertation to be my original work that has not at any time, totally or partially, been submitted to any other university for the purpose of attaining a degree

Signed:

Date:

Summary

Christian confessions are frequently seen as Christian documents that have nothing to do with the subject of politics. This study endeavours to investigate the relationship between Christian confessions and politics, looking particularly at how the relationship between them has been construed in the theology of Karl Barth, the Barmen Declaration and the Belhar Confession. It concludes that a relationship between confession and politics is unavoidable, yet this relationship is only best comprehended when one looks at it in a confessional manner.

A 'confessional manner' of reading Karl Barth's theology is explained. Issues such as the primacy of the Word of God, the church as the subject of theology, the public witness of Christ to the world, the political context in which this theology takes place, as well as the ethical implications which emanates from this theology characterises confessional theology.

The usage of the concept "confession" is informed by Barth's observation that as Christians we are obliged to speak about God, but we are human beings and therefore cannot speak about God in an manner that suggest that God is fully comprehensible. By confining itself not merely to his monumental work – the Church Dogmatics – but also to Barth's preceding and succeeding works, this research is able to render a detailed illustration of how Barth viewed the relationship of confessions to politics.

Chapter 1 establishes the confessional nature of his theology. This chapter traces the most influential people and events that shaped the confessional nature of Barth's theology. These include Luther, Kant, the Blumhardts, as well as Calvin and the Reformed theology in particular.

Chapter 2 investigates whether Barth was true to his 1925 understanding of what constituted a Reformed confession when he was confronted with the need to confess in 1934. The historicity of the Barmen Theological Declaration is

explored to illustrate that Barth continued to view theology in a confessional manner.

Chapter 3 deals with Barth's Church Dogmatics, illustrating that Barth never wanted his work to be seen as a complete event, but preferred to see it as a process. It argues that contrary to the 1930s where Barth's theology insisted on the essence of confessional theology, the entire Church Dogmatics (especially the parts that precedes the era indicated) should be read as confessional theology.

Chapter 4 deals with the Belhar Confession that was adopted in South African in 1986. Admitting that the Belhar Confession was influenced by the theology of Barth, the characteristics of confessional theology are also explored in this Confession. It is argued that many have failed to see the Belhar Confession's call for embodiment, because they have interpreted this Confession without regard for the new church order.

Finally, it is argued that the confessional nature of Belhar allows this Confession to contribute positively to the current democratic dispensation in South Africa. It is admitted that the Belhar Confession is a confession of its time and.

It is also argued that a confessional theology can be a suitable theological alternative that can contribute to the current theological deliberations. Additionally a confessional theology can provide a platform of discussing ways in which theology and politics, which remain intertwined, can both exist side by side, without the one dictating to the other.

Abstrak!

Christelike belydenisse word dikwels beskou as Christelike verklarings wat geen verband met die politiek het nie. Gevolglik is daar 'n neiging om hierdie dokumente bloot te sien as teologies maar nie polities nie. Hierdie navorsing bespreek dié siening, maar voer aan dat, hoewel hierdie dokumente nie as sodanig polities is nie, ons tog nie die politieke kontekste waaruit hulle voortspruit, kan ignoreer nie. Twee belydenisse word gebruik om hierdie punt te illustreer, naamlik die Barmen Teologiese Verklaring (1934) in Nazi-Duitsland, en die Belharbelydenis (1986) gedurende die apartheidsregering in Suid-Afrika.

Die gevolgtrekking van hierdie studie is dat daar in die teologie van Karl Barth én die Belhar Belydenis 'n onvermydelike verhouding tussen die Christelike belydenis en politiek bestaan. Die woord "belydenis" word hier in verband gebring met Barth se interpretasie van die opdrag om oor God te praat uit hoofde van ons Christelike oortuigings, en ons onvermoë om oor God te praat weens ons menslike feilbaarheid. Hiervolgens is belydende teologie gekant teen neigings om oor God te praat op 'n manier wat voorgee dat God in sy volheid aan ons bekend is.

Vyf opsigtelike kenmerke in die teologie van Barth word ondersoek. Hierdie kenmerke illustreer die mate waartoe teologie en politiek aan mekaar verwant is, en dat politiek altyd in Barth se teologie geïmpliseer word. Die studie voer ook aan dat Barth se teologie relevant is omdat dit probeer om die Woord op 'n ander manier te interpreteer na aanleiding van die spesifieke konteks waarbinne daar oor God gepraat word. Die studie beweer verder dat Barth se hele teologie as belydende teologie gelees moet word. Die gevolgtrekking word gemaak dat belydende teologie verskil van "konfessionalisme" en altyd die beliggaming van dít wat bely word, impliseer. Deur hierdie kenmerke van belydende teologie in die teologie van Barth waar te neem, word daar besef dat sy teologie steeds 'n deurslaggewende rol in ander teologiese kontekste speel. Om hierdie rede word daar aangevoer dat die Belharbelydenis grootliks deur die

teologie van Barth beïnvloed is. Die debat oor die Belharbelydenis bring ook belangrike vrae oor die teologiese situasie in Suid-Afrika na vore.

Ten slotte word daar aangevoer dat belydende teologie 'n nuttige teologie is wat teologie in die algemeen kan beskerm teen die kloue van “geteologiseerde politiek”. Hierdie teologie kan dus steeds 'n konstruktiewe bydrae tot die huidige teologiese debatte in 'n demokratiese Suid-Afrika lewer.

Key words

Apartheid

Black Theology

Barmen Theological Declaration

Belhar Confession

Church Dogmatics

Confessional Theology

Confessing Church

Karl Barth

Reformed confessions

Status Confessionis

Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

For the three most important women in my life as well the little village from which I originate:

My Grandmother (Annie Cunzwane Tshaka), my mother (Thereza Mantwa Letsoha), my beautiful wife (Galaletsang Precious Tshaka) as well as the community of Ritchie.

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PREFACE

The preliminary impulsion of this study came from the numerous conversations that I had with some of my peers while I was studying at the University of the Western Cape. South Africa had just had its first election by the people in 1994. Having followed the impact that theology had both in its sanctioning of Apartheid as well as its bold attempts later to challenge the theological legitimacy of this ideology, I and most of my theological peers took it for granted that the church shall now have to retreat to that which it was called to; that which we thought was the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the Word of God. Clearly this view exhibited what we understood the task of theology was. These views have subsequently undergone vigorous revision as this study will reveal.

Many individuals have encouraged and assisted me during the past few years as this work gradually grew. I was blessed with my family who although at times they seem not to understand my need to pursue further studies, nonetheless always thought of me in their prayers, for this I am eternally grateful. I have to mention especially my parents Thereza and George Letsoha for their material and spiritual support.

I am a member of an extended family therefore it is within me never to forget this very important aspect of my life. I have never known a cousin in my tradition, those who are traditionally considered cousins are known in my culture and family as my brothers, I also acknowledge them with gratitude. Mzwandile, Vuyo, (Olivia and Vincent), Thandi, Vuyisile, Sizakele, Thieo, Modiehe, Nomhle, Nontlantla as well as my beautiful little sister Masego. I am most grateful for my parents in that they above all, acted as parents to my son while I was away on studies- I love you guys.

Throughout my entire theological studies I have always hoped that my son Theophillus Xolani Tshaka will one day understand why he only saw me for

brief periods. You are and remain the wings beneath my wings – I love you son. The name Galaletsang Precious Tshaka (née Setlhabi) is special because it always leaves a smile on my face when I think about it. She is mother to our son Xolani, a firm critic, friend and above all the woman that I have decided to spend the rest of my life with. She has sacrificed the most by allowing me to spend nine years to study while she raised our son. She is indeed a strong black woman and I just know that I would have been nothing without her. I love you baby. I am furthermore also grateful to her family who never lost faith in me, I am thinking especially of her mom Violet and her grand mother Mrs Mpinga senior. In the absence of my loving grandmother (Annie) I looked to her for most of the important things that makes sense in life.

With regard to those who stood by me throughout my studies (both secondary and tertiary) and encouraged me, my sincere gratitude. I cannot name them all but will point the following few out. I must mention my teachers at then Kgabang Combined School in Ritchie (now Kgabang Primary School). Although a number of them encouraged me, I am particularly grateful to Mrr. M. Mpinga, K. Molusi, and others who never ceased to encourage me. It was especially these two teachers who first made me aware of the potential that I had. I am grateful to my friend with whom I share dreams about Ritchie, Andrew Modise who constantly reminds me of where I am coming from.

I am impelled to acknowledge my indebtedness to my supervisor, Professor Dirkie Smit who encouraged me to begin, and assisted me to clarify my task. His interest both in me as well as in this study has never lessened; his inquisitive questions and comments were always a motivation. I am especially delighted for the trust that he had shown in me, of plunging me into the huge arena with a giant theologian Karl Barth with the hope that I will return with something new. It must also be pointed out that this did not help always for I would at times return with an important issue which was not of benefit to this

current study. Professor Nico Koopman was also very helpful especially in the absence of professor Smit.

In the person of Professor Hendrik Bosman I found a caring critic. He has done more than enough to consistently remind me of where I am coming from. Because of him I could justify the need to reckon with Barth as a black young man in South Africa today, in a time where many are insisting on the reawakening of Africa. I am thankful to my long time friend and stern critic of my work Charl Fredericks, without whom I never might have pursued further studies.

I am thankful to the faculty of theology at Stellenbosch which has offered me a number of opportunities to study both in the United States as well as in Europe. While in the USA I made the acquaintance of Rev. Ted Smit and his wife Susan who were not reluctant to engage me in the subject that I was pursuing but also showed a keen interest in assisting my study financially. I am also grateful for the friendship of Dr. Michael Haspel as well as his wife Ulrike.

During the duration of this dissertation I had the privilege of making the acquaintance of a number of exquisite Barth enthusiasts. I label them as such for I know that they would not appreciate the title of Barthians. I first met Professor George Hunsinger of Princeton Theological Seminary upon my first visit to the USA. We began to talk about that which interested me in Barth and subsequently continued our views about this important theologian of the church electronically. I must mention here that his commends were very helpful.

Another very important person that needs mention in the same vein as Hunsinger is Professor Martin Rumscheidt. Upon hearing that he would be visiting South Africa for the third time (after having seen him on his second visit to South Africa where he was attending a colloquium in honour of Professor John De Gruchy) I hasten to introduce myself to him by means of email. We made very interesting conversation about Barth.

I was blessed to be one of those who attended a very small and yet affectionate wedding ceremony of Martin and his beautiful new wife Professor Nancy Lukens - a professor of German studies in the USA - over which Professor John De Gruchy officiated in Hermanus, South Africa. On a visit of South Africa in 2003, I met Professor Timothy Gorringe. He was one of the theologians that attended the same colloquium that people such as Rumscheidt and Colin Green attended

Apart from the material assistance that the faculty of theology granted me, I am gratified by all those faculty members who shown keen interest in what I was doing. A word of thanks must also go to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa – I am grateful to be associated with this church. Much material assistance also came from various individuals and institutions. My parents have contributed more than they could towards the completion of this project. In Ritchie I was lucky enough to be supported by Mr. F Naudé of Séduan. The Dutch Reformed Church. At Stellenbosch I remain indebted to Dr. Thyse Smith who never hesitated to invest in me. The DRC regional synod of the Northern Cape also played its part in my studies. Rev. H. Roelofse of whom I can say I truly consider a friend. I am forever thankful to you sir. In Ritchie

None of these individuals can be held responsible for any errors, furthermore the magnitude of people who were involved with me during this study inhibits any attempt to give full credit for the insights and helpful comments that I received.

I will not be pardoned if I did not name the following names: Rev. Johan Julies, propp. André Botha, Jetro Cloete, Juwein Rossant, Cludett Williams. Arthur Johnson, Leslie van Rooi, Jacobsen Strauss, Siphon and Marlene Mahokoto, Carmen Titus, Nasley January, Alicestine October, William and Rachel Douris, Kagiso Manzane, Abel van Wyk, Jakes Madebe, Sticks, Lukie, Top and others.

CHAPTER 1

The seeds of confessional theology sown?

"[Calvin is] a waterfall, a primitive forest, a demonic power, something straight down from the Himalayas, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I just don't have the organs, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, let alone to describe it properly."

Karl Barth¹

1.1 Introduction

Karl Barth has been hailed as one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. As a Reformed theologian, Barth never forgot to give credit to his Reformed predecessors as well as other theologians who had influenced him. His reverence for the reformer Martin Luther has not gone unnoticed.² This chapter explores the most important individuals and events that made an impact on Barth, specifically Calvin and the Reformed tradition. Although the impact Luther made of Barth is well documented, this chapter shall attempt to give due credit to the impact of John Calvin and therefore the Reformed tradition.³ It will be argued that Barth saw in Calvin an individual who was approachable and with whom one could disagree, if necessary.

¹ Karl Barth cited in: E Busch, *Karl Barth: his life from letters and autobiographical texts*. Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1976: 138.

² Hans Tiefel has particularly done some exquisite work on the relationship between Martin Luther and Barth, particularly on the issue of Gospel and Law (cf. H Tiefel, *The ethics of Gospel and Law: Aspects of the Barth-Luther debate*. D. Phil dissertation. Yale University, 1967). Hunsinger has also noted the influence that Luther had on Barth. He refers to the index of Barth's Church Dogmatics and asserts that the longest entry in the index volume indicates that Luther was one of the individuals who made the greatest impact on Barth (cf. G Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000: 279-304 and 'Gesetz und Evangelium oder Evangelium und Gebot?' in: B Klappert, *Versöhnung und Befreiung: Versuche, Karl Barth zu verstehen*. Düsseldorf, Neukirchener Verlag, 1994: 166).

³ The impact that the Reformed tradition left on him can also not go unnoticed. The work of Matthias Freudenberg is of particular importance (cf. M Freudenberg, *Karl Barth und die Reformierte Theologie: Die Auseinandersetzung mit Calvin, Zwingli und den Reformierten Bekenntnisschriften während seiner*

The initial parts of this chapter deal with the person of Barth and his preliminary encounters with Kant and other important figures at the time. It will explain why Barth thought it necessary to entertain Kant as a conversational partner in his theological reflection. This chapter will furthermore trace the centres in which Barth had studied and then continue to probe his growing awareness of the inadequacy of liberal theology. It will be illustrated that Barth only realised the loopholes inherent in liberal theology after he had stumbled on the truth in the Bible and the serious challenges that the Bible posed to this theology.

Karl Barth was interested in politics from the outset. Fundamentally, this chapter will assert that although the Bible opened a “strange new world” to him, Barth never thought that he had to abandon his interest in politics. This chapter shall attempt not to confine itself to a specific period in Barth’s theological progress. In doing this it hopes to indicate the gradual maturity with which Barth handled politics. This claim is underpinned by the view that, although he later distanced himself from his initial identification of “‘Jesus Christ with the movement for social change”⁴, Barth never rejected his social tendencies.

The fact that he remained biased in favour of socialism does not suggest that he allowed himself to be confined by such an ideology. Barth’s constant vigilance against the ills of “isms” placed him in a position where he could criticise the very views that he espoused. His initiation into the academic world and his responsibility for teaching Reformed theology impelled him to invest more time and energy in the Reformed confessions. This chapter will consider the importance of the Reformed confessions for Barth, as well as the role of confessional theology as a means of justifying the church’s existence in the world while constantly reminding the church that it has not arrived at its desired destiny yet.

Göttinger Lehrtätigkeit. Germany: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997 and K Barth, *The theology of John Calvin*. Tran. G Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.)

⁴ Cf. K Barth, ‘Jesus Christ and the movement for social change’ in: G Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.

This chapter will ultimately make the claim that, for all intents and purposes, it was Barth's discovery of the relevance and importance of Reformed confessions that impelled him to justify the church's ability to engage in the affairs of the world. It will be pointed out that the church engaged the affairs of the world by means of a "confessional theology" which admitted that the church was charged to say something about God and yet, because of its humanness, couldn't speak about this God as if it really knew Him. Attempts will also be made to indicate that confessional theology is not synonymous with confessionalism, hence reference is made to the effect that Barth remained constantly aware of the dangers of confessionalism.⁵

1.2 Berne (1904) to Geneva (1908): Early catalysts in the search for a contextual theology

Barth began his theological training in 1904 at the University of Berne under the direction of his father, Johann Friedrich "Fritz" Barth. At Berne, he had the unpalatable obligation to listen to some of the most tedious and conservative theologians of that era. His teachers at that time were tedious in his opinion primarily because he thought that they neither spoke to his condition nor commanded his attention.⁶

Despite this, it was also at Berne that he became interested in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, as well as Schleiermacher's theology of religious

⁵ When Barth visited the USA for the first time he took some time to talk about his theology. He acknowledged that he knew too little about the USA to consider it his audience, nonetheless he reiterated some of the basic principles upon which he based his theology. Barth preferred to speak on the subject of Evangelical theology which in essence characterizes his theology. Evangelical theology insists radically on the Bible. His preference for the concept Evangelical is informed by his concern for the ills of denominational theology. This reveals Barth as someone that remained forever at loggerheads with confessionalism. Barth argued that Evangelical theology intended to apprehend, to understand and to speak of the gospel in the midst of the variety of all other theologies, and (without any value-judgment being implied) in distinction from them (cf. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An introduction*. Trans. G Foley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963: 3-5). This is the same goal that confessional theology attempts to strive for.

⁶ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 33.

experience.⁷ From Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, Barth realised that the gospel was in actual fact simple, and that the divine truth was not a complicated, difficult construction with hundreds of different prepositions and hypotheses.⁸

When the time came for Karl Barth to continue his studies in Germany (as was customary among many of his peers in those days), a huge debate ensued between him and his father concerning where exactly he would further his theological studies. This difference of opinion was inevitable, since his father was considered to belong to the conservative school of theology. Fritz Barth's discomfort with liberal theology led him to conclude that his son would be safe at Halle or Greifswald, considered to be among the conservative centres of theology in Germany.⁹

In the end, Barth managed to obtain his father's approval to enrol in Berlin. Among the many theologians whom he encountered in Berlin, Barth was especially impressed by Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). It was from this man's lips that Barth heard the argument that "the dogma of the early period was a self-expression of the Greek spirit in the sphere of the gospel".

Conceding that theology during Barth's formative years at Berne was dull, Barth nevertheless became enthusiastic about this subject after he had stumbled upon liberal theology and began to believe that those espousing a liberal voice in theology had something to say to him. In Berlin he became a devout pupil and disciple of Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922), a systematic theologian from Marburg.

Although Barth had come to enjoy liberal theology, his father was not impressed with this new venture and as a means of initiating him into sound positive theology, Fritz Barth resorted to sending his son off to Tübingen to hear Adolf Schlatter.¹⁰ Barth finally left for Marburg in 1908. There his future dear friend

⁷ Cf. K Barth, *Karl Barth: How I changed my mind*. Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1966c: 18.

⁸ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 35.

⁹ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 38ff; B McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: its genesis and development 1909-1936*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997: 37f.

¹⁰ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 42.

and theological partner, Eduard Thurneysen, later introduced him to Hermann Kutter as well as Leonhard Ragaz, the leaders of the Swiss religious movement. He was particularly overwhelmed by Ragaz with his theme “God was meeting humanity¹¹ today in socialism”.¹²

By this time, Karl Barth was already a devoted follower of Immanuel Kant. With the help of his philosopher brother Peter Barth, Karl was convinced of the need to take Kant seriously as a conversation partner in his theological discourses. Therefore, although Barth insisted on the primacy of the Word of God in doing theology (as was especially the case with his mature theology), it cannot be denied that he equally paid attention to philosophy. McCormack has suggested that to the extent that Barth engages Kant in particular, Barth could be seen as a Kantian. He argued that since Barth operated with philosophical epistemology, Barth was an idealist and at best a Kantian.¹³

This epistemology is particularly evident in Barth’s Romans II which, in the view of McCormack, stood in the shadow of Kant. McCormack holds that Barth took for granted the validity of Kant’s epistemology as set forth in the First Critique as well as the success of his attack on metaphysics.¹⁴ Barth’s comprehension of Kant and the contribution that Kant made to the rational world needs to be weighed against two realms that Kant radically delimited: the one that of “pure reason”, the domain of time and space and causality; the other that of practical reason or faith, the domain in which are to be found (eternally beyond the inquiry or criticism of science) God, freedom and immortality.

By validating scientific inquiry in terms of the *a priori* nature of knowing, Kant saved science and the whole Newtonian world of time, space and causation

¹¹ The German word (Mensch) has the connotation of human being. With the translation of Barth’s work into English this word was rendered ‘men’. The author will take the liberty to correct this false impression and refer to human or humanity instead of being contend with the word men when translated into English.

¹² Cf. E Busch, 1976: 44.

¹³ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 466.

¹⁴ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 245.

from the destructive scalpel of Hume's scepticism. On the other hand, he saved the realm of religion and morals from the disintegrations of empirical discovery and scientific relativism in ethics and belief.¹⁵

As he dealt more seriously with Kant, Barth felt at ease to have him as a conversation partner in his theological discourses. According to Kant, knowledge begins with experience, but yet it does not follow that all arises from experience. Even our empirical knowledge may consist of what we perceive through our senses.¹⁶

As soon as this is realised, Kant asserts that it then follows that we must admit and assume that behind the visible there is something else that is invisible, namely, the essence of the object in question. Although we must admit that these objects can never be known to us except as they affect us, we can come closer to them, but can never tangibly grasp the essence.¹⁷ With this Kant admits that the possibility exists where knowledge can exist independent of experience. This he calls *a priori* knowledge, which differs from empirical knowledge which has its sources *a posteriori*.

It has already been pointed out that Barth heard for the first time the name Immanuel Kant while still a student at Berne. It was during that time that he developed a great interest in Kant's writings and would repeatedly read especially Kant's critique of pure reason. In fact, Barth was entertaining the possibility of engaging Kant more thoroughly when Barth decided instead to deal with the epistle of Paul to the Romans. When Kant's critique of pure reason saw the light in the 18th century, it changed people's thinking. Barth maintains that it was in Kant and the work in question that the 18th century saw, understood and affirmed itself and its

¹⁵ I. Kant, 'Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals' in: I Edman and H Schneider (eds.) *Landmarks for Beginners in Philosophy*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1960: 570.

¹⁶ I Kant in: I Edman & H Schneider (eds.), 1960: 632.

¹⁷ I Kant in: I Edman & H Schneider (eds.), 1960: 633.

own limitations. However, in saying this, continues Barth, it has to be conceded that Kant, like Rosseau and Lessing, stood at the turning point of his age.¹⁸

Suffice it to say that Karl Barth worked and lived in the shadow of the Enlightenment where faith in God had become a highly challenged phenomenon. It is for this reason that Van der Kooi stresses the significance of Barth's theological context as well as his interest in Kant.¹⁹ Van der Kooi continues to maintain that Barth, unlike Calvin whom he portrays as a pre-modern thinker, stood fully within the complexities of modernity.²⁰

Even though Barth gave credit to some of Kant's contemporaries, especially Rousseau and Lessing and later Herder, Schleiermacher and Hegel for the contribution that each brought to the Enlightenment debates, Barth was convinced that it was fundamentally impossible to conduct a conversation with them from the point of view of the critique of pure reason – which brought (at least from him) a new theological possibility, for they simply did not recognise it as a distinct opposite of their own possibility.²¹

Barth had come to understand the concept “Metaphysics” as referring to the classical attempt to provide an account for the order which human subjects observe in the world about them. Deducing from experience, the human being speculates the existence of the First Cause. McCormack has rightly observed that it was the rejection of this order of knowing which has earned Barth the title of being anti-metaphysical.²²

At Marburg Barth was exposed to the Neo-Kantism of Herman Cohen (1842-1918) and Paul Natorp (1854-1924), which had also influenced Hermann, although he was very critical of it. Through him, Barth was influenced as well. The Neo-Kantism of Cohen insisted that the stuff of sensed experience cannot be considered a

¹⁸ K Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*. London: SCM Press, 1959: 150.

¹⁹ C van der Kooi, *Als in een Spiegel: God kennen volgens Calvijn en Barth*. Kampen : Kok, 2002: 12.

²⁰ C van der Kooi, 2002: 13.

²¹ K Barth, 1959: 151.

²² Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 246.

source of the content of knowledge. This found its most pointed expression in his understanding of the concept “origin” (*Ursprung*).

To Cohen, the understanding and usage of this concept is not a complicated matter. He is also convinced that thought cannot have its origin in anything outside of itself. To elucidate the complexity surrounding the subject, McCormack makes reference to Fisher who delineates three meanings of the word *Ursprung* in Cohen’s thought:

Firstly, Origin refers to a point of commencement, the beginning of cognition in thought itself. Secondly, Cohen’s usage of the term does not envision a spatial or temporal origin; it is purely a question of logical origin. Lastly, he refers to the potency of the thought to produce its content autonomously.

Ursprung according to Cohen therefore means “originary” or “originative”.²³ McCormack asserts that the net effect of Cohen’s doctrine of *Ursprung* is that the ideal epistemological subject is credited with a kind of knowledge which was traditionally attributed to God alone.²⁴ With this, Cohen wanted to exhibit the unitary character of all human knowledge. As a result he could convincingly reach the conclusion that there were only three validly recognised patterns of cognition viz. logic, ethics and aesthetics.

Taken together, these three modes of consciousness were thought to exhaust that which can be known scientifically. Thus logic concerned itself with being or that which is true, ethics concerned itself with that which ought to be or the good, and aesthetics concerned itself with beauty.²⁵ It is worth noting that Cohen regarded logic to be superior to the rest, for it was within this sphere that he developed the model of generation which was asserted to be valid for all scientific knowledge. Cohen’s administration of these three concepts gave him reason to speak of the “objective consciousnesses”.

²³ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 45.

²⁴ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 46.

²⁵ This insight is taken from Fisher’s *Revelatory Positivism?* Cited in: B McCormack, 1997: 46.

Because everything that was perceived had its origin or was formulated by one of the external modes detected by Cohen, and because everything had to be logically ascertained, Cohen was confronted with yet another crucial problem. Since scientific approaches cannot ascertain the existence and the way in which God conducts His business, what is to happen to God? It became quite clear that both Cohen as well as Natorp made or had no place for God in their schemes, even though both were religious humanists. McCormack reminds us that both these philosophers were convinced that the idea of religion was a fundamental force in the formation of culture. Because of this conviction, they had to find ways of incorporating this aspect into their scheme.

In McCormack's view, Natorp's solution was much more complex *and in turn would open itself for much misunderstanding* (italics added). In an attempt to remedy the situation, Natorp modified Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as "feeling" (*Gefühl*). He then concluded that feeling is of extreme importance to the inwardness or self-consciousness which accompanies and vivifies all cognitive striving of whatever kind (scientific, ethical, *et al*). The problem which arises is this: given the fact that religion itself is non-cognitive in that it is incapable of generating an object, it is therefore without an object. The result is that, for Natorp, there is no God.

Cohen on the other hand, who is noted by McCormack as being a pious albeit liberal Jew, is to a certain extent careful in this regard. For him, the place to accommodate religion within the Marburg system was under the heading of ethics. How does he do this? First he argues that the self (like the objects known to/by sciences) is not so much a given to the extent that it is an ongoing task. The self is realised through a lifetime of fidelity to moral law, meaning that it is only those choices that are made in complete freedom (and this includes freedom from coercion or even gracious assistance from God) that are moral. It is evident that Cohen believes that humanity is capable of good. This leads him to the conclusion that the

collective realisation of the good by society is an indication of the moral progress of the human race.

The great emphasis on the freedom of the human being inhibits Cohen to bring God in at the beginning of his scheme, although it makes place for God at the end. Cohen can do this because he is assured that the unfolding of ideals comes to an end, and the process of unfolding ideals will not be perfectly realised in history. Thus God for Cohen becomes merely a guarantee that there will always be a world in which moral goals are progressively attained. It was for this reason that when he wanted to speak about the God/World relation, he used the term *Ursprung*, indicating thus that the God-World relation was a purely logical one, and not a personal one.

God for Cohen is like the mathematical concept zero: a very important placeholder in the system, yet completely without content; featureless and colourless. As much as he was aware of how convincing the arguments set forward by this Neo-Kantism were, Barth had to constantly remind himself that he was a theologian and not a philosopher. This philosophical vision and language which Cohen and Natorp wanted to introduce into the field of biblical revelation would pose a great threat to the independence of theology from science and ethics. It is more than fair to predict that, should such a philosophical approach be ordained, revelation would be subordinate to philosophy. It is for this reason that, when we look at Barth's rejection of such an approach, the question raised by Balthasar as to whether Barth should in this regard be understood prophetically or systematically becomes relevant.²⁶

In his search for a contextual theology, Barth had no alternative but to seek a new objectivity in theology. Therefore, in contrast to the philosophers, for him God was not a "supreme being" whose objective relation to the world was basically mechanical. In addition, faith was not a kind of passive cognition of divine data in

²⁶ Cf. H Balthasar, *The theology of Karl Barth*. San Francisco: Communion Books, Ignatius Press. 1992: 72.

revelation and nature, nor was theology a series of formal propositions from scripture and conditioned by general truths.

When Barth was confronted with the critical structures of Kant and Neo-Kantism regarding the limits of human cognition, the genius of liberal theology consisted of overcoming this mechanical externality in the relationship between God and human beings. It was this genius, says Hunsinger which depended largely on three factors as identified by Hans Frei, namely that Barth had inherited from liberal theology the dialectical form of theological thought, the primacy of God in revelation, and the centrality of Jesus Christ as the content of theological knowledge.²⁷ Each of these inherited factors was instrumental as Barth set out to desert a theology that he had once felt content with. Barth also owed a great deal to Hermann who assisted him in the process of inculcating the mentioned issues in his theological reflection.

It was without a doubt Hermann who encouraged Barth to assert the independence of theology from science and ethics. Hermann was instrumental in stimulating Barth in this regard. From his first readings of the Ethics, he knew himself to be a devoted disciple of Herrmann.²⁸

In Romans II Barth continues to draw upon the term employed in Kant's epistemology when Barth says the *unintuitable* must become *intuitable*; yet in such a way that the *unintuitable* wan't changed.²⁹ This then means that, in order for God to remain distinct from the medium of revelation, God veils himself in the medium.

When referring to Barth's progress in Marburg, McCormack characterises the Barth's active period in Marburg as "the making of an outsider".³⁰ There are a number of reasons why this is a necessary and relevant characteristic. Firstly, although Barth was not a native of Germany, his activities in Marburg would certainly put his name on the theological map of Germany. More importantly, it was

²⁷ Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 283.

²⁸ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 37.

²⁹ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 249.

³⁰ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: Prologue.

at Marburg that Barth came into close contact with the Neo-Kantism of Natorp and Cohen.

It was also in Marburg that he met some of his most important theological counterparts in the likes of Rudolf Bultmann and others. Here Barth also made the acquaintance of Martin Rade who, in addition to being professor of theology, was also the chief editor of *Die Christliche Welt*, a journal of which Barth would later become assistant editor.³¹ From a very early period in Barth's theological development, one can detect that he was constantly engaged in processes which seemed to defy all odds. As a young man with a Marburg education showing such a great interest in the ideology of the Swiss Religious Movement was considered as odd.

The competence which he illustrated in his engagement with diverse realities manifests a view that Barth was always on the lookout for that which was good in a particular teaching. He had come to understand from Hermann Kutter's language about God, to say that great word God earnestly, responsibly and momentously. Kutter had taken the familiar anti-ecclesiastical resentment of liberal theology and put it to a positive use: "The realm of God's power is greater than the realm of the Church'; God may well confront Christendom right in the midst of the persons and events of the profane world process".³²

After leaving Marburg during the middle of August 1909 Barth became *Hilfsprediger* (assistant pastor) in Geneva. It was there that he became more aware of the intricacies of the ministry. Standing in the very same place where John Calvin had lectured, he began to take the complexities of the ministry seriously. The fact that he grappled with these issues culminated in his ministry when he was pastor of a small parish at Safenwil from 1911-1921. Barth's approach to politics in Safenwil had taken a new form contrary to the one that he had while still an assistant pastor

³¹ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 46.

³² H Kutter cited in: E Jüngel, *Karl Barth a theological legacy*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986: 30.

in Geneva. There can be no doubt that his stay in Geneva impelled him to take the political situation in which he found himself seriously.

The seriousness with which he took his ministry in Safenwil led him to be labelled the “Red Pastor” of Safenwil. It was also while being in Safenwil that he abandoned the view he had held earlier that social misery was a necessity which serviced to elicit genuine faith. Barth could now attempt to make a connection between the gospel and the law. Two things helped him to do so: Calvin’s idea of a city of God on earth, and his discovery and careful study of Werner Sombart’s *Sozialismus und Soziale Bewegung*.³³

It is worth noting that Barth only developed his socialist convictions after he had come into direct contact with members of his parish in Geneva and Safenwil. That a genuine interest in the social conditions of those he ministered to was only manifested later impels us to ponder how he would have related with his teachers who were political conservatives.

McCormack asserts that Hermann’s concern for the working class extended only as far as a desire to see the worst abuses of modern industrialisation ameliorated. He continues to declare that Hermann’s analysis of social problems focused upon individual relations; he made no effort to investigate structural and institutional forms of evil. He certainly had no interest in a radical change in the prevailing capitalist system that governed economic and social relationships.³⁴

1.3 Experiencing loopholes in liberal theology: A requiem

It would be completely false to assume that Barth had reached his apex as a contextual theologian when he occupied the position of pastor in the industrial area of Safenwil. Note should however be taken of the way in which he executed his

³³ B McCormack, 1997: 80.

³⁴ B McCormack, 1997: 87.

ecclesiastical duties in light of the many challenges that the socio-economic and political environment in Safenwil presented.³⁵

In affirming this, it should also be stated that his points of interaction with these facets differ from period to period in his theological development. By this it is meant that the essence of context in theological deliberation has always been with Barth, although the different contexts in which he found himself necessitated different ways of engaging with his context. For this reason it is argued that his involvement with the student society Zofingia³⁶ in 1906 already revealed him as someone who took context seriously. Barth delivered a paper on “Zofingia and the Social question”, drawing on the teachings of Ragaz.³⁷

It has already been pointed out that it was in Safenwil that Barth came to engage the socio-economic and political factors in a more proactive fashion. In Safenwil we see him involved in the establishment of four trade unions as well as his acquisition of membership to the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which afforded him the title of the “Red Pastor” of Safenwil. It was this very tendency of practising

³⁵ Barth's activities in the small industrial area of Safenwil are usually seen as indicators that he took his context seriously. His involvement with the creation of a few trade unions as well as his writings concerning the treatment of the workers is seldom not cited as illustrations of his awareness of the importance of context for theology. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt has been the chief exponent to insist on the significance of these activities for a better understanding of Barth's theology (cf. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths*. Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1972.) It is the view of this thesis that the Safenwil activities should not be seen as isolated incidents in Barth's theology. It is true that they signal Barth's tangible involvement in his context, but they are not the only pointers that portray Barth as a contextual theologian. Another reason why his activities in Safenwil are seen as important for understanding him as a contextual theologian is because it is seldom argued that Barth started writing prior to his Safenwil pastorate. During the time prior to Safenwil Barth was already engaging the relationship between theory and praxis. Hunsinger refers to some essays written by Barth in which he showed intense struggling with theory and praxis. These essays are: *Modern Theology and the Work for the Kingdom of God* written during his student days in 1909, followed by *The Christian Faith and History*, written from the pastorate in 1910 but not published until 1912, and *Faith in a Personal God*, written in the spring of 1914. With the last essay one can detect a last attempt to give a last chance to liberal theology (cf. G Hunsinger, 'Towards a radical Barth' in G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 193-194).

³⁶ Zofingia was the student association to which Barth also belonged while in his first semester at Berne (cf. E Busch, 1976: 35)

³⁷ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 37.

doing theology and relating it to politics that led Marquardt to the conclusion that Barth's socialism was a *socialist praxis*.³⁸

In the periods leading to the World War I, Barth registered his commitment to Religious Socialism. According to McCormack, Barth's sermons of 1913 demonstrate the fervour with which he engaged the world in which he lived.³⁹ Inevitable, some of the themes Barth dealt with in his sermons in this year offended those who did not share the same convictions with regard to the stance that the church ought to be taking in the world. The result was the resignation of five of the six members of the church session (*Kirchenpflege*).⁴⁰

With these sermons, Barth preached that self-seeking, greed, pride and hatred were the powers dictating the laws that govern our business, our political life, as well as our social life. At the same time, Barth emphasised that the person who is apathetic about such a state of affairs and cares instead only for his or her own spiritual salvation "does not know God".⁴¹ McCormack is correct when he asserts that some of these sermons illustrate the seeds of some of Barth's most profound views which later became evident in the development of his dialectical theology. Already in Safenwil, Barth had come to realise that his liberal approach to theology was not adequate. World War I would later merely endorse his growing suspicion about the integrity of liberal theology.

³⁸ F Marquardt, 'Socialism in the theology of Karl Barth' in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 47-76.

³⁹ Karl Barth remained very interested in preaching. This is clear since he always thought of theology as critical reflection on the Word of God. H Genest has demonstrated the impact that preaching had on Barth. In a chronological manner he traces most of the sermons that shaped Barth and also illustrates the different impacts that the different contexts had on his preaching (cf. H Genest, *Karl Barth und die Predigt: Darstellung und Deutung von Predigtwerk und Predigtlehre Karl Barths*. Deutschland Neukirchener, 1995). Some of the important collections of Karl Barth's sermons are; *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben!* (Karl Barth/Eduard Thurneysen) Bern 1917; *Komm Schöpfer Geist!* (Karl Barth/Eduard Thurneysen) München 1924, 1926, 1932; *Die große Barmherzigkeit* (Karl Barth/Eduard Thurneysen), München 1935; *Fürchte dich nicht!* (Predigten aus Jahren 1934-1948) München 1949; *Den Gefangenen Befreiung* (Predigten aus dem Jahren 1954-1959) Zollikon 1959, Zürich 1963; *Rufe mich an! Neue Predigten aus der Strafanstalt Basel*, Zürich 1965.

⁴⁰ B McCormack, 1976: 92

⁴¹ M Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity: The theological basis of Karl Barth's opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2001: 92.

It is impossible to conclude that the sermons of this period were more important than his later sermons. In one of his later sermons Barth spoke of the poor Lazarus. He calls God the God of the poor and bases this not on the grounds of Lazarus' piety, but Lazarus' being the friend of God because he is marginalised and persecuted due to his poverty.⁴²

In the midst of the theological confusion in which he found himself, Barth made the acquaintance of the message of the Blumhardts through Thurneysen who had encouraged him to take the work of these eschatological revivalist seriously. Christoph Blumhardt (1842-1919) was the son of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880).⁴³ This encounter was important for Barth for a number of reasons. Firstly, Barth came to appreciate the message of the two Blumhardts who insisted on Christian hope. The younger Blumhardt consolidated the idea of engaging politics in Barth. This is probably due to the fact that the younger Blumhardt was elected to serve as a deputy at the 1900 Württemberg assembly after having joined the SDP in 1899, and yet could still manage to practice his spirituality.⁴⁴ In the previous year when he had just joined the SDP, he had expressed public opinion in support for picketing strikers in Württemberg. This kind of expression of public opinion by a member of the clergy was considered to be taboo.

⁴² Barth's sermon on the poor Lazarus cited in: M E Brinkman, *De Theologie van Karl Barth: Dynamiet of dynamo voor christelijk handelen*. Baarn: Ten Have, 1983: 44-45.

⁴³ The Blumhardts left an indelible mark on the theological thinking of Barth. He never parted ways with them and his credit for their contribution cannot be ignored. Barth holds that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there was a reaction to the integrity of liberal theology. This reaction was manifested in the advocacy of eschatology. He maintains that one focus in this movement of discovery was the message of the younger Blumhardt. Furthermore, Barth maintains that the younger Blumhardt, H Kutter as well as L Ragaz challenged the positively church-centered Christianity when they linked their fight for the kingdom of God with eschatology and hope with the Socialist labour movement (cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. II/1, 1936: 633 and J Cort, *Christian Socialism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988: 199-201). In Barth's works that were published posthumously, an appreciation of the Blumhardts still remains evident. Barth reminds us that their main message was to prepare humanity for the world to come. He (Blumhardt senior) writes "very naively, but with axiomatic certainty, they were thinking of the reality of the risen and living Jesus Christ himself, acting and speaking as a distinctive factor no less actual today than yesterday" (cf. K Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics* Vol. IV, Part 4. Lecture Fragments. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981a: 259).

⁴⁴ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 85.

Christoph Blumhardt the elder was a Lutheran preacher blessed with the gift of healing. This gift climaxed at Christmas 1843 the year after his son was born. It is believed that he drove what was purported to be a demon out of the soul of a young woman called Gottlieben Dittus, and he subsequently reported this miracle to church authorities.⁴⁵ Barth only came to know of this event after he had visited Bad Boll which was the residence of Christoph Blumhardt the younger. The importance of prayer as illustrated by the elder Blumhardt did not escape Barth. In his works published after his death, Karl Barth deals with the subject of the Lord's Prayer with the same vigour as Blumhardt did.⁴⁶

There can be no doubt that Barth's continued emphasis on the theme of peace in his theological conversations subsequent to returning from Bad Boll was a result of the impression that was left on him by the Blumhardts. What is even more important is that we can already detect an exodus of some of Barth's liberal ideals which he held in high esteem. Although Barth now began to read the Bible more seriously, he admits that he did that using many different "spectacles". Among them can be counted especially the perspective of J T Beck whom Barth considered as the

⁴⁵ Sauter maintains that later as the upshot of this account (his healing of the women possessed by demons), Blumhardt recognized that the individual's cry for help was the root of this proclamation of the Kingdom of God: "Jesus is Victor". Sauter explains that Blumhardt came to know sufferers who were no longer in control of their faculties. He claims that they were not just suffering from the weakness of will, but that they were impotent in both mind and soul even to the point of insensibility. In worst instances they could no longer even respond. These people were so entangled and oppressed that they no longer viewed their own situations of need as something alien to them. They could no longer say what they wanted, but merely cry out with a voice that was not their own. In his attempts to find ways of diagnosing these people, he felt compelled to adopt a totally different approach to those who believed that these individuals were sinful and had to reckon with their sins, but his diagnosis was that suffering had to be related to the coming of the Kingdom of God. It became Blumhardt's view that learning to pray, "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" we come closer to understanding the point that we are to be obedient to the commands of God (cf. G Sauter, *Gateways to Dogmatics: Reasoning Theologically for the Life of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) for an account of Blumhardts healing of Gottlieben Dittus, and J Cort, 1988: 199. In his doctoral dissertation Sauter also noted the impact that the Blumhardts had had on Karl Barth as clearly illustrated in his Church Dogmatics. For a detailed treatment of Barth's relationship with Christoph Blumhardt, cf. G Sauter, *Die Theologie des Reiches Gottes beim älteren und jüngeren Blumhardt*, Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1962, and M Brinkman, *Karl Barth's Socialistische Stellingname*, Baarn: Ten Have, 1982: 63-69.

⁴⁶ For a detailed illustration of Barth's treatment of the Lord's Prayer cf. K Barth, 1981a: 153ff.

one towering above his contemporaries, and others like Bengel and Oetinger.⁴⁷ Barth's departure from his beloved liberal approach to theology reached its apex when he realised that he had to substitute religious experience and reason with revelation and faith.

His changed attitude is catalogued in two addresses which he delivered in 1916. The one was called "The righteousness of God" while the other one was entitled "The Strange New World within the Bible",⁴⁸ all of which culminated in his first commentary on Romans. The seeds of these lectures were already planted after Barth had come to see the contribution that the Blumhardts were making in a context where humanity was plagued with hopelessness.

During the years that preceded the publication of his commentary on the epistle of Paul to the Romans, there is a notable difference in his sermons in his first Safenwil years, and his serious engagement with the Bible is evident. Initially he was famous for his "Red Pastor" approach to sermons. He could boldly say things like "Jesus is the movement for social change, and the movement for social change is Jesus in the present ... Real socialism is real Christianity in our time ... Jesus rejected the concept of private property; ..." ⁴⁹

The tone in his later sermons was as follows: "Is it not the case that sometimes we are heartily sick of our previous 'God' ... But fortunately we are all involved in a revolution. What we mean yet do not meet, seek and find; miss and lack, yet do not discover anywhere, is a living God ... the opposite of our previous 'God', a God who is really God ... Not a fifth wheel on the wagon but the wheel which drives all the rest ..." ⁵⁰ Barth was swimming against the stream – in fact, he was swimming against the very same wave that he once used to lead. Gorringer reminds us that

⁴⁷ E Busch, 1976: 98.

⁴⁸ Cf. K Barth, 1966c: 23.

⁴⁹ Cf. K Barth, 'Jesus Christ and Social Justice' in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 19-47.

⁵⁰ E Busch, 1976: 102.

since Göttingen Barth always used to refer to himself as “swimming against the stream”.⁵¹

Gorringe is correct in locating this “swimming against the stream” at the beginning of Barth’s Göttingen era which began in 1921. One could also say that the actual “swimming against the stream” period preceded the period indicated by Gorringe, as illustrated in Barth’s Tambach address of 1919.⁵² It is not by chance that Hood refers to Barth’s Tambach lecture as his first theological rebellion.

According to Hood, Barth sought to define three issues:

- a. the nature and content of the summons to be a Christian in society
- b. the nature of the society in which the Christian has to act
- c. the basis for political action by the Christian.⁵³

Barth made it clear that the Christian in society means initially Christ in society and Christ in us – thus Christ acting through us. Hood makes it clear that this action has nothing to do with exclusiveness for the chosen few, but conveys a universal inclusiveness which is almost ontologically true for all people.⁵⁴ However, Hood rightly observes that this inclusiveness does not mean “Christian” qualifications of all human actions and institutions in society. Hood refers to parts of the Tambach lecture which captures this essence. Barth admitted that:

“All combinations like ‘Christian-social’, ‘evangelical-social’, ‘religious-social’, are conveniently handy, but it is especially important to ask the question whether the

⁵¹ The description ‘swimming against the stream’ remained an important one also for Barth. He wrote to his colleague Emil Brunner in Zurich that when the church confesses, “it goes in fear and trembling against the stream and not with it”. Timothy Gorringe deals with this subject by looking primarily at Barth’s decisions to swim against the then dominant theological stream (cf. T Gorringe, *Karl Barth against Hegemony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 3). Frank Jehle also deals with this subject by looking primarily at the political life of Karl Barth (cf. F Jehle, *Ever against the stream: the politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002: 3).

⁵² The religious-socialists organized a conference in the town of Tambach in November of 1919. Since Ragaz could not attend, let alone speak at the conference due to ill health, Barth was approached to speak. He spoke on the subject “The Christian in Society” and his lecture disappointed many who thought that the meeting would shed new light on the topic for those who had become disillusioned with political life and the Church in their situations. Cf. E Busch, 1976: 102, 110.

⁵³ Cf. R E Hood, *Contemporary Political orders and Christ: Karl Barth’s Christology and Political Praxis*. Pennsylvania: Pickwick Press, 1985: 39.

⁵⁴ Cf. R E Hood, 1985: 39.

hyphens which we use with reasonable boldness are not dangerous shortcuts. The paradox that God's service (*Gottesdienst*) is or must become service to humankind (*Menschen dienst*) is very ingenuous, but whether our hasty service to mankind becomes through such an enlightenment service to God, even when it occurs in the name of purest love ... The evangelical reminder is very true that the seed is the word and the world the field, but what is the word and whom of us possess it? ... The divine is something total, something closed, something in the nature of the new, the different from the world. It cannot be glued on and conformed to something. It cannot be separated or divided up because it is something more than religion ... It is all or it is nothing".⁵⁵

This inclination to "swim against the stream" had led some to characterise Barth as ambiguous.⁵⁶ Cort is therefore correct when he maintains that those who invited Barth to stand in for Ragaz who was ailing at the time, would never have continued with the invitation had they read his commentary on Romans, which had just been completed before he wrote his Tambach address.

For those who thought that they knew Barth and expected that he would merely represent the views of Ragaz, the entire Tambach address was an embarrassing disappointment, as it was to many who thought of him as the radical "Red Pastor" of Safenwil. Quite early in his address, his anxious audience was confronted with statements such as: "Immediately to hand we have all those combinations – Christian-social, evangelical-social, religious-social and the like – but it is highly questionable that the hyphens we draw with such intellectual courage do not really make dangerous shortcuts. Clever enough is the paradox that the service of God is or must become service of humanity; but that it is not the same as saying that our purest love, becomes by that happy fact service of God".⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Fragments of Barth's Tambach lecture cited in: R E Hood, 1985: 39.

⁵⁶ Cf. J Cort, 1988: 207.

⁵⁷ Cf. Fragments of speech cited. Cf. also K Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Trans. Douglas Horton. London: Hodder and Stoughton. 1928: 276.

1.4 The Bible's impact on Barth's desertion of liberal theology

World War I came as Barth was reading proofs of his commentary on Romans.⁵⁸ This was a confusing time theologically for him, because he had come to note with dismay the endorsement of the war by some of his most respected teachers. As a product of liberalism, Barth was a dedicated and convinced liberal theologian before the outbreak of World War I. One of the fundamental factors that impelled Barth to seek theological inspiration elsewhere was his conviction that he had to part ways with liberal theology. His decisive break was triggered by the outbreak of World War I.⁵⁹ In his own words:

“The actual end of the 19th century as ‘the good old days’ came for theology as for everything else with the fateful year of 1914. Accidentally or not, a significant event took place during that very year. Ernst Troeltch, the well-known professor of systematic theology and the leader of the then most modern school, gave up his chair in theology for one in philosophy. One day in early August 1914 stands out in my personal memory as a black day. Ninety-three German intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war-policy of Wilhelm II and his counsellors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realised that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history”.⁶⁰

Clearly the external trigger was world war – a war that was essentially underpinned by a Christian nationalism and faith in one's nation-state. Barth decided to get back to basics, this time he had to find a way in which he could – in the midst of all the chaos – be faithful to the Christian teaching as displayed in the Holy Scripture.

⁵⁸ E Busch, 1976: 106.

⁵⁹ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 81.

⁶⁰ K Barth, *The Humanity of God*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982: 12.

Dietrich Ritschl reminds us of a letter dated 6 October 1921 in which Eduard Thurneysen reminded his friend of the night in Leutwil when for the first time they said out loud that they could no longer believe Schleiermacher. Barth had already confided earlier to his friend that he planned to declare war on this church father and religious virtuoso and that the muzzle of the gun was aimed at him. It is also important, Ritschl says, to remember that Barth as late as 1968 did not believe that Schleiermacher would have endorsed the war as some of his teachers did, although they had been influenced by Schleiermacher.⁶¹

Barth's approach to the Bible was already taking shape prior to the events that acted as the catalyst to his ultimate rejection of the method used to approach the Bible as taught to him by his teachers. In fact since the theological justification of World War I, one can already sense that Barth was about to put a spoke in the wheel of liberal theology. Hunsinger has affirmed this. He asserts that Barth's disillusionment with liberal theology had not only been nascent for many years, but would take months to really sink in. Furthermore, he argues that it is difficult to overestimate the sense of moral commitment with which Barth (and generations of theologians before him) had adhered to the "scientific method" of modern theology.⁶²

Barth explained later why he considered the Bible as the canon. He argues that this is so simply because the canon has been imposed upon the church as such, and continues to be so imposed. He understands that the recollection of God's past revelation has the Bible specifically as its object, because this object is nothings other than the promise of the church which gives it courage in its functions.⁶³ In his foreword to the Reformed Dogmatics of Heinrich Heppe, which was revised and edited by Ernst Bizer, Barth gave due credit to the contribution that Heppe had

⁶¹ Cf. D Ritschl (ed.), *Karl Barth: the theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen Winter semester of 1923/24*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982: ix.

⁶² Cf. G Hunsinger, 'Towards a Radical Barth' in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 200.

⁶³ K Barth, 1936: 107.

made towards his understanding that Holy Scripture must be the controlling element in evangelical dogmatics.⁶⁴

The importance of the Bible in the construction of Barth's theology cannot be overstated.⁶⁵ Watson holds that Barth's biblical interpretations are not a particular item, but the foundation and principle of coherence of his entire project, and interpreters who overlook this biblical foundation, or who refer to it only in passing, will radically misinterpret that project.⁶⁶ Barth has been criticised for not making much space for historical criticism, yet it cannot be denied that biblical hermeneutics played a pivotal role in his theological reflection. He wrote that:

“[To accept scripture as] God's revelation ... does not mean an annulling of the results of biblical scholarship in the last centuries, nor does it mean a breaking off and neglect of efforts in this direction. What it does mean is a radical re-orientation concerning the goal to be pursued, on the basis of the recognition that the biblical texts must be investigated for their own sake to the extent that the revelation which they attest does not stand or occur, and is not to be sought, behind or above them but in them”.⁶⁷

Barth understood that biblical hermeneutics could not exist without acknowledging the context in which it was conducted. For this reason it must be stated that the context helped him to understand his reading of his Bible better. As it is asserted that World War I was an external stimulus which compelled Barth to break with liberalism, it is also contended that Barth's discovery of the posthumous writings of

⁶⁴ K Barth in E Bizer (ed.), *Reformed Dogmatics set out and illustrated from the sources: Heinrich Heppel*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950: v.

⁶⁵ As late as 1986 Christoph Barth recounted his father's attitude towards the Bible. He remembered that “His was an attitude of high expectancy in the face of this ancient library called Holy Scripture – a reverence and openness I will never forget ... What an intensity of exegetical work, beginning with two commentaries on Romans, continuing with academic courses on Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and St John, of ever-increasing importance in the biblical excursus in the Church Dogmatics!” Cf. K Barth, ‘Letter to the Editor’ in: D. McKim (ed.), *How Karl Barth changed my mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986: 7.

⁶⁶ Cf. F Watson, ‘The Bible’ in: J Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 57.

⁶⁷ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. I/2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956a: 494.

Frans Overbeck (an anti-theological historian) confirmed his break with theological liberalism.

After having read Overbeck's *Christentum und Kultur* (Christianity and Culture), Barth was convinced that in those writings there were still crucial challenging questions posed to liberal theology that had not yet been answered.⁶⁸ When Barth was reflecting in 1960 on the possibilities of liberal theology at the time, he told those present that it had been 40 years since he read the remark by Overbeck that theology could no longer be established through anything but audacity.⁶⁹

Barth's reference to this statement by Overbeck displays him as one who had come to understand that Christian theology has no other alternative but to unequivocally insist on the Bible as theology's only point of departure in theological reflections. He understood that this was the very essence of Overbeck's critique against liberal theology. Barth refers to the following statement by Overbeck which flows from his view that theology cannot establish itself unless it does so boldly: "that the first, fresh Christianity is a Christianity without the experience of growing old and it cannot be saved by any theology which does not renounce all its pretensions, historically, scientific and theological".⁷⁰ Overbeck rejected the possibility of a non-eschatological Christianity, and within this rejection, he was joined by Barth who held the view that a Christianity which is not utterly and absolutely eschatological has nothing to do with Christ.⁷¹

What Barth thought of modern theology was in a clear way articulated in the writings of Overbeck; for this reason Overbeck was very important to Barth. In Overbeck, Barth had found that which he himself had sensed and had tried to articulate, namely the impotence of modern theology camouflaged meticulously in

⁶⁸ K Barth, *Theology and Church*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1962: 55 *et seq.*

⁶⁹ K Barth, 1962: 72.

⁷⁰ F Overbeck cited in: K Barth, 1962: 72.

⁷¹ Cf. N B MacDonald, *Karl Barth and the Strange New World within the Bible: Barth, Wittgenstein, and the Metadilemmas of the Enlightenment*, London: Paternoster Press, 2000: xi.

culture-Protestantism. Since Overbeck realised this, he had come to conclude that liberal theology had falsified the essence of Christianity.⁷²

MacDonald views Barth's response to Overbeck as primarily a matter of the truth of the Bible: if the historical truth-claims of the Bible were true, then it followed that the historical truth-claims pertaining to the events of the particular theological *historicality* were true. If this is grasped, it must then be assumed that Overbeck's dilemma is solved, because theology had remained unalterably and irreducibly itself and had not become some other subject, whether that be anthropology or any other social or psychological science.⁷³

In Barth's theological reflection he found it difficult to talk about Overbeck without referring to the Blumhardts as well – and vice versa. This was simply because he used to place them alongside each other: Blumhardt as the one looking forward in hope, and Overbeck as the one looking backwards in a critical manner. It was easy for Barth to do so, because he was convinced by Overbeck's critique of liberal theology and his insistence on the eschatological character of Christianity, and had learned from the Blumhardts the living Christianity whose theology was a proclamation of the kingdom of God that hinged on the resurrection of Jesus.

Having encountered these individuals, Barth became convinced that there could be no turning back to liberal theology. Two crucial issues need a brief mention here:

- (1) Barth's rejection of the immediacy of the divine-human relationship in revelation. He became convinced that theology does not start from religious experience as the form whose content is revelation. Religious experience is not the object of theological reflection. It is not the concrete reality from which theological concepts are derived. The object of theological reflection is not the

⁷² Barth was evidently quite convinced by Overbeck's argument, to such an extent that he believed that Overbeck had repudiated liberal theology's synthesis of Christianity and the world, of faith and world history. Overbeck had written: "The contradiction between the original Christian eschatology and the contemporary hope for the future is fundamental". For a detailed discussion of this view see E Jüngel, 1986: 60-61.

⁷³ Cf. N B MacDonald, 2000: xx.

relationship of humanity to God in religious experience, but that of God to humanity in Jesus Christ.

- (2) Barth's rejection of the "relational" thought form of liberal theology. Just as religious experience was not the object of theological reflection, so "relationalism" was not its formal structure. "Relationalism" describes the formal or conceptual nexus between the content of revelation and direct human experience.⁷⁴ His reconsideration of the Bible convinced him of matters that he could never comprehend while he was still maintaining a liberal approach to the Bible.

Wanamaker maintains that Barth discovered a 'strange new world within the Bible' because what he had been taught to treat as a document about humankind's religious quest for God, he discovered was actually the "the Word of God".⁷⁵ After deciding to give up liberalism, which tended to be anthropological and wrestling to find a meaningful place for theology, Barth now reversed this liberal approach so that it became theology seeking a place for anthropology.

This very attitude explained Barth's approach to exegesis. He understood that since biblical exegesis is also at the mercy of humanity, the misrepresentation of biblical truths would certainly ensue. Barth believed therefore that "exegesis is always a combination of taking and giving, of reading out and reading in, and therefore exegesis without which the norm cannot assert itself as a norm, entails the constant danger that the Bible will be taken prisoner by the church, that its own life will be absorbed into the life of the church, that its free power will be transformed into the authority of the church; in short, that it will lose its character as a norm magisterially confronting the church".⁷⁶

⁷⁴ For a detailed overview of some elementary reasons that impelled Barth to abandon liberalism, see G Hunsinger, 'Towards a Radical Barth' in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 205ff.

⁷⁵ C Wanamaker, 'Romans 13: A hermeneutic for Church and State' in: C. Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988: 92.

⁷⁶ K Barth, 1936: 106.

Biblical exegesis occupies a pivotal role in Barth's theology. The serious way in which he approached the Bible and the context in which he practised his theology has sometimes been misunderstood to imply that Barth only resorted to the Bible after he had been challenged by his context. It is for this reason that brief mention will now be made of Barth's theology and its relationship to his socialist tendencies.

1.5 Barth's socialist praxis and its relationship to his theology

Karl Barth has continued to assert that he had always been interested in politics.⁷⁷ Recent research on Barth and politics has managed to challenge allegations that Barth's theology had remained removed from politics.⁷⁸ Barth was frequently blamed for not taking politics seriously. At the forefront of this argument stand theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Emil Brunner and Charles West.⁷⁹ Niebuhr argued that Barth viewed the political terrain from 'an eschatological airplane', soaring at such a "very high altitude" that his theology was "too transcendent to offer any guidance for the discriminating choices that political responsibility challenges us to".⁸⁰

The character of Barth's political judgement has also come under criticism. Barth is judged by West in particular for neglecting the necessary function of empirical analysis. It is for this reason that West contends that Barth had failed to concentrate "on the facts of human experience".⁸¹ Emil Brunner has criticised Barth's lack of zeal in condemning Communism. He holds that Barth's critical sympathy for Communism emanated from beliefs residing "in his subconscious but not his conscious approach to things".⁸²

⁷⁷Cf. footnote in Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 181.

⁷⁸ The studies by Timothy Gorrige, Frank Jehle and others referred to in this chapter are of particular relevance here.

⁷⁹ Cf. G Hunsinger, 'Towards a radical Barth', in: Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 181f.

⁸⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr cited in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 182.

⁸¹ Charles West cited in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 182.

⁸² Emil Brunner cited in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 183.

This inability to see Barth as someone who took politics seriously impelled Hunsinger to table a few questions which justify and provide the background for understanding the “controversial” work of Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt. Hunsinger asks the following questions to those who prefer not to see Barth as a serious theologian who took politics equally seriously: “If politics is peripheral to his theology, then why did Barth so often insist that there was a political thrust to his formal thought? If his theology actually leads to such complacency, then what accounts for Barth’s leadership in the resistance of Nazism? If his theology is incapable of discriminate political choices, then what explains his subtle, if controversial, discrimination between Communism and Nazism?”⁸³ These questions and answers present us with a Barth totally different to the one introduced by Niebuhr, West and Brunner.

Barth’s socialist convictions have also been dealt with in numerous commentaries on this subject.⁸⁴ From his time as pastor in the small industrial community of Safenwil to his induction into academic theology, Barth has continually demonstrated his bias for socialism. The interpretation of this socialist inclination was sometimes at the head of many controversies regarding Barth’s understanding of the relationship between his theology and politics.

Some have argued that it was Barth’s favouring of socialism that coloured his theology. In other words, his socialist bias dictated Barth’s theology. Leading this school of thought was Marquardt. In 1972 he plunged Barthian scholarship into a state of confusion. He rightly argued that Barth had been a lifelong socialist and that socialist praxis was the interpretive key to his theological output.⁸⁵ The reaction that this thesis elicited resulted in it not being accepted at the Theologische Hochschule

⁸³ Cf. G Hunsinger, ‘Towards a radical Barth’ in G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 184.

⁸⁴ Further detailed discussions concerning Barth’s interest in politics and how he related politics to his theology are contained in G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976; B McCormack, 1995; T Gorringer, 1999; M Rumscheidt, ‘The Political worship of God – the example of Beyers Naudé’. In: *The Legacy of Beyers Naudé*. The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology series. Stellenbosch: Sun Press. 2005, 110f

⁸⁵ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, 1972; cf. also Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, ‘Socialism in the theology of Karl Barth’ in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 47-76.

in Berlin; Jüngel refused to act as external examiner for it, which in turn resulted in the resignation of Gollwitzer from his chair in protest.⁸⁶

In maintaining this about Barth, Marquardt does not give enough credit to the role that the Bible played in Barth's socialist praxis. In his view Barth turned to theology in order to seek the organic connection between the Bible and the newspaper, the new world and the collapsing bourgeois order.⁸⁷ Although Marquardt rightly observed that in Safenwil the proletariat was the material of Scriptural exegesis,⁸⁸ he failed to refer to Barth's realisation of an uncritical association with a political view.

Hunsinger has noted that Barth was always aware that "a viable relationship between theology and politics, in his view must be one of mutual clarification in which neither discipline is reduced to the terms of the other ... Theology must not be politicised, nor politics theologised".⁸⁹ This disregard for politicised theology is best illustrated in Barth's Tambach address. More importantly, in his reference to Barth's rediscovery of the Bible, Marquardt seems to be in oblivion about the fact that Barth, until his encounter with a non-liberal reading of the Bible, was reading the Bible in a liberal manner.

There are certain statements made by Barth in person from which it can be deduced that his break with liberalism took place strictly on theological grounds. It is therefore understandable that Marquardt is criticised for suggesting that Barth's disenchantment with liberal theology cannot be appreciated in isolation from its socialist context. The statements revealing Barth's break with liberalism on theological grounds are the following: "For twelve years I was a minister ... I had my theology. It was not really mine but that of my unforgotten teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann ... Once in the ministry, I found myself growing away from these

⁸⁶ Cf. T Gorringer, 1999: 5.

⁸⁷ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 59.

⁸⁸ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 60.

⁸⁹ G Hunsinger, 'Towards a radical Barth' in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 181.

theological habits of thought and being forced back at every point more and more to the specific *minister's* problem, the *sermon*.”⁹⁰

To this effect Hunsinger agrees that Marquardt is not wrong when he stresses that there is a lasting socialist dimension to Barth's thought. However, Hunsinger bemoans Marquardt's emphasis on this dimension to the exclusion of all else, and at times subordinating all else to this dimension.⁹¹

According to Hunsinger, Barth had broken with liberalism politically long before he did so theologically.⁹² When he broke away from liberal theology, he needed to be extra careful not to lapse into the pitfalls of 18th-century orthodoxy. He had already in 1916 made his intention clear of seeking a radical new theological relationship between theory and praxis. Such an approach needed to have its sole foundation on the concrete sovereignty of God. Hunsinger argues that to ground “theory” and “praxis” in that way meant that Barth had to look for a new conceptual objectivity which would overcome liberal theology at its crucial point – its conceptual subjectivism and relativism.⁹³

Barth came to grasp that it was not “right human feelings” that formed the content of the Bible. This new understanding followed on his discovery of the “strange new world” which formed Barth's new understanding of the Bible. This legitimated his radical departure from the prevailing liberal theology of the time and led to the first edition of Romans which was completed in 1918 and published in 1919, marking his quest for a radical theology. Marquardt was one of the first of Barth's followers to capitalise on this tendency of Barth. He was viciously criticised for insisting on Barth's anarchist inclinations.⁹⁴ The result was also that Barth's quest for such a theology meant a complete rethinking of the concept of revelation.

⁹⁰ Karl Barth cited in: G Hunsinger (ed.) 1976: 201. Italics in the original.

⁹¹ Cf. G Hunsinger (ed.) 1976: 190.

⁹² Cf. G Hunsinger (ed.) 1976: 203ff.

⁹³ Cf. G Hunsinger (ed.) 1976: 204.

⁹⁴ Marquardt was severely criticized because some concluded that his analysis of Barth displayed Barth as an anarchist. Although his analysis of Barth does portray Barth as someone who entertained anarchist inclination theoretically, Marquardt does not clearly portray Barth as someone who shared

This radical inclination facilitated his easy navigation from insisting on religious experience to seeing revelation as eschatology.⁹⁵ It was the influence especially of the message of the Blumhardts with regard to eschatology that led Rumscheidt to conclude that:

“Barth was a man who was deeply concerned about the preaching of the gospel. His real, his primary aim was to allow the depth of the scriptures to become visible again, the springs of the Bible to flow freely once more, and the message of the biblical writers to become concrete again in human life and existence. We may say indeed that Barth wanted scripture to become ‘political’, involved in the events of community, nation and world. Hence his interpretation of God’s judgment as a judgment which puts things right, in the phrase borrowed from the Blumhardts”.⁹⁶

This statement is best understood when one remembers that Barth was schooled in the liberal theological tradition and now wanted ways of challenging this approach. A question may then be asked: having been schooled and conditioned by liberalism, how would Barth succeed in coming to this conclusion? Barth operated on the following principle which, in Hunsinger’s view, remained consistent through every phase of his theology after his decisive break with theological liberalism: he maintained that theological concepts must be exegetically consistent with scripture, logically consistent with each other, and functionally consistent with praxis. For him this radical political praxis was demanded and sustained by the realistic eschatology of scripture. He recognised that the task of theology was not only exegetical, but also conceptual.

This therefore suggests that theology’s proper task was conceptually to clarify the revelational content of scriptural exegesis. In this way the task of theology would be carried out in the service of human praxis, which demanded a firm conceptual and exegetical foundation. Hunsinger is correct in asserting that, in the first edition

these inclinations on a practical level. Cf. F Marquardt, ‘Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth’ in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 47-76.

⁹⁵ G Hunsinger (ed.) 1976: 206.

⁹⁶ Cf. M Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: an analysis of the Barth-Harnack correspondence of 1923*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972: 4.

of Romans, Barth's problem was to find the objective ground of God's irreversible relationship with humanity, a solution that he later found within his doctrine of God.⁹⁷

He argues that during Barth's early ministry, he made no separation in principle between socialist praxis and preaching. According to his son, Markus Barth, in about one of every four sermons of that period he mentioned current political, social and economic issues. "Thus when Barth set out to find a new theological basis for preaching in 1915 – for the specific minister's problem, the sermon – he was seeking a new basis for his socialist praxis at the same time".⁹⁸

On this basis Hunsinger is convinced that, by insisting on a specifically socialist context for Barth's break with liberalism, Marquardt is far from misrepresenting the facts. That Barth was indeed a theologian that thought very highly of the reality of politics is beyond doubt. It is understandable that many were alarmed by his decision to join the academic frontier. The decisive question which confronts us at this point in the development of Barth's theology is what was to happen with this "Red Pastor" if he was to become a professor of Reformed Theology? Barth had received a letter from Johann Adam Heilmann who was at that time the pastor of the Reformed Church in Göttingen. The letter contained a request that Barth should submit an application for the position of honorary professor in Reformed Theology at Göttingen.⁹⁹

Barth was undoubtedly a man who was given a lot of labels. Reference has already been made to the "Red Pastor" of Safenwil. What was to happen when this pastor became an academic theologian?¹⁰⁰ How would he relate his theology to his politics? Having already pointed out that Barth was an ambiguous figure, it should come as no surprise that many were concerned about what his views would look

⁹⁷ Cf. G Hunsinger (ed.) 1976: 207.

⁹⁸ K Barth cited in G Hunsinger (ed.) 1976: 203.

⁹⁹ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 242.

¹⁰⁰ This is a peculiar description since it does not exist in Barth's theological thinking. It is nonetheless used here to illustrate Barth's activities in the academic world.

like once he left the church for academia. Leonhard Ragaz who shortly before abandoning his professorial position in Zürich because of what he called “the sterility of pursuing academic theology” was especially concerned that Barth’s political interests would be overwhelmed by his theological exercises.¹⁰¹

According to Gollwitzer many followed in his footsteps, reproaching Barth that he now wanted to depoliticise theology.¹⁰² These fears were justified, since Heilmann’s letter contained more than just an invitation to a professorship. Heilmann, a retired pastor of the Reformed Church in Göttingen, had been campaigning tirelessly for a Reformed professorate at Göttingen University.¹⁰³ Upon conversing with Barth about his intention of seeing him occupying the position in question, he specifically requested that Barth refrained from engaging in politics.¹⁰⁴

1.6 The seeds of confessional theology in the theology of Karl Barth

Throughout his theological advancement, Barth was consistently engaged in a process of correcting and refining his theological position. This is partly due to the fact that Barth was constantly open to listen to what others had to say about the very issues that he was contemplating. Barth has articulated this very idea when he wrote in his preface to the Church Dogmatics (CD) I/1 that the process of writing of his CD has become very similar to his re-editing his *Römerbrief I*. He retorted: “What option had I [with the writing of the CD] but to begin again at the beginning, saying the same thing, but in a very different way? Hence I must gratify or perhaps annoy my readers by giving them a revision of the old book instead of the expected new one”.¹⁰⁵

Barth had persistently given credit to the numerous individuals and incidents which precipitated a change in his position. More importantly, Barth had been

¹⁰¹ Cf. H Gollwitzer, ‘Kingdom of God and Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth’, in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 9.

¹⁰² Cf. H Gollwitzer in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 79.

¹⁰³ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 125.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 242.

¹⁰⁵ K. Barth, 1936: xi.

unequivocal in praising the impact the Reformed tradition had had on him. His break with theological liberalism and fundamentally his break with 19th century Protestantism propelled him on a course of confronting his faith with sincerity, admitting that at times it was difficult given the school of thought in which he was immersed.

Barth's interest in Reformed theology is imperative when one considers some of the following aspects. When he had to migrate to the academic world while hardly fulfilling the academic requirements to be able to teach, he found himself in a position where he had to work extremely hard to gain command of his new task.¹⁰⁶ Since his entry into academia he spent a great deal of his time on finding ways to enhance his understanding of the Reformed faith. This would subsequently play a pivotal role when he had to respond to the dangers that were threatening the existence of the Christian faith, such as a strict separation of law and the gospel, as is the case with Lutheranism.

During his struggle to make sense of the Reformed faith, Barth sincerely took issue with some of the profound confessional writings of the Reformed faith. Yet one must remember that this struggle was still informed by the residual liberal tendencies which had come to characterise him. His initial comment on the Heidelberg Catechism was hardly encouraging; one can even conclude that his disdain of the Catechism's subject matter at that early stage reveals the remnants of strong liberal views in his theology. With regard to the Heidelberg Catechism he confided in his friend Thurneysen that:

“The Heidelberg Catechism is a decidedly questionable work. Precisely the first question is not good at all. I criticised it for an hour to the students today in order then to show them in the second hour how it is fortunately blown sky-high by the answer. It seems that Peter [his bother who was also a pastor] is using the

¹⁰⁶ The position which Barth was invited to occupy at Göttingen envisaged that he would specialize in teaching Reformed confessions, Reformed doctrine of as well as Reformed church life. These were all subjects which Barth felt ill-prepared for that time to teach in a predominantly Lutheran faculty (cf. E Busch, 1976: 128-9).

Heidelberger in his catechetical instruction in Madiswil. I would not risk that but would prefer to go back to the Genevan Catechism or to that of Leo Jud of 1541.”¹⁰⁷

The inclination to engaging theology in this manner (to engage all sides of the argument seriously) was to become a typical trademark of Barth’s entire theological venture. When taking into account Barth’s entire struggle with Reformed confessions such as the one indicated, one realises that his views with regard to Reformed writings had changed tremendously.¹⁰⁸ McCormack believes that the appreciation that Barth later had of early Reformed orthodoxy would have been impossible had he not decided to change his attitude in this regard.¹⁰⁹

Shirley Guthrie, who translated this work by Barth into English, maintained that with this work Barth demonstrated his loyalty to the genuine Reformed tradition.¹¹⁰ He continues to assert that, although Barth’s pledge of his solidarity to this confession was informed by the same scripture that guided Barth’s predecessors in their attempt to compose this document, Barth insisted that we had to say things differently in the 20th century. It was important for Barth to struggle sincerely with a better appreciation of the Reformed faith. It is also imperative that note be taken of some of the individual Reformed church fathers who influenced him.

In his celebrated study, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical theology*, to which we have already made ample reference in this chapter, McCormack convincingly demonstrated how numerous Reformed theologians as well as the Reformed tradition made an impression on Barth,¹¹¹ particularly Heinrich Heppe’s Reformed Dogmatics. It is however unfortunate that McCormack does not do the same with regard to the way Calvin influenced Barth. Because he does not make explicit mention of Calvin’s influence on Barth, McCormack creates the impression

¹⁰⁷ K Barth cited in: B McCormack, 1997: 303.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. K Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964a.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 304.

¹¹⁰ S Guthrie cited in: K Barth, 1964a: 12.

¹¹¹ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 291ff.

that Calvin did not influence Barth in the same manner as the individuals to whom he alludes.

The influence Reformed individuals and the Reformed tradition had on Barth impelled him to write his commentary on the epistle of Paul to the Romans differently the second time round. Sung Wook Chung has ventured to assert that Barth's *Der Römerbrief II* was written differently due to Barth's discovery of Calvin's usage of the Bible. Following Chung, one can already detect the influence that Calvin had on Barth in *Der Römerbrief II*.¹¹²

1.6.1 Calvin: An unprecedented discovery for Barth?

It is fair to assume that Barth's interest in Calvin was triggered at some earlier stage; however, it should be stated that his particular interest in the Reformed tradition, and particularly in Calvin developed gradually. Bromiley insisted on this when he maintained that "Calvin's own character appears also not to have made any immediate appeal to Barth's sympathy, and his theology had both formal and material features that could not command his wholehearted approval".¹¹³ Webster endorses this view, reminding us that Barth's 1922 Göttingen lectures were a rough document.¹¹⁴

After he was challenged to teach Reformed Theology at a Lutheran faculty, Barth developed a fascination with Calvin. It was this very fascination that informed Barth's constructive engagement with Calvin. Scholl has attempted to argue that Barth's interest in Calvin was first kindled during his initial semester *as a student* at Berne in the winter of 1904/5 when he was attending his father's course on the history of the Reformation age.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Cf. S Chung, 'Seeds of Ambivalence sown: Barth's use of Calvin in *Der Römerbrief II* (1922)' in: *The Evangelical Quarterly*. Vol LXXIII, No. 1. January (2001) 37-58.

¹¹³ K Barth, 1995: x.

¹¹⁴ Cf. J Webster, *Karl Barth*. London: Continuum, 2000: 34.

¹¹⁵ H Scholl in the preface to K Barth, 1995: xiii. Emphasis added.

His discovery of Calvin in this manner was therefore accidental if we were to take into account the view that, although he had been exposed to Calvin earlier on, he had interpreted Calvin through Hermannian lenses until he joined the staff at Göttingen.¹¹⁶ As a vicariate in Geneva and preaching in the very same place as Calvin, Barth seemed uncomfortable with Calvin's use of the Bible in his context.¹¹⁷

Although Barth did read Calvin's Institutes when he was still in Geneva, he did not immediately part ways with Hermannian liberalism, but instead simply appropriated and incorporated certain Calvinistic elements to reinforce his liberal theological stance. It was for this reason that the celebrations of Calvin which took place in the Geneva Theatre in 1909 did not change his liberal thinking at the time. He confessed that the Marburg influence that he brought with him to Geneva as well as the circle of the *Christliche Welt* and its friends inhibited him from giving due credit to Calvin.¹¹⁸

However, the situation in Göttingen impelled him to do a little more justice to Calvin. It has already been argued that a Reformed professorship had been established in Göttingen in 1921 through the initiative of Heilmann. The primary motivation behind this was to initiate a confessional renewal within the Reformed movement. This renewal was a clear reaction against the widespread liberalism that was threatening the very essence of Reformed confessional practices.¹¹⁹ Although Barth did not take Reformed theology seriously until Göttingen, it cannot be denied that he was thought of as befitting this position because of the work that he had done in his first commentary on Romans. His position in Göttingen precipitated his interest in Reformed ecclesiastical affairs. His *Göttingen Dogmatics* demonstrates the results of Barth's careful study of Reformed theology; it also demonstrates the manner in which he incorporated and appropriated the theology of the reformers, especially that of Calvin.

¹¹⁶ E Busch, 1976: 149.

¹¹⁷ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 54.

¹¹⁸ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 57.

¹¹⁹ K Barth, *The theology of the Reformed Confessions*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2002: vii.

In an interesting study, Van der Kooi set out to deal with the challenges that the Enlightenment had lain at the doorstep of theology. Van der Kooi employs the concept of a mirror in dealing with the issue of faith and knowledge in Calvin and Barth. He proposes that the metaphor of a mirror in Calvin is underpinned by the multiple avenues in which “knowledge of God” is to be pursued. It is a positive metaphor in which theology functions as an indicator of how earthly mediums are utilised to reveal God through His Spirit to humanity. In the case of Barth, the metaphor of the mirror plays a pivotal role especially with regard to his work on the concept of the “*analogia fide*” which was later reworked in the teaching of the “*analogia relationis*”.¹²⁰

There are a number of issues that impressed Barth about Calvin, among other things the art of exegesis, Calvin’s rendition of the doctrine of predestination, the secular person’s ability for truth, as well as Calvin’s understanding of history. Granting that the Bible has always occupied a pivotal role in Calvin’s theology, it came as no surprise that Barth would find a number of biblical pointers which would later give form to his own theology.

In Barth’s preparation of his commentary on Romans, he had already discovered in Calvin a form of energetic wrestling with the text. In the preface to the second edition of this commentary, Barth says the following about the effectiveness of Calvin in answer to those who criticised him for not giving sufficient space to historical criticism: “if one was to place the works of (a modern theologian) such as Jülicher, for an example side by side with that of Calvin: how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to rethink the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the 16th century from the first century becomes transparent! Paul speaks, and the person of the 16th century hears”.¹²¹

¹²⁰ C van der Kooi, 2002: 13.

¹²¹ Cf. K Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. 6th ed. Trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1977: 7.

Webster maintains that his lectures on Calvin in 1922 gave a revealing early account of Calvin's exegetical practice from which much can be gleaned about Barth's reflection on biblical interpretation in the Göttingen period and beyond.¹²² Göttingen dictated a wholly different approach to Reformed theology and confessions. Calvin played a pivotal role in guiding Barth on his new adventure. Although he was fascinated by Calvin, Barth never denied his conservatism. In an article entitled "Thoughts on the 400th Anniversary of the death of Calvin" he said the following of Calvin:

"No one today should imagine that he [sic] would have been able to live in the Geneva ruled by Calvin with a good conscience, let alone with pleasure. It came to the point where he could not rid himself of a certain Platonising dualism in the categorisation of the relationship between body and soul as well as that between heaven and earth, things here and things beyond. It did not allow him to see and to bring into focus the totality of man's existence, his misery and also his redemption, a deficiency which necessarily brought peculiar life-denying coldness into his ethics and also, above all, into the hope for the future. He was undoubtedly stronger when he spoke about faith and obedience than about love and hope".¹²³

Apart from the clear differences which existed between Calvin and Barth, it must be stated that Barth nonetheless later came to look at Calvin with great adoration and intrigue. This is epitomised in a letter that he wrote to his great friend Thurneysen, in which he had this to say about Calvin: "[Calvin is] a waterfall, a primitive forest, a demonic power, something straight down from the Himalayas, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I just don't have the organs, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, let alone to describe it properly".¹²⁴ Busch reminds us that Barth occasionally remarked of Calvin's theology that even with its clearly problematic aspects, it has "metallic substance".¹²⁵ There can be no doubt that this

¹²² J Webster, *Word and Church: essays in Christian dogmatics*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001: 92.

¹²³ K Barth, *Fragments grave and gay*. Collins: Great Britain, 1976: 109.

¹²⁴ E Busch, 1976: 138.

¹²⁵ E Busch cited in: M Rumscheidt (ed.), *Karl Barth in Re-view: Posthumous Works reviewed and assessed*. Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1981: x.

impression that Calvin made on Barth accompanied him throughout his theological career.

Karl Barth's exchange with Calvin's doctrine of predestination is particularly important in that it epitomises the degree to which Barth thought he could engage with Calvin. Fundamentally, Barth's doctrine of election [he uses the concept election instead of predestination as Calvin prefers to use it] in Romans I constituted the rejection of the idea of a twin permanent factions of individuals – with the one belonging to the so-called “elect” and the other to the so-called “reprobate”.

Both of these categories were conceived tangibly as the highly impermanent status of the human individual before God, which depends finally on the question of whether genuine faith is present. But because faith is unpredictable, it was constantly possible for one to lose one's faith and regain it again later.¹²⁶ Barth had found in Calvin a partner that accompanied him on a journey of dealing with the secular person's mind concerning truth. Hunsinger points to the following statement which, although appropriated by Barth, remained nonetheless Calvin's idea. Calvin held that:

“Whenever ... we meet with heathen writers, let us learn from the light of truth which is admirably displayed in their works, which the human mind, fallen as it is, and corrupted from its integrity, is yet invested and adorned by God with excellent talents. If we believe that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we shall neither reject nor despise the truth itself, wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to insult the Spirit of God”.¹²⁷

Karl Barth took this idea and developed it in his *Church Dogmatics*, although with some amendments as he dealt with the idea of inquiry into “secular parables of truth”. Hunsinger is one of those who have noted that where Calvin speaks of “the Spirit of God” Barth opts to speak of “the prophetic work of Jesus Christ”; where Calvin speaks of the human *mind* being adorned with “excellent talents”, Barth

¹²⁶ Cf. K Barth, 1933: 387.

¹²⁷ John Calvin cited by G Hunsinger, *How to read Karl Barth: The shape of his theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991: 234.

prefers to speak of human *words* being invested and adorned, miraculously, with a capacity they do not intrinsically possess.¹²⁸

The similarities between these two individuals are striking. Barth like Calvin believed that, although the human mind had fallen and had become corrupted from its integrity, truth was nevertheless still to be found in authors that appeared to be hostile and ignorant of the gospel. Barth affirmed the reality of truth in these individuals for he was convinced that anything that questioned this would suggest that there were numerous fountains of truths. In comparing the similarities between Barth and Calvin one can however not ignore an important difference: although both affirm that truth is also to be found in those who are ignorant of Christ, Barth addresses a different set of issues in so far as he defines christologically a problem that Calvin had defined anthropologically.

Hunsinger holds that the problem for Barth was not (as it was for Calvin) how to explain the occurrence of truth in heathen writers, given the degree of the fall, so much as it was to explain that phenomenon, given the sheer exclusivity of truth in Jesus Christ.¹²⁹ Hunsinger is therefore correct in pointing out that this understanding challenges those critics of Barth that held that his exclusivist Christology is incompatible with theological truth in non-Christian sources and writers. It can therefore not be doubted that Calvin is evoked on numerous occasions in Barth's thoughts and speech. Barth's intensive struggle with natural theology and his rejection thereof also echo his deep appreciation of this church father.

Concerning Barth's appreciation of Calvin, it is helpful to look at Barth's earliest struggles with Calvin. Barth thought that the only means of understanding Calvin better was for him to retrieve the most fundamental aspects that made Calvin's theology stand out in the manner that it did. He compared Calvin's most elementary works to his later and more mature writings. During this comparison we

¹²⁸ G Hunsinger, 1991: 234.

¹²⁹ G Hunsinger, 1991: 234-235.

come across a Barth who refuses to engage Calvin in an uncritical manner and at times does not shy away from strong language when he differs strongly with him.

In his introduction to Calvin's theology, Barth is quick to take issue with Calvin's exposition of history. Although he appreciates the flexibility with which Calvin approaches this subject, he seems especially perturbed by Calvin's association of secular history with divine history.¹³⁰ It is fundamental to take Barth's discomfort seriously, because for Barth divine history is the eschatological history of God which encompasses all history, biblical and profane.¹³¹

It is asserted here that this discomfort was elicited by his rejection of a liberal approach to history which is not impervious to caricaturing God's intervention in human affairs. Barth also held that the one who would be considered a good Calvinist was not the one who merely repeated what Calvin had said; on the contrary, a good Calvinist was the one who ventured into a debate with Calvin. If such a debate was not present we might as well be listening to Chinese.¹³² Barth's understanding of history is enveloped in his statement "if others want to understand us historically, they may not simply read what we have really said, or work[ed] on it, but must at least have the skill to detect what we wanted to say".¹³³

In some of the lectures that he gave on John Calvin, Barth made ample reference to Calvin's second major work which was completed in Orléans towards the end of 1534. This work was entitled *Psychopannychia*, which is rendered "Soul Sleep", but literally means "night of the soul".¹³⁴

According to Barth, with this work Calvin hoped to reject the thesis that with the death of the body, the soul sinks into a deep sleep, similar to death. Calvin also wanted to counter the view that it was only at resurrection that the body was

¹³⁰ The flexibility to which is alluded to here refers to the good that Barth sees concerning history as life's teacher. For Barth it is fundamental that humans remain aware of this, since we are not only concerned about the present but should have reason to embrace things of the past as well as things yet to come (cf. K Barth, 1995: 1ff).

¹³¹ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 305.

¹³² K Barth, 1995: 4.

¹³³ K Barth, 1995: 6.

¹³⁴ K Barth, 1995: 146.

resurrected into a physical body. Calvin's objection to this view was that the departed souls of the elect were indeed at rest, but not asleep, and not in a state of indolence, sleepiness or intoxication.¹³⁵

Among the many themes with which Calvin dealt in this study, Barth argued that under the heading of "Opposition to Quietism", it became clear that soul sleep or the soul's night festival was nothing other than what we know from mysticism as quietism. In attempting to substantiate this claim, Barth held that as distinct from Luther, Calvin was dealing in the main with mystical enthusiasts. This suggests therefore that the doctrine of soul sleep was simply a metaphysical version of the attitude to life that, by passivity, renunciation of all things, abandonment of all human thinking and doing and the mystical death of the soul in God, it can attain the supreme summit of eternal life. It is also worth noting that in Calvin the distinction between faith and mysticism is the starting point. This is so because for him faith must be free at once for life, for ethos, for the glorifying of God in thinking, willing and doing.¹³⁶

Barth's discovery of a maturity in Calvin's theological thinking which was reflected in *psychopannychia* and the link that he made with his later theology drove Hans Scholl to speak about Barth's fascination with Calvin.¹³⁷ Scholl is correct in saying that this fascination was motivated by Calvin's obscurity; however it was not merely this fascination which made an impression on Barth, it was Calvin's simplicity as well.

It was in Calvin that Barth saw a great and paramount figure who nonetheless did not think much of himself. He said the following about this important and yet simple man:

"It is no coincidence that the place of his burial slipped into oblivion only a few years after his death. The monument to him and several other Calvinists of spiritual and

¹³⁵ Cf. H Scholl, 'Karl Barth als Interpret der Psychopannychia' in: H Scholl (Hg.). *Karl Barth und Johannes Calvin: Karl Barths Göttinger Calvin-Vorlesung von 1922*. Breklumer Druckerei Manfred Siegel KG: Duitsland. 1995: 155-156.

¹³⁶ K. Barth, 1995: 151.

¹³⁷ Cf. H Scholl (Hg.), 1995: 1ff.

secular standing of his time at Geneva was certainly not erected in his spirit. Calvin was no hero, and is not suited to hero-worship. Showing no trace of special consciousness of a prophetic mission, he desired to be merely the first servant of the Word of God for the Christian congregation at Geneva, as well as for others who came to him asking him to be that".¹³⁸

Throughout his intensive grappling with Calvin, it is more than palpable that Barth came to see Calvin as being engaged in some sort of confessional theology. The intention of Calvin's Magnum Opus was to declare what he as well as those who were persecuted believed and in a sense to invite a conversation between himself and those clergy whose bellies had become their gods. It must be remembered that Calvin wrote his Magnum Opus in exile.

He addressed this work – *Introduction in the Christian Religion* – to the king of France. Although it was intended to be used as a textbook for the king,¹³⁹ in actual fact this work may be construed as a confession of what Calvin and his followers believed. With this, Calvin wanted to show the king what was really taught by those whom he was persecuting and to ask him whether they really deserved such horrible punishment and that the charge against them – in the main that of revolution – should not be accepted without examination.¹⁴⁰ To put the mind of the king at rest pertaining to the claim that his camp wanted to overthrow the King's government, Calvin concludes:

"Your mind is now indeed turned away and estranged from us ... but we trust that we can regain your favour, if in a quiet, composed mood; you will once read this confession, which we intend in lieu of a defence before Your Majesty. Suppose however, the whisperings of the malevolent so fill your ears that the accused have no chance to speak for themselves, but those savage furies, while you connive at them, rage against us with imprisonings, scourgings, rackings, maimings and burnings. Then we will be reduced to the last extremity even as sheep destined for the slaughter. Yet this will so happen that "in our patience we may possess our

¹³⁸ K Barth, 1976: 105.

¹³⁹ K Barth, 1995: 109.

¹⁴⁰ K Barth, 1995: 107.

souls”; and may await the strong hand of the Lord, which will surely appear in due season, coming forth to deliver the poor from their affliction, and also to punish their despisers, who now exult with great assurance. May the Lord, the King of kings, establish your throne in righteousness, and your dominion in equity, most illustrious King”.¹⁴¹

Having catalogued the events and individuals that contributed to Barth’s theological metamorphosis, this chapter shall now briefly turn to investigate the confessional nature of the theology of Barth. It shall endeavour to argue that Barth’s engagement with Reformed theology and Reformed confessions provided an impetus of dealing with theology in a confessional manner. The first part of the following section will explain why it is necessary to think about Barth’s theological enterprise in a confessional manner. The characteristics of confessional theology which are prevalent in the theology of Barth will be highlighted.

1.7 Characteristics of Barth’s confessional theology

When Barth was asked by the World Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches which was held in Cardiff in 1925 to comment on the desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed creed, he took that opportunity to put into perspective what he understood the nature of Reformed confessions to be. Within this response, trademarks of the confessional theology of Barth are conspicuous.

When Barth was requested by his friend Thurneysen to give a series of lectures of his own dogmatics in 1923, we are reminded of what Barth said with regard to Reformed theology prior to this request. Barth maintained that Reformed theology always had to be re-examined from time to time in order to be able to speak to the cultural existence at particular moments in history: “a trumpet blast which needs to be blown in our sick time”.¹⁴² The definition given by Barth at the behest of the council indicated is best understood when some of his writings which

¹⁴¹ K Barth, 1995: 109.

¹⁴² K Barth’s correspondence with E Thurneysen in: J Smart (ed.), *Revolutionary theology in the making: Barth-Thurneysen correspondence, 1914-1925*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964: 101.

proceed this period are also taken into account. A working definition of what he considered to constitute a Reformed confession is contained in the basic characteristics of what constitutes confessional theology.

It is imperative to consider this definition. It should be considered not simply to ascertain whether the elementary views that he had of a Reformed confession were being repeated when he was facing the challenge to confess almost a decade after this definition was formulated. But it is important that this definition is considered for the intention of illustrating that it reveals Barth as someone who was well aware of the context of his theology. Barth maintained that:

“a Reformed confession is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which until further action, defines its character to outsiders; and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures alone”.¹⁴³

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

- (a) Confessional theology is a theology which is anchored in the Word of God. The definition is unequivocal that a confession is to be based on Holy Scriptures alone. Barth's intense interaction with scripture had brought him to the conclusion of what a Reformed confession was. The seriousness with which he wrestled with scripture allowed him the possibility of seeing that the strength of Reformed confessions lies in their weaknesses. This comes about simply because a confession can never take the place of Holy Scripture. It should therefore come as no surprise as to why Barth asserts that the significance of a confession in the Reformed Church lies in its essential *nonsignificance*.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ K Barth, 1962: 112.

¹⁴⁴ K Barth, 2002: 38.

He compares a Reformed confession with a bell and the mighty sound that it makes. The mighty sound dies away gently; likewise a Reformed confession, if it is to understand its place and significance, should look out for a time when it dies away gently. In his opinion one can only come to this insight when one comprehends that a confession points beyond itself, and that its centre of gravity is not in itself but rather beyond itself.¹⁴⁵

- (b) A Reformed confession is a spontaneous and publicly formulated statement by a Christian community. This view is informed by Barth's changed attitude towards the doctrine of the church. McCormack argues that at the beginning of his academic career, Barth's attitude towards this doctrine had become more positive and, largely as a consequence, the church came to be seen by him as the locus of authority in theology instead of simply the locus of judgment as revealed in Romans II.¹⁴⁶ To him, the church then plays a pivotal role in that it is the only organ that is charged with the task of deciding when a confession is in order.
- (c) A Reformed confession witnesses Jesus Christ publicly to the world. Barth's definition maintains that a Reformed confession is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed by the Holy Scripture alone. A Reformed confession does not bear witness to itself, politics or the ingenious way that it was arrived at, but vigorously witnesses Jesus Christ to the world. Gorringer put this into perspective when he said that Barth's theology, from first to last, is an attempt to witness God; that it resists all attempts to find interpretive master keys which would bring it under theological-cultural hegemony.¹⁴⁷
- (d) A Reformed confession has to be mindful of the context in which it is called to life. By being mindful of its context, Barth concludes that it is perhaps possible to institute a creed or a confession that will be binding to all who

¹⁴⁵ K Barth, 2002: 38-9.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 303.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. T Gorringer, 1999: 5.

stands within the Reformed tradition. In accepting this confession as binding, it ought to be kept in mind that it does not remain flawless.

A Reformed confession, albeit important to the life of the Reformed church, is in Barth's view extremely difficult to be called into existence because, among other issues, a confession will have to be translated into the language of the civil community.¹⁴⁸ Although Christians are united because of one baptism, they nonetheless find themselves scattered around the globe. For Barth any road to a universal creed which bypasses the concrete actuality of unitedness would not be a Reformed road. It is for this reason why he holds that the reluctance of the old Reformers to take inclusive creedal action is to be understood.¹⁴⁹

Barth comprehends that, as was the case with old Reformers whereby their confessions were called into being and were impelled by concrete situations, Reformed confessions today have to follow that road. While admitting that classical Reformed confessions were acts and events which responded to God in his revelation, Barth is of the view that they were nonetheless also demonstrations of tangible human-earthly unitedness.¹⁵⁰ It is at the backdrop of this that Barth's restriction of "a Christian community geographically limited" should be understood. More than anything, this restriction displays the essence of context in theological matters.

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

¹⁴⁸ K Barth, *Dogmatics in outline*. New York: Pilosophical Library Press , 1949: 31.

¹⁴⁹ K Barth, 1962: 125.

¹⁵⁰ K Barth, 1962: 125.

that natural theology took different forms and that contextual theology could also become one form of this theology.¹⁵¹

Such suspicion nonetheless does not demonstrate that Barth remained opposed to the significance of the context in adding colour to his theology. It must then be said that Barth was not opposed to a theology that is contextual in as far as it called upon theology to take “context” seriously – this contextual theology however needed to be conducted in such a manner that the Word of God was taken as its point of departure. Barth’s suspicion of contextual theology was triggered by his conviction that, because theology is undertaken by human beings, it runs the risk of becoming diabolical. Speaking about something which Barth opposed without taking the time to expatiate the concept in question is a careless theological practice.

Making the confession that Jesus Christ is the only Word that we have to hear and obey in a context that threatens those who do this, it has to be remembered at all times that our utterances are fallible. Our utterances of this confession in whatever context are fallible because they always remain at the mercy of Leviathan¹⁵², and are always accompanied by Mammon, a very close relative to Leviathan.

- (e) A Reformed confession until further action defines its character to outsiders and gives guidance for its own doctrine and life. By being mindful of its task to define its character to the outside world, this confession remains aware of

¹⁵¹ E Busch, *The Great Passion: an introduction to Karl Barth’s theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004: 71-72.

¹⁵² Barth employs this concept in his work ‘The Christian life’ where he focuses especially on the ‘Lordless powers’. It was Thomas Hobbes who made this notion famous in a book that he entitled ‘Leviathan’ which was published in 1651. In his attempt to answer the question ‘who’ and ‘what’ Leviathan is, Hobbes asserts that Leviathan is the epitome of the rise and existence, the past, present and future, the essence and reality or state as the only earthly potentate and sovereign with one or more heads. People have handed over and entrusted to it all their political, social, economic, intellectual, and even ethical and religious freedoms, possibilities and rights. By their consent Leviathan is safeguarded against every possible protest, thus he rules in their place over them. Essentially Leviathan is an ideology and Barth held that this very Leviathan was detectable in totalitarian states such as Fascism, National Socialism and Stalinism (cf. K Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics Vol. IV, 4. Lecture Fragments*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982: 220-221.

the ethical implications which are implied in this function. It defines its character to the outside world with its back against the wall, because it is convinced that it has to do this. However, in defining this character, it remains aware of its own limitations in confessing. These limitations challenge it ethically to confess until further action. Its ethical inclination impels it to look at the signs of the time.

These ideas are continued in Barth's Church Dogmatics. Karl Barth began his Church Dogmatics maintaining that theology was a critical reflection on the importance of preaching. Intrinsic to this understanding of theology, Barth suggested that this activity had chiefly to do with the Word of God, that since it was addressed to humanity it presupposed ethics which emanated from talk about God. This consequently implied that the public witness component of the preaching could not be ignored,¹⁵³ that the socio-economic context in which this critical reflection was taking place needed to be acknowledged, and that this function belonged primarily to the church.¹⁵⁴

In summary, these five characteristics of confessional theology are set out in the following sequence:

- the primacy of the Word of God
- the church as the subject
- public witness to Jesus Christ
- the socio-economic and political context
- ethical implications.

Taken together, these constitute confessional theology.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ This view is informed by the fact that we cannot speak about God in a binding way, but can at least listen to this binding Word of God and be a witness to the world about this (cf. E Busch, *Verbindlich van Gott reden: Gemeindevorträge*, 2002: 20).

¹⁵⁴ The characteristics of confessional theology correspond with Karl Barth's criteria for preaching. For a detailed overview of these criteria see K Barth, *Homiletik: Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt*. Verlag, Zürich, 1966b: 32-69.

¹⁵⁵ George Hunsinger has been instrumental in illuminating this idea. In his attempts to provide helpful hints to understand Barth's theology, Hunsinger maintains that the status of warranted assertions is ascribed to certain complex beliefs which are themselves derived from scripture. That

Barth's understanding that preaching enveloped the entire being of the person cannot be stressed enough. This is clearly demonstrated in the question he asked in 1963 to a minister, Professor Nico Smith, who was then a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa under the apartheid regime. Barth asked him: "Will you be free to preach the gospel even if the government in your country tells you that you are preaching against the whole system?".¹⁵⁶ Preaching has a specific intention of explaining the relationship between God and humanity; the fallibility of humanity impels us to speak about this relationship in a confessional manner – that is, attempting to speak about God bearing all these characteristics in mind.

God has engaged in an act of self-revelation, that the Bible is the Word of God, that Jesus Christ is the centre and norm of the scriptural witness, that Jesus Christ is at once fully God and fully human, are all examples of beliefs to which warranted assertability is ascribed. Their epistemic justification is understood to be confessional and hermeneutical (and thus coherentist). Once a belief achieves the status of warranted assertability, it can then become the basis for further doctrinal construction (cf. G Hunsinger, 1991: 56). While Hunsinger understands confessional theology to be both hermeneutical and confessional, this study prefers to settle for an understanding of confessional theology which has hermeneutics intrinsic to it. In his later work Hunsinger takes confessional theology to task arguing that the confessing church today has to learn a lesson from the confessing churches of yesterday. In essence Hunsinger argues that confessional theology has no place for apathy (cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 61).

Eberhard Busch has also been instrumental in reviving the view of confessional theology. He insists on the significance of Reformed confessions, reviewing them with the intention of illustrating that they summon to action those who subscribe to them. He also highlights the view that there remains a distinction between confession and confessing, although the traditional Reformed confessions always envisaged an act or action (cf. E Busch, *Credo: Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998). He summarises the apostle's creed in the following manner: a confession has biblical importance, a Christian confession is a confession in Jesus Christ (p.12); it illustrates faith as an answer; a confession is directed mainly to God (p.14); it includes action from the Christian community (p.14), and is public (p.15). In another study in which Busch engages Christian faith in the current context and brings it into dialogue with the Heidelberg Catechism, Busch uses one of the central questions of the Heidelberg Catechism, viz. the question of 'what is our comfort'. It is his view that this question is either posed by the human being, or that God poses this question to the human being. There is no arbitrary answer, but theology has to look for this answer. Busch prefers the second option which is that God asks this question. This then implies that God is biased in favour of freedom (cf. E Busch, *Der Freiheit zugetan: Christlicher Glaube heute - im Gespräch mit dem Heidelberger Katechismus*. Germany: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998: 3ff). Busch furthermore acknowledges that Reformed confessions serve the purpose of reminding us of the need to talk about God. In this way these confessions are binding. However, it is only God who can talk about God in a binding manner since only God knows God (cf. E Busch, 2002: 13-16). Busch argues that it is not our task to speak about God in a binding way, but rather to listen.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Allan Cowell, 'Afrikaner Minister tells of his long road of conversion from Apartheid,' in: *The New York Times* (10 November 1985), 22.

John de Gruchy, like Busch,¹⁵⁷ draws a distinction between a “confessional theology” and a “confessing theology”. In explaining the difference between these two concepts, he holds that a confessional theology has an inclination to repeat the ecclesiastical doctrines of the church, while a confessing theology has the preference of proclaiming publicly what these doctrines mean in terms of the issues of the day.¹⁵⁸ He continues to point out that, although both these facets complement each other, a confessing theology begs those who espouse it to embody their confessions. Acknowledging the baggage that accompanies both these definitions, we shall refer to confessional theology not merely as a theology that seems content with the repetitions of Reformed statements that would ultimately result in confessionalism.

Distinguishing between these concepts is imperative. However, this distinction is superficial in that it was arrived at in the absence of a concept that could be used to include both the theoretical act of confession as well as the practical act of embodiment. Fundamentally it can also be argued that it is impossible to have the one without the other. There is only a confessing church because there is a confessional church. Taking into account the implied differences and hence the option of the concept “confessing” instead of “confession”, it has to be stated here that when the concept “confession” is used, it refers to more than the traditional repetition of confessional documents. Confessional theology here recognises the essence of confession, but implies a definite embodiment of that which is confessed; hence confessing is implied in confession. The confessional inclination here has to do with the incompleteness from which those who utter it, suffer. “Confessional” here has more to do with a bold statement which is made by one or a group that remains at all times aware of their incompleteness.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. E Busch, 1998a: 15. This idea is also clearly articulated in an interview that Busch had with the Presbyterian Outlook with regard to the difference between a confessional church and a confessing church (cf. www.pres-outlook.com/HTML/busch.html).

¹⁵⁸ J W De Gruchy, 'Beyers Naudé and Public theology'. Unpublished paper delivered during the celebration of the birthday of Beyers Naudé. 10 May 2004.

The theology of Barth constantly reminds us of its incompleteness, what Busch prefers to call the inability to speak about God in a binding way.¹⁵⁹ This is what motivates this chapter to speak about Barth's theology as a process instead of an event. It is a process for it has yet to reach its culmination point. It contemplates this point and yet its frailness is a constant reminder that it can never attain this point. This is clearly articulated in Barth's engagement with the subject of the shortcomings of human beings.

During his only visit to the United States of America in 1962, Barth gave a series of lectures at the University of Chicago and later at the Princeton Theological Seminary. The lectures delivered at these institutions were not intended to be a "credo" or a new outline to his *Magnum Opus*, but rather in his words, "a short account of what, up to now, I have basically sought, learned, and represented from among all the paths and detours in the field of Evangelical theology".¹⁶⁰ It was this attitude which led Barth to view his *Church Dogmatics* not as the conclusion, but as the initiation of a new exchange of views about the question of proper theology, the established knowledge of God, and the obedient service of God among and for humanity.¹⁶¹

It is therefore not by chance that Busch commented that "he was also very clear about the tentative character of his dogmatics", for Barth himself had confessed that it (dogmatics) is not the ripe fruit of a life's work, but a beginner's attempt in this area: indeed he even thought that "there are no real Dogmatics on the scene at present".¹⁶² Yet Busch found the time to explain Barth's theology accordingly: "It is a theology which, even when pursuing most intricate, specific points to their smallest detail, does not lose itself in side-issues or peculiarities".¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Cf. E Busch, 2002: 16f.

¹⁶⁰ K Barth, 1963: xiii.

¹⁶¹ K Barth, 1963: xii.

¹⁶² E Busch, 1976: 174.

¹⁶³ E Busch cited in: M Rumscheidt (ed.), 1981: xi.

Barth's theology is a theology which was a determined process of engaging the paradox of being charged with the command to speak about God, and yet faced with the human being's incapability of executing this command. Throughout Barth's life we are confronted with this process, as well as with the realisation that he never aspired to reach the conclusion of the process he had embarked upon. Barth's paradoxical nature is evident also in his theology: his theology is simultaneously a human construction and also classical theology.

According to Busch the title of classical theology was conferred on Barth's theology by Ernst Wolf of Göttingen with regard to Barth's posthumous publications. He maintained that there can be no question of a selection from themes, nor a mere edition of the unpublished works left behind. There has to be nothing less than a complete edition of all of Barth's published and unpublished works.¹⁶⁴

That Barth set himself on a path of engaging important issues within the Christian tradition and admitted at times that he was never perturbed about not completing some of the most important projects as he wished, brings us to an understanding that he was always open to begin once again at the beginning. It should come therefore as no surprise that Barth never retired from thinking and daring to speak about God. In his most fragile years, Barth with a sense of earnestness said some of the same things as he did early in his life, while remaining open to saying some of those things differently. This openness should not be understood as a contradiction of what he stood for initially, but rather as a culmination of his maturity that was induced by his constant openness for corrections.

It is this openness coupled with his engagement of the socio-economic and political context in which he practised his theology that characterises his theology as confessional. The reality of confession is not only inherent in his theology, but also visible throughout Barth's theological transmutation. More importantly, confession

¹⁶⁴ E. Wolf cited in: M Rumscheidt (ed.), 1981: xviii.

is not understood here in fixed orthodox terms. Speaking about confession begs an elucidation of the concept, without which we may slip into a confusing quagmire of what the concept might imply.

It is also this openness which leaves us with the clear impression that Barth approached his theology with both a profound seriousness as well as a clear easiness to modify and even part ways with a view that he once had. While this is very clear when one catalogues his theological evolution, the three interviews with the *Christian Century* reveals a man that was not ashamed of admitting that he had changed his mind on a number of occasions.¹⁶⁵

When it is argued that Barth's theology is confessional theology, what is meant is that it is confessional for the very reason that it does not posit arrogance, but remains instead open for continued correction and modifications. It allows for modifications because it does not take as its point of departure what the human being needs, but sees the Word of God as the suitable point of departure. To be able to entertain the confessional nature of his theology, it is fundamental to note the numerous stages of Barth's theological development.

Barth's serious yet flexible engagement of the Word should be understood against the backdrop that for him there was a fundamental distinction between God and humanity. Contrary to the popular views that this distinction alienates God from humanity, it is maintained that this distinction is imperative given the vulnerability and sinfulness of mankind. Most of this comes to the fore in his *Church Dogmatics*, but it had its origin in the events preceding his entry into academic theology. Although Barth's mature theology differs in its engagement of politics and other spheres of life, the seeds of his latter theology were planted during his early

¹⁶⁵ The editor of the *Christian Century* asked Barth on three occasions to write an article on how his mind had changed over the decades that he practised theology. Barth covered the theological metamorphosis of his theology in three decades, viz. 1928-1938, 1938-1948 and 1948-1958. The periods indicated give us enough insight into the changes that Barth went through theologically. Godsey is therefore correct when he maintains that these accounts have become authoritative autobiographical notes to help us better understand Barth and his work (cf. K Barth, 1966c).

wrestling with the themes that were to occupy him for the rest of his life. In what follows, the characteristics of confessional theology will be explored individually.

1.7.1 Confessional theology as theology based on the Word of God

There is no doubt that Barth's theology was a theology that was given form by the Word of God. His emphasis on the Word is probably one of the most cardinal subjects in his theology. It was brought to the fore by his rejection of liberal theology. Metzger has rightly reminded us of the time in 1916 when Eduard Thurneysen whispered to Barth that a "wholly other" theology was needed for service in the church.¹⁶⁶ The theme of a theology of the Word occupied Barth's lectures. His lecture entitled "The Strange New World within the Bible" (1916) was one indicator that he had begun to deal seriously with the shortcomings of liberal theology. In a different article he wrote:

"[W]hat the Bible has to offer us, above all, is insights to the effect that the knowledge of God is the eternal problem of our profoundest personal existence, that it is the starting-point at which we begin and yet do not begin, from which we are separated and yet are not separated ... No one compels us to turn from the quiet pursuit of our so-called religious or so-called cultural duties to the Bible; but once we have done so, there is nothing for it but that we should find ourselves in perplexity, and in fear and trembling come to respect the necessity under which, as we shall realise, we were living before we asked our question or heard the answer".¹⁶⁷

Barth understood that the word "theology" included the concept *Logos*, which is rendered *logia* or language, and that this language is bound to "*theos*" (God).¹⁶⁸ In maintaining this, Barth admitted that the Word was not the only necessary determination of the place of theology, but undoubtedly the first. In his opinion theology in itself was a word, a human response; yet what made it theology was not

¹⁶⁶ Cf. PL Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular through the theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003: 12-13.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. K Barth, 'Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas' in: K Barth, 1928: 59-60.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. K Barth, 1963: 16.

its own word or response but the Word which it heard and to which it responded.¹⁶⁹ In this way theology therefore stands and falls with the Word of God, since the Word of God precedes all theological words by creating, arousing and challenging them.

Barth's ability to discern between the Word of God and the human word put him in a position to justify why theology ought to be a modest and free science. He posited that theology was modest because its entire logic could only be a human analogy to that Word; analogical thought and speech do not claim to be, to say, to contain, or to control the original Word but give a reply to it by their attempt to co-respond with it. He continued to argue that theology was a free science because it was not only summoned but also liberated for such analogy, reflection and reproduction. It was authorised, empowered, and impelled to such praise of its Creator.¹⁷⁰

Barth was severely criticised by his contemporaries for insisting on the centrality of the Word in theology. Among others, Friedrich Gogarten, his one time co-founder of a theological journal called "*Zwischen den Zeiten*"¹⁷¹, criticised Barth's doctrine of the Word for not having a "true anthropology"¹⁷². He suggested that Barth had to improve his dogmatics by introducing a "true anthropology". Secondly, Gogarten believed that some parts of his dogmatics spoke of a God isolated "in and for himself over humanity and of human beings as isolated in and for themselves against God" instead of speaking always about both God and humanity in their interconnectedness.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Cf. K Barth, 1963: 16-17.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. K Barth, 1963: 17.

¹⁷¹ The theological journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Between the Times) was founded by Barth, Gogarten and Thurneysen in August 1922 and was to be a theological counterpart of other famous Weimar journals. The sole intention of this journal was to oppose the hitherto dominant liberal theology, and to promote a theology of the Word.

¹⁷² True anthropology refers to an emphasis on the centrality of the human being. This is contrary to how Barth dealt with anthropology in his theology.

¹⁷³ K Barth, 1936: 127.

Barth admitted that Gogarten had detected exactly what he had wanted to do. In response to these criticisms, Barth reminded both Gogarten and his other critics that he had deliberately steered clear of an anthropology which robbed theology of its central position. Barth thus declined Gogarten's invitation to reconsider the anthropological position in his dogmatics. This should be understood against the following background: for Barth to understand God from the perspective of humanity was either impossible or something that one could do in a form of Christology, but not anthropology.¹⁷⁴ Barth did not deny anthropology, but understood anthropology as having its form in Christology, not the other way around.

Another important issue that Barth raised as he entertained the critiques levelled against him especially by Gogarten and Bultmann, was the subject of the scientific nature of theology, i.e. the relationship between philosophy and theology. It is imperative to take note of the fact that Barth's dogmatics shares with his commentary on the epistle to the Romans a protest against modern Protestantism. This protest is highlighted by his frequent reference to theologians who had not travelled the main road of modern theology, i.e. the elder and younger Blumhardt, I A Dorner, Soren Kierkegaard, Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrügge, Hermann Kutter, Julius Müller, Franz Overbeck and A F C Vilmar.¹⁷⁵ Busch asserts that, although Barth largely continued to relate dogmatics to preaching as he did in Göttingen, he later wanted to comprehend it more fundamentally as a reflection of the Word of God proclaimed.¹⁷⁶

Traditionally Neo-Protestant dogmatics discussed general presuppositions such as the philosophy of religion, psychology and the conditions of Christian faith in the prolegomena. Barth regarded the prolegomena simply as an extract from the legomena of the dogmatics itself which illustrated the whole work. Thus when Barth pursued dogmatics as a scientific inquiry, he started with the phenomenon of the

¹⁷⁴ K Barth, 1936: 131.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 73.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 173.

Word of God proclaimed in the church, his intention being to indicate that the Christian faith did not have such general presuppositions and did not really need them.

At first sight a case could be made that the deliberate ignorance of the presuppositions mentioned contradicts a phenomenon which centres on the believing human being. However, more important is the fact that this preached Word is also intrinsically related to the written Word of scripture, which in turn points to the primary Word of God embodied in Jesus Christ.¹⁷⁷

1.7.2 The Church as subject of confessional theology

In his *Dogmatics in outline*, Barth refers to the task of theology. He maintains that the subject of theology is the Christian church, for theology is more at home in the Christian community.¹⁷⁸ Barth made it clear at the outset that dogmatic theology was not an end in itself but existed to serve the proclamation of the church.¹⁷⁹ The church was that place and community charged with the object and activity with which theology was concerned, namely the proclamation of the gospel. By claiming the church as the subject of theology, it was suggested that where theology was practiced either by a student or a tutor, we found ourselves in the sphere of the church.

Barth argued that the one who wrestled with theology and wittingly put them outside of the confines of the church would have to reckon with the fact that for them the object of theology would be alien. Such people should therefore not be alarmed to discover after the first steps that they could not find their bearings.¹⁸⁰ The church is fundamental for it is also the space in which its proclamation can be

¹⁷⁷ Cf. K Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.

¹⁷⁸ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in outline*. London: SCM Press, 1966a: 9.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. J Tavish & H Wells (eds), *Karl Barth: Preaching through the Christian year*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978: v.

¹⁸⁰ K Barth, 1949: 10.

examined and where its confessions are best understood given the church's temporal existence in the world.

The influence that Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) had on Barth cannot be ignored when talk about the church is at issue in Barth's theology. Hood has rightly pointed out that Barth saw in Anselm's method a rejection of apologetics as a possible approach to Christian dogmatics. He continues to point out that Barth understood that Anselm did not accept the idea that the voice of the church and other voices had equal rights within the church.¹⁸¹ According to Barth dogmatics is to speak from within the church about the truth given by God to the church, and about the relationship between God and us. He writes:

“Perhaps, desiring to prove, (Anselm) did not really remain standing on this side of the gulf between the believer and the non-believer but crossed it, though on this occasion not in search of a truce as has been said of him and has often happened, but as a conqueror whose weapon was the fact that he met the unbeliever as one of them and accepted them as his equal”.¹⁸²

De Gruchy is correct when he says that Barth understood his theological task from the outset as an attempt to enable the church to fulfil its *raison d'être*: the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.¹⁸³ Because of this particular function of the church it cannot be denied that ecclesiology is always implied in Barth's theology. Barth's ministry in the small industrial village of Safenwil illustrates how his ecclesiology remained intertwined with his theology.

Because of the church's fundamental task and because its confessions are best understood in the realm of the church, it is perhaps safe to claim that exponents of Christian confessions (both theologians and Christians) therefore have a greater responsibility towards this community. Karl Barth had seen the dearth of accountability when theology is not held answerable to the church. He wrote

¹⁸¹ Cf. R E Hood, 1985: 19.

¹⁸² K. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. Trans. I Robertson. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975: 11.

¹⁸³ J W De Gruchy, *The Dynamic Structure of the Church*. D.Div dissertation. University of South Africa, 1972: 1.

already in 1927 that “a fundamental cause of the weakness of our present-day theology is the fact that when we pursue theology we have no church behind us which has the courage to say to us unambiguously that, so far as we talk together, this and this is dogma in the highest concreteness”.¹⁸⁴

The concept of the church has undergone numerous definitions and interpretations since its inception. Already during his lifetime Barth had foreseen that the Church as it was still understood in the Western sense was fast becoming something of the past. With that Barth believed that the contemporary established church into which the earlier unity of church and society had evolved was according to him disintegrating.¹⁸⁵ That the Christian West no longer existed meant that the idea of a Christianity which was automatically given and received with the rest of our inheritance had become historically impossible, no matter how tenaciously it might linger on and even renew itself in various attempts at restoration by the church and the world.¹⁸⁶

Although Barth conceded to the existence of the numerous interpretations, he was nonetheless aware that there were basic fundamental criteria which explicated the concept of the church. This awareness is best illustrated in Barth’s exchange with Roman Catholicism. In 1927 Barth was invited to speak about the concept of the church and refused to believe that Protestants and Catholics meant different things when they spoke about this concept. In an attempt to substantiate his claim that both these parties in essence meant the same things when speaking about the concept in question, Barth referred to a creed that was common to both parties: “I believe the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”.¹⁸⁷

Barth understood the church as a summons, a calling forth of God’s people. He maintained that it was as incorrect on the Protestant side to suppose that Catholicism understood by *evocation* a calling forth in any sense which would make

¹⁸⁴ K Barth, 1962: 290.

¹⁸⁵ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/3.2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961b: 525.

¹⁸⁶ K Barth, 1961b: 525.

¹⁸⁷ K Barth, 1962: 274.

the church an institution magically providing salvation, as it was on the Catholic side to think that Protestantism understood the church not as a divine institution but only as a corporation of men who were religious or who wanted to be.¹⁸⁸

Admitting that the reality of the concept of the church might be perceived differently, Barth cited two statements to illustrate that Protestantism clearly recognised the objective and Catholicism the subjective element in this concept. The first statement was an extract from the Heidelberg Catechism and reads as follows: (a) “What dost thou believe concerning the holy, universal Christian church? That the Son of God assembles for himself out of the whole human race a chosen community for eternal life through his Spirit and Word, in the unity of true faith from the beginning to the end of the world; protects and preserves them; and that I am and never shall be a living member of the same. (b) The church is the congregation of the faithful who are called by faith on the light of truth and the knowledge of God, so that having rejected the shades of ignorance and death they may worship the true and living God in piety and holiness, and serve him with their whole heart.”¹⁸⁹

According to Barth it was possible and even fair to distinguish between the church triumphant in heaven and the church militant on earth; between the church of the old covenant and the church of the new covenant; between the visible and the invisible church, but the unity of the church could never be questioned.¹⁹⁰ There could therefore be no talk of different churches since the church as the body of Christ was one. It is consequently only by conceding that the church is one that we can proceed to ponder Barth’s view of the function and place of the church.

Busch maintains that in his teachings with regard to the church Barth never saw it as his task either to provide a theory to secure the church in the form it had until then, nor to offer a prognosis for a very different kind of church. On the contrary, Barth saw his function as one of investigating the church’s existing

¹⁸⁸ K Barth, 1962: 275.

¹⁸⁹ K Barth, 1962: 275.

¹⁹⁰ K Barth, 1962: 275-276.

situation; to ponder what the promise of God to the church was concerning its being on earth.¹⁹¹ Despite the fact that Barth rarely made explicit reference to the situation that he talked about when he spoke of the church, he nonetheless discussed the two different and yet related conceptions that were fundamentally flawed reactions to the church's context at the time, summarising them as follows according to two themes: the church falling victim to alienation (secularization) or self-glorification (secralization).¹⁹²

These flawed reactions enjoyed much attention both in Barth's early writings such as his commentary on the epistle of Paul to the Romans, as well as his more mature work which is displayed in his *Church Dogmatics*. Although his work on the church is best understood when one can detect a line which began with his ministry in Safenwil and matured in his *Church Dogmatics*, his commentary on Romans (which has since undergone numerous revisions) is an even more tangible example of how he perceived the church. Barth dealt with the church particularly where the apostle Paul entertained this subject (chapters 9-11), and where Paul entertained the rejection and hope of Israel.

Concerning the self-glorification of the church, De Gruchy reminds us that the ecclesiology of Barth's epistle to the Romans is a far-reaching and devastating critique of the church as a collection of human pretensions, seeking to make a place for God in the world, as against the gospel of Christ which is revealed as sheer unmerited grace in the eschatological moment, and in which event the church fulfils its true purpose on earth.¹⁹³

In Barth's view the church stands with Israel and the whole world of religion against the gospel of Christ in a complete and comprehensive opposition, because it is the place where God's revelation is transformed into a temporal, visible thing in

¹⁹¹ E Busch, 2004: 243-244.

¹⁹² K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958: 667.

¹⁹³ J W De Gruchy, 1972: 6.

this world as the church seeks to possess what it cannot possess and makes static what can only be dynamic.¹⁹⁴

1.7.3 The public witness to Jesus Christ

When Barth dealt with the issue of public witness to Jesus Christ, he took his cue – which was typical of him – from Holy Scripture. For this reason G C Berkouwer has maintained that Barth will certainly be done no injustice when one characterises his dogmatics as unambiguously Christocentric.¹⁹⁵ Berkouwer arrives at this conclusion because he had come to appreciate that Barth underscored with increasing stress that all knowledge of God was exclusively determined by and dependent upon the knowledge of Jesus Christ and that this was directly related to the nature of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ who was the dominant and all-controlling central factor in the doctrines of election, creation and reconciliation.¹⁹⁶

Hood argued that Barth used Christology as a *modus operandi* for ethics and political praxis.¹⁹⁷ In his Göttingen lectures Barth made it clear that the latter debates concerning the Old Testament (OT) as an earlier form of witness ought to be rejected. He maintained that the New Testament (NT) was not a second step above the OT, but that it was a later witness alongside an earlier witness.¹⁹⁸ Barth continued to argue that what made the NT a Holy book in the eyes of the church – *in other words an instrument of witness* – was not its relation to the period A D 1-30, but its relation to the content of this period, to the reality of revelation, to God's encounter with us, to the concrete event of the incarnation at the centre, not the

¹⁹⁴ K Barth, 1977: 332f.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. G C Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956: 17.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. G C Berkouwer, 1956: 18.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. R E Hood, 1985: 63.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. K Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*. Vol. I. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990: 149.

relation to the historical Jesus as such but the relation to the crucified and risen Jesus.¹⁹⁹

The theology of the Cross and the succeeding events to the Cross occupy a pivotal role in giving form to the triumph of grace in Barth's theology. It is for this reason that Berkouwer concluded that the triumphant note in Barth's theology stood in direct connection with both God's judging as well as God's gracious action in Jesus Christ.²⁰⁰ It is this that the Christian church is called to witness. Hunsinger agrees with Berkouwer that Barth's dogmatics was Christocentric, but goes further and argues that the Christology that Barth had in view was not merely a Christology but that it was a Christology with a basic Chalcedonian²⁰¹ character.²⁰²

By insisting on the Chalcedonian aspect, Hunsinger counters assertions that Barth's theology was removed from the position of humanity.²⁰³ From a

¹⁹⁹ Cf. K Barth, 1990: 149. Italics in original.

²⁰⁰ Cf. G C Berkouwer, 1956: 37.

²⁰¹ The council of Chalcedon convened to deliberate among other issues the two natures of Christ which had come under fire by some who insisted merely on the divine nature of Christ. This council resolved to insist that Jesus Christ has to be understood as "one person in two natures". These two natures – his divinity as well as his humanity – are seen as internal to the person. Schaff has pointed out that the wording of the Chalcedonian definition includes elaborations that analytically explains that Christ's deity as well as his humanity are each true and complete in themselves. His deity is believed to be 'consubstantial' [of the same substance as the Father] just as His humanity is believed to be 'consubstantial' with us [of the same substance as us]. His deity is properly eternal, since he was "begotten before all ages of the Father," whereas his humanity is properly temporal, since he was "born of the Virgin Mary" [who is the Mother of God in his humanity]. Therefore, since his humanity is complete, it consists of "a reasonable soul and body" and not merely of a body. He is "in all things like us, except without sin" (cf. P Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2. New York: Harper & Row, 1931: 62-65).

²⁰² Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 131.

²⁰³ Hunsinger is aware that Barth has been accused of emphasizing the deity of Christ to the detriment of the humanity of Christ. To put Barth's Christology into perspective, Hunsinger refers to the two basic alternatives to Chalcedonian Christology. These alternatives are referred to as the 'Alexandrian' as well as the 'Antiochian' Christologies. 'Docetism' is the extreme or subtle Alexandrian tendency that stresses the deity of Jesus Christ at the expense of his humanity. His humanity according to this interpretation is in effect no more real but only apparent. Jesus becomes the kind of divine being with a phantom humanity that Chalcedon wanted to rule out. When Barth's Christology is classified as 'Alexandrian' or 'Docetic', he is usually accused of the fact that his conception of Christ's humanity is not sufficient. "Nestorianism" is the extreme or subtle Antiochian tendency. In opposition to Docetism, it preaches the humanity of Christ to the detriment of the deity of Christ. Although it does presuppose Christ as divine, it does not think that he is completely God. It does not concede to the union of these two natures; instead, it sees the divinity of Christ as emanating from the special character of his union as a human person with God (cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 134).

Chalcedonian point of view Hunsinger remarks that any definition of Christ's two natures that does not meet the minimal standard [that Christ is equally God and human] will fail, because it will not be sufficient for understanding Christ's saving work. Another observation that Hunsinger makes is that looking at Christ in a Chalcedonian manner makes it easy to note that it was not merely about soteriology but that it was largely a hermeneutical construct.²⁰⁴

As a hermeneutical construct, Chalcedon therefore offers a means of bringing the central witness of the New Testament in particular into focus. It is then by acknowledging the hermeneutical construct of Barth's Chalcedonian Christology that the Bible is given its venerated status as a primary source of witness in Barth's theological reflection. In maintaining this, Barth was aware that there was a special group of individuals, or better, a special community that was tasked to witness that which Holy Scripture commanded. It was his view that this community was special because of their relation to the Word of God. Barth hastened to add that:

“the position of this community is not special by virtue of a particular aptitude of sentiment or attitude toward the Word or by the fact that it might earn them particular favours, gratuities, or honours. Instead, it is special by virtue of the specific historical situation in which they are confronted by this Word, by the particular service to which the Word called and equipped them. They are the witnesses of the Word”.²⁰⁵

By having arrived at the privileged position of the church which is given the task of witnessing Christ, Barth could also safely deal with the witness of Christ outside the reality of the church. Barth engaged both Luther and Calvin who were fervently opposed to Zwingli's eagerness "to people the Christian heaven with a whole series of noble pagans, including Hercules and Theseus, since he saw in these pagans, like Abraham and his people, who all knew and believed the one revelation."²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 132-133.

²⁰⁵ K Barth, 1963: 26.

²⁰⁶ Cf. K Barth, 1990: 149-150.

Barth's view was that it was imperative to treat this idea with caution on both sides. He substantiated this claim by asserting that to yell "impossible" might be a sign of obduracy. Barth made a number of references to biblical incidents referring to pagans such as Melchizedek, king of Salem, Ruth the *Moabitess*, the wise men from the East, the centurions, etc. He then concluded that the manner in which the Bible treated these pagans should be a warning to us (Christians) that pagans could not simply be regarded as objects of mission.²⁰⁷

From what has been said above, it should be clear that Barth did not rule out the possibility of witness to God which arose from outside the church. However, it is clear that for Barth such witness must be ruled by the particularity of God's "indirect communication".²⁰⁸ Metzger reminds us that Protestant thought has traditionally been marked by its emphasis on the Word of God. He is correct in pointing out that this is especially the case with Barth, whose theology can be described as a theology of the Word, namely the living Word as witnessed by the Word's written and spoken forms.²⁰⁹

Although Barth insisted that the witness of Jesus Christ was not only confined to the church and did not only originate from this realm, Barth nonetheless argued that the Christian had a specific responsibility of making Christ known to the world. Barth maintained that Christians had to be involved in this simply because they were in the world and yet were not of this world. He continued to point out the fact that the Christians' invocation of God the Father did not take place on an "island of the blessed" but out in the world, precisely where it should be.²¹⁰

With this Barth aspired to illustrate his theology's "public witness to Jesus Christ" inclination. This was an idea that accompanied Barth throughout his theological life. It is for this reason that Hart argues that Barth's entire theological

²⁰⁷ Cf. K Barth, 1990:150.

²⁰⁸ Cf. K Barth, 1990: 150, and P L Metzger, 2003: 122.

²⁰⁹ P L Metzger, 2003: 122.

²¹⁰ Cf. K Barth, 1981a: 97.

project might legitimately be described as a “theology of proclamation”.²¹¹ He substantiates this claim by referring to the assumption with which Barth concerns himself by insisting that the only legitimate starting point for true theological activity, was the claim made by faith that God has spoken, that He has proclaimed his Word to humankind, that He has revealed himself.²¹² What distinguished the Christian faith from other faiths in Barth’s opinion was the mere fact that humanity became initiated into the communion of the saints, and was as a result attached to Jesus Christ.²¹³

The public witnessing of Jesus Christ means that the church witnesses Christ as He is revealed to us through Holy Scripture. It is however impossible to witness this revelation without referring to the essence of reconciliation. The public witness of Christ to the world has at its core the gospel that the world is reconciled with God through Christ. It is for this reason that Metzger maintains that a witness that insisted on the revelation of Christ without ample reference to reconciliation was impossible in Barth’s theology. It was impossible because both these works belonged to Christ.²¹⁴

Although Barth acknowledged this, he remained of the view that witnesses to revelation could however not bear witness to God nor his Word. Therefore he wrote:

“Nothing could be further from our minds than to attribute to the human creature as such a capacity to know God and the one Word of God, or to produce true words corresponding to this knowledge. Even in the sphere of the Bible and the church there can be no question of any such capacity. If there are true words of God, it is all miraculous. How much more so, then, in the wider field! What we have in both cases is the capacity of Jesus Christ to raise up of the stones children of Abraham, i.e. to

²¹¹ Cf. T Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a reading of his theology*. Illinois: Intervacuity Press, 1999: 28.

²¹² Barth’s lectures on John 1-8 which he did not publish insisted on the significance of witnessing to the Word (cf. K Barth, *Witness to the Word: A commentary on John 1*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

²¹³ K Barth, 1961b: 555.

²¹⁴ Cf. P L Metzger, 2003: 129.

take into His service, to empower for this service, to cause to speak in it, men [sic] who are quite without capacity of their own.²¹⁵

Barth admitted that witness was possible and could be espoused both within the walls of the church as well as outside. However, he insisted that witness remained essentially a celestial privilege. The church had however a favoured position in this witnessing since it represented the inner sphere of witness. Its allegiance to scripture put it in a category that it could witness directly, but as a fallible community it lacked the ability to really witness God and His Word.

1.7.4 The role of the socio-economic and political context

Metzger has rightly pointed out that there are two things that Barth loved outside the realm of theology, viz. politics and Mozart.²¹⁶ This keenness served as an significant pointer to the important role that context played in Barth's theology.²¹⁷ Fundamentally Barth was continually engaged in examining the issue of reconciliation between God and humanity and the liberation of humanity from the pangs of idolatry. The subject of "reconciliation and liberation" remained an imperative subject for Barth. It should therefore not come as a surprise that someone like Bertold Klappert decided to base his studies on Barth and the importance of context on this theme.²¹⁸ Barth's theology is characterised by the fact that it attempts to wrestle seriously with the socio-political context in which it is applied.

It is difficult if not impossible to distinguish clearly between politics and theology in the Barth's framework. This was succinctly encapsulated in Barth's

²¹⁵ Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/ 3.1. 118.

²¹⁶ Cf. P L Metzger, 2003: 161.

²¹⁷ In his doctoral dissertation, Takatso Mofokeng developed a black Christological approach which is influenced by the theology of Barth. He makes a strong argument that Barth's Christology was chiefly influenced by the socio-economic and political factors which confronted him when he was vicariate in Geneva and later in Safenwil. Mofokeng, taking his cue from Barth's interpretation of theology within a context which was fraught with exploitation, suggests a Black Christology to deal with the exploitation of Black people in South Africa under the pretext of the justification of apartheid (cf. T Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers: towards a Black Christology*. University of Kampen: Kok, 1983).

²¹⁸ Cf. B Klappert, 1994.

response to a question he was asked on the subject of theology and how it related to politics. He had the following to say:

“Politics is an aspect of what we have ... called culture. Politics means the human attempt to create and uphold some sort of order and peace in the world. Even at best, politics will create only *some* sort of order, no more. The purpose of politics is to realise in some degree something like a human commonwealth. Now since “evangelical theology” deals with God’s justice (God has revealed the justice of the covenant in Jesus Christ), it confronts all human attempts to create justice, order, peace, and so on with this superior justice. Thus there is an encounter and to this extent “evangelical theology” has to do with politics ... If Christians serve the King of Kings, then politics is something straightforward. Thus theology is itself political action. There is no theological word, no theological reflection or elucidation, there is no sermon and even no Catechism for children which does not imply political meaning and as such enter into the world as a little bit of political reality. You cannot believe in the Kingdom which can and will come without also being a politician. Every Christian is a politician, and the church proclaiming the Kingdom of Jesus Christ is itself a political reality.”²¹⁹

Smit was correct in asserting that behind this misleadingly simple answer lay Barth’s whole career.²²⁰ From this extract the limitation of humanity is manifested. If it is taken into account that this statement was made towards the end of Barth’s career and this is then compared with his initial political endeavours while still a young pastor in Safenwil, it can not be argued that Barth lacked consistence with his treatment of politics and theology.

Barth’s theology insisted on the correlation between theology and politics. Although his theological convictions were altered from time to time, it cannot be denied that he persistently believed that theology could not ignore this phenomenon. This is already evident in his earliest commentaries on theology and

²¹⁹ K Barth, ‘A Theological Dialogue,’ *Theology Today* Vol. XIX Number 2, (July 1962), 175.

²²⁰ D Smit, ‘... The doing of the little righteousness’ – On justice in Barth’s view of the Christian life’: M. Welker and C.A. Jarvis (eds.), *Loving God with our minds: the Pastor as theologian*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2004, 123.

how it related to politics. With reference to Romans 13:1-7, Barth retorted that because Christians recognised the order of God in the order of the sword, compulsion and fear, they themselves could be neither anti-political nor a-political.²²¹

For Barth there could be no doubt that Christians had to submit to authorities, yet he remained convinced that Paul was not suggesting that Christians were to submit blindly to the affairs of the state. The essence of the Christian community is thus not only evident in the church's critical submission to the state, but also in its recognition that it is different from the rest of the world. In a recent study which chronicles Barth's approach to politics, Timothy Gorringer argues that Barth's theology is chiefly against hegemony.²²² As a point of departure, Gorringer points out that the phrase "against hegemony" characterises an important aspect of Barth's own work which links all stages of his theology, from his 1911 article on *Jesus and the movement for social change*,²²³ to the last, posthumously published fragments of the Dogmatics on the "Lordless powers".

Barth asserted that the Lordless powers were nothing but humanity's own abilities loaned to its creaturely nature and peculiar to it. The creator of these forces is of the opinion that they can take them in hand, control them and command them as they sees fit, only to be confronted with the fact that they have escaped humankind and no longer stand under their command.

Barth continued to maintain that it was for this reason, in consequence of humanity's emancipation of itself from God, that these abilities emancipated themselves from man and thus acquired the character of entities with some kind of existence and dominion of their own. Only a pseudo-objective reality and efficacy could be possessed by them and ascribed to them.²²⁴ What is worth noting is Barth's

²²¹ K Barth, 1957b: 722.

²²² Cf. T Gorringer, 1999.

²²³ K Barth, 'Jesus and the Movement for Social change' in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 19.

²²⁴ K Barth, 1981a: 215.

conviction that although these powers may be Lordless and bad, they cannot be ontologically godless forces.

Gorringe compares this work of Barth with that of Gramsci²²⁵. He does this in such a manner that one might confuse both Barth's and Gramsci's interpretations of hegemony. He has rightly pointed out that these contemporaries were thinking about the same thing, albeit from different perspective.²²⁶ Barth interpreted these powers from a Christian point of view in contrast to Gramsci who seemed to be having faith in some form of human system (in this instance a human form of government). Barth remained essentially critical of all human forms of systems although he did not advocate a form of escapism from this reality.

What Gramsci was trying to get at was the way in which ideas and practices come to be taken for granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it. Furthermore, Gorringe notes that 30 years after Gramsci, in the draft for paragraph 78 of the Church Dogmatics, Barth described the "Lordless powers" as not just support but motors of society. They are the hidden wire pullers in humanity's great and small enterprises, movements, achievements, revolutions. They are not just the potencies, but the real factors and agents of human progress, regress and stagnation in politics, economics, scholarship, technology and art, and also of the evolutions and retardations in all personal life of the individual.

²²⁵ Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian philosopher who was arrested and subsequently murdered under fascist Italian rule for his philosophies. Gramsci notably became aware of the manner in which bourgeois societies operated. In order for these societies to function efficiently, they depended on the monopoly that they had on the minds of the masses. For Gramsci it was clear that in order to survive this, the masses ought to be made aware of the importance of education, which would enable them not to let words such as 'hegemony' tacitly concede to the lies of the bourgeois. He perceived that Western society with its bond between rulers and the ruled succeeded in creating 'hegemony'. For Gramsci, the word 'hegemony' was not the mere dominance by force; it was a set of ideas by which the dominant group in a society secured the consent of subordinate groups to their rule. Gramsci believed that revolutionaries who wished to eradicate this hegemony had to build up a 'counter hegemony' to that of the ruling class. It was for him of the utmost importance that people's minds needed to be changed. This then led Gramsci to speak in favour of what he called 'organic intellectuals' – a concept which made him a household name. With this, he suggested that people within the masses needed to be developed and educated and then return to their societies to govern (cf. D Forgas, and G Nowell-Smith (eds), *Antonio Gramsci 1891-1937. Selected from cultural writings*. Trans. W. Boelhower. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985).

²²⁶ Cf. T Gorringe, 1999: 2.

It is not really people who do things, whether leaders or the masses. Through humankind's faults, things are invisibly done without and above humans. According to Gorringe, Barth was clearly concerned with the same problems as Gramsci: the way in which we lose our freedom in the face of societal forces.²²⁷

Hegemony is a cultural reality, which is bound up with the existence of ideologies. As Gramsci described it, "culture" refers to the values, norms, beliefs and institutions reflected in language, expressed as a common conception of the world and embodied in a cultural social unity.²²⁸

Ideology, said Barth in his 1960 reflections, was the assignment of permanent normativity to the ideas and conceptions through which we try to make sense of the world. Barth continued to argue that once we absolutise ideologies, we lose our freedom. We think that we possess the ideology, but in reality it possesses us. The person bound to an ideology no longer has anything of his own to say. He can only mouth the piece dictated to them as intelligibly as they can. Gorringe rightly acknowledges the fact that Barth has been dubbed the "theologian of freedom". From one point of view Barth's Church Dogmatics is a gigantic exploration of the meaning, presuppositions and actualisation of human freedom.

The negative critical mode of this exploration is the attack on hegemony, on worldviews that take over the freedom of the gospel.²²⁹ It is thus not a surprise that Barth believed that God frees us by liberating us from hegemony. What should also be remembered is that culture, ideology and the struggle against hegemony were key issues for Barth throughout his life. In so far as "against hegemony" means Barth's reluctance to subscribe to human hegemony for the obvious reason that it is fraught with flaws, we are in agreement with Gorringe. However, it needs to be said that Barth was not encouraging a campaign to remain aloof from hegemony, but for the very reason that it is flawed, called for an active engagement in hegemony.

²²⁷ T Gorringe, 1999: 3-4

²²⁸ T Gorringe, 1999: 2.

²²⁹ T Gorringe, 1999: 3-4.

Barth did not see himself as being against hegemony in principle; his discomfort with human hegemony was encapsulated in his views concerning the revolt against disorder. When Barth dealt with the subject in question, he utilised prayer extensively. In his opinion, when Christians pray “Hallowed be thy name” they call upon God their father in recognition that they for their part are commanded to be zealous of his honour. In doing this, Barth did not lose sight of the fact that Christians are also human, adding that the Christian’s zeal for the honour of God according to God’s command would always be a human action and therefore a dubious one.²³⁰ Given this quandary, this zeal is always confronted with a need to be tested. In Barth argumentation, the necessity to test this zeal was imperative, for it was only in testing this zeal that one was clearly able to discern between Christian and human zeal. As far as true zeal was concerned, which was definitely the Christian zeal, Barth held that this was a zeal which exhibited an obedient action.

For him, there could be no doubt that one of the reason(s) that Christians were also called to be involved in this world was to identify themselves with the objective of some form of human righteousness on earth. Barth was also convinced that there would never be any struggle for human righteousness if Christian action was not simultaneously zealous for God’s honour. Thus, although Barth conceded that Christians were also human – meaning that they also faced the same obstacles as other – they were *ipso facto* also called to identify with those who longed for an end to oppression.

Barth believed that, due to the fact that some labelled themselves as Christians, the objective to revolt was questionable to an extent. He regarded revolt or rebellion as more than the rejection of a particular option. He admitted that this rejection could undoubtedly mean non-participation in actualising an option, but that it does not have to be the case.²³¹ The issue which concerns us here especially with regard to the subject of politics, is rather what we perceive to be Barth’s

²³⁰ Cf. K Barth, 1981a: 205.

²³¹ Cf. K Barth, 1981a: 206.

confessional approach to this subject. On the one hand this approach appears to be committed to the human being's calling in the world; on the other hand it limits the theological justification of the option taken. This idea is encapsulated in the following statement:

“[E]ven the sharpest rejection does not in itself include within it one thing, namely entry into the struggle for the actualisation of a very different possibility opposed to the first one. In the thought, speech, and action demanded of Christians, the issue is not just that of rejecting what they see to be a bad possibility stands with such splendour before the eyes of the rebels that they cannot refrain from affirming and grasping it and entering into battle for its actualisation”.²³²

Barth furthermore believes that Christians too can simply live and stand in some form of conflict for their free being. That they can be in revolt against everything that would take their freedom away or restrict it, against painful conditions of life to which they are subjected, against destinies which have led them or are about to lead them where they do not want to go, primarily and supremely against tyrants, those by whom they find themselves browbeaten, defrauded and oppressed, who encroach upon them, who intentionally or unintentionally hurt them and threaten to make life impossible for them.²³³

A cardinal point then ensues which he intends to make throughout the section on the Lord's Prayer. Barth continues to argue that, although as people, Christians are called or, more importantly, have a responsibility to rebel against any type of disorder as indicated above, the important thing is for them to acknowledge the fact that they are Christians – or that they at least aspire to be Christians.

As much as Barth appeared to support the fact that Christians were also human, one cannot ignore Barth's discomfort with manmade things and affirming the human potential too much, particularly when that human potential appeared to be in competition with God. For instance, when a Christian participated in some kind of revolt, it was imperative that the individual in question, who called them

²³² K Barth, 1981a: 206.

²³³ K Barth, 1981a: 207.

Christian, should be aware of the fact that his or her actions as a Christian imply that God is automatically on his or her side.

Barth was quick to point out that the struggle, of which he had been speaking, was not the Christian's true revolt.²³⁴ Based on this point, Barth was of the view that there might come a time when Christians may refrain from such a revolt.

After indicating the differences between Christian and human zeal, Barth pointed out the fact that the decisive action of their revolt against disorder which, correctly understood, included within itself all others, was their calling upon God in the second petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come."²³⁵ In his opinion, Christians were more privileged simply because they had been granted the freedom to invoke God's kingdom. Interestingly enough, when Barth spoke about this freedom, he pointed out that the act of praying did not excuse Christians from provisionally rebelling and battling the disorder in their own human thoughts, words and works. On the contrary, they could not pray the Lord's Prayer without being impelled into action.²³⁶

1.7.5 Ethics as a quintessential aspect

Most of Barth's critics opted for a reading of his theology as something removed from its context have conveniently concluded that his theology is out of touch with humanity. Concerning this approach, Dolamo has reminded us particularly of people like Reinhold Niebuhr and Emil Brunner who argued that Barth's social ethics was an absolutistic and transcendental one.²³⁷ One of the reasons many have been content to criticise Barth for not doing enough to explicitly affirm the essence of ethics in his theology, is because ethics was understood to be something which existed independently of dogmatics.

²³⁴ K Barth, 1981a: 207.

²³⁵ K Barth, 1981a: 212.

²³⁶ K Barth, 1981a: 213.

²³⁷ Cf. R T H Dolamo. *The relevance of Karl Barth's theology of Church and State in South Africa*. D. Th dissertation. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1993: 3.

This concern falls within the ambit of the history of theology which contemplates the question of whether an independent Church Ethics exists alongside Church Dogmatics. Although this is a fundamental and valid question, Barth feared that such an existence would raise a second fundamental question: the need of a special and independent examination of church proclamation with regard to its suitability as instruction for human good conduct in the Christian sense.²³⁸ Barth began to probe this subject early in 1927 when he was tasked with discovering a new approach to the old Reformation problem of "faith and works" – in other words, the way in which the question of ethics was illuminated and clarified by the knowledge of the Word of God.

He presented his views on this subject in two lectures entitled *Justification and Sanctification* and *The keeping of the Commandments*.²³⁹ For Barth it was impossible to think about the existence of an independent ethical yardstick, therefore he contended that when we deal with Dogmatics, we deal with Ethics. In the mentioned lectures Barth contended that God both justified and sanctified the human being. In the second lecture he held that the Christian ethos did not consist of the knowledge of a universal truth, but lay in the fact that "I am confronted with a claim which is really made and which really affects me".²⁴⁰

Consequently Barth admitted that the history of theological ethics as an independent discipline revealed a number of cardinal features. He maintained that its presupposition had always been the opinion that the goodness, i.e. the holiness of the Christian character was not hidden with God in Christ, but could be directly perceived and therefore demonstrated, described and set up as a norm.²⁴¹ Should one succumb to such an interpretation of ethics, Barth feared that we would be calling into being a liberal approach that was too concerned with human beings, at the expense of God in Christ. It is for this reason that Barth contented that:

²³⁸ K Barth, 1956a: 782.

²³⁹ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 175.

²⁴⁰ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 176.

²⁴¹ K Barth, 1956a: 782.

“... the execution of this enterprise seems always to have involved that the Christian character definable in this way should be construed as a distinctive form of human conduct generally, so that to demonstrate and describe it and set it up as a norm it is necessary to reach back to a general anthropology quite abstracted from the assumptions of revelation”.²⁴²

Barth's disregard of an independent ethic is worth pondering given his view that it is essentially non-existent. The danger inherent in such an ethic cannot be understated. Barth understood from history that incidents where ethics had managed to secure its independence had reversed the emphasis between dogmatics and ethics, thereby replacing dogmatics as the basic theological discipline, absorbing dogmatics into itself, transforming it into an ethical system with a Christian foundation, and then penetrating and controlling biblical exegesis and pastoral theology in the same way.²⁴³ For Barth, the end product of this exercise was that dogmatics then merely became applied anthropology.

Ethics is informed by witnessing to Jesus Christ. Christians are privileged because of their allegiance to Holy Scripture and therefore to Jesus Christ. Because of this attachment, Christianity is governed by a particular Christian ethos. However, Barth warned that:

“as soon as the Christian ethos is divorced from its natural context, considered abstractly as an absolute magnitude and declared to be a controlling principle as such, it loses its distinctiveness, originality and uniqueness which marks it off from the type of ethos common from the rest of the world and humanity and thus make it an appropriate designation of the distinctive manner of the Christian”.²⁴⁴

One therefore cannot ignore the ethical aspect which is intertwined with politics. Barth therefore insisted that in ethics it was not a matter of what somebody ought to

²⁴² K Barth, 1956a: 782.

²⁴³ K Barth, 1956a: 783.

²⁴⁴ K Barth, 1961b: 559.

do in a hypothetical sense, but of what we ourselves ought to do in our own given situation.²⁴⁵

The ethical action which flows from this assertion brings us to the issue of public witness which is conspicuous in Barth's theology. Because of its public character, Confessional theology cannot be a private issue.

The witness of Jesus Christ to the world was important to Barth because he was not merely interested in the "crucifixion" in abstract. Witness to Christ and ethics are mutually related. When looked at from different angles, one gets the impression that both inform each other. Mangina asserts that, although the Cross remained important for Barth, he was more interested in the risen presence of the crucified, i.e. His ongoing and powerful witness that He is for us and among us.²⁴⁶ Mangina makes a strong point that for Barth, the account of Christ's prophetic office was not a mere noetic postscript to the doctrine of reconciliation, but formed the climax of the doctrine of reconciliation. Jesus was no less the True Witness that he was Son of God and Son of Man. On the contrary, his priestly and royal work culminated in the glory of his self-revelation.²⁴⁷

In Church Dogmatics Vol. II/2, Barth developed four ethical principles of action which were informed by the question: *What ought we to do?*²⁴⁸ Bettis argues that there is a criterion for ethical action which needs to be appreciated if one wanted to understand Barth's easy navigation from dogmatics to ethics.²⁴⁹ Part of this criterion takes it for granted that this action is an open action, which suggest that ethical action is always subject to change. Bettis explains this as follows: "What" means that ethical action is open; "ought" means that it is self-validating; "we" means that it is communal, and "to do" means that it is concrete. Ethical actions will

²⁴⁵ K Barth, 1957b: 654.

²⁴⁶ Cf. J Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian life: the practical knowledge of God*. Washington: Peter Lang Publishers, 2001: 77.

²⁴⁷ Cf. J Mangina, 2001: 77-78.

²⁴⁸ K Barth, 1957b: 654ff.

²⁴⁹ Cf. J Bettis, 'Political Theology and Social Ethics' in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 169.

exhibit these characteristics²⁵⁰. He explains these aspects in further detail, as follows²⁵¹:

1. Ethical action is open

By this Bettis means that it is always subject to change, reversal and redirection. Any action which is assumed to be absolute and universally true or right is by definition unethical, thus being ethical means recognising that we are human and that all our actions are human actions and therefore subject to fallibility and change.

2. Ethical action is self-validating.

Bettis is of the opinion that Barth is trying to say that the ethical question is not the question of trying to apply some criteria of the good and the true and the beautiful to some particular event or decision. It is not an effort to apply the universal to a particular. On the contrary, it is an attempt to find the universal.

3. Ethical action is communal.

It is a question of what “we” ought to do. This means in the first instance that it is not a generalised question of what “one” ought to do. It is direct and immediate. It does not refer to a *person* in isolation but to the community. It must be an activity that is open to the community and in which the community can engage.

4. Ethical action is concrete.

It is not abstract. The ethical task is to come to the point at which *the community* is asking the question about what it is to do in an actual situation.

²⁵⁰ J Bettis in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 169ff.

²⁵¹ J Bettis in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 170-171. Emphasis added.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the confessional nature of the theology Karl Barth. It looked at the events and individuals that contributed to the formation of his theology. Appreciating the great influence that individuals such as Kant, Luther, Heppel and others had on Barth, this chapter primarily dealt with Calvin as an important figure in the development of Barth's theology. It was argued that Barth never anticipated his theology to be read as a theology that had arrived at its destiny; the best method of understanding Barth's theology is therefore to look at it as a process instead of an event. In that way, one cannot ignore the humanness of his theology. It is this incompleteness and humanness which impelled us to coin the description "confessional theology" as an encompassing concept for his theology.

It was argued that confessional theology differs from "confessionalism". By making reference particularly of Barth's response to the desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed confession, this chapter established the characteristics of confessional theology. Barth's theology is confessional primarily because it displays the following characteristics: it is a theology which is vehemently centred on the Word of God; the Church is its subject; it acknowledges its public witness to Jesus Christ; it strives to deal seriously with its socio-economic and political context: and it acknowledges the ethics that flows from it.

The following chapter will explore the question whether when Barth remained faithful to this definition when he was confronted with the need to confess, or whether he instead devised other means of justifying his confessional theology.

CHAPTER 2

Confessional theology in action: The Barmen Theological Declaration

“We really begin to understand [Barth’s] position when we see that his comparatively isolated struggle was directed ‘no less sharply’ against the centrist faction of the church, which had drawn a line between itself and the German Christians in 1933. It decisively resisted any state intervention into the church’s interior life, but in the political area it just as decisively affirmed the state of the Führer and the Volk. It could condemn the ousting of the Jewish Christian pastors and yet at the same time welcome the state’s anti-Jewish laws.”

E Busch¹

2.1 Introduction

The theologised politics of the “German Christians” posed significant challenges to the independence of theology in Germany during the Hitler regime. In the previous chapter it was indicated that Barth’s 1925 response to the question of the “desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed confession” contained characteristics of his confessional theology. In this chapter it will be argued that it was this confessional theology that precipitated the church’s response to the evil that had invaded it during the Nazi epoch. Before arguing this, this chapter shall first probe the question whether Barth remained faithful to these characteristics when confronted with the practical demand for a confession, or whether he abandoned this inclination and devised other means that justified his involvement in the struggle of the church during the Hitler era.

Initially this chapter will focus on the political situation of Germany after World War I. It will probe the vulnerable situation of many Germans after the war and explore how this vulnerability was capitalised on by some that positioned themselves as the saviours of the German people. After dealing with the political situation of

¹ E Busch, *The Great Passion: An introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 33.

Germany and considering how the politics of the day were given theological legitimacy, the chapter will explore the significance of the Barmen Theological Declaration.² Taking its cue from the definition given by Barth that was mentioned in the previous chapter (see chapter 1. section 1.5.), the confessional nature of this declaration will be investigated.

The characteristics of confessional theology will be used as rubrics to discuss a number of important subjects in Barth's theology and the Barmen Declaration. For example, this chapter will argue that a fresh perspective on the subject of Gospel and Law is pertinent to a better understanding of the church's role in the world. It will also argue that the confessing church's inertia towards the Jewish question can partly be blamed on a misunderstanding regarding the subject of Gospel and Law. By looking at this subject from a Christological perspective, it will be argued that the church is ethically commanded to participate in societal affairs.

In the previous chapter a case was made that Barth's theology is best appreciated as confessional theology. In this chapter the theses of the Barmen Declaration will be used to support this view. The Barmen Declaration will be treated as the primary source in this chapter. However, it has been argued that Barth was already pondering the issues embedded in Barmen prior to the Barmen event. For this reason, works by Barth written both before and after the Declaration will be mentioned.

Since this dissertation is approached from a Reformed point of view, it is difficult to avoid using the concept "confession" when referring to the Barmen Declaration. The extent to which the Barmen Declaration is not considered a confession,³ especially in Lutheran circles, falls outside the scope of this dissertation,

²Full title: "Declaration concerning the right understanding of the Reformation confessions of faith in the German Evangelical Church of the present". This declaration was the result of the confessional synod of the German Evangelical Church which convened in Barmen on 29-31 May 1934. The meeting was constituted by members of the Lutheran, Reformed and United churches, seeking a common message against the attempts of Hitler and the Nazis to co-opt the church and make it subservient to Nazi ideology and its Aryan policies (cf. Editorial 'Celebrating Barmen' in: *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. 47 (June 1984), 2).

³ Cf. M Schilling, *Das eine Wort Gottes zwischen den zeiten. Die Wirkungsgeschichte der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung vom Kirchenkampf bis zum Fall der Mauer*. Neukirchen – Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005.

although the Lutheran understanding of the concept “confession” is recognised in this chapter.

2.2 The pre-history and significance of the Barmen Theological Declaration

The situation in Germany after its defeat in World War I was characterised by great confusion. This propelled many into assuming positions which to them could explain the defeat suffered by the Germans during the war. The collapse of the Weimar Republic was precipitated by an extremely unfavourable combination of political circumstances both in Germany and abroad.⁴ Although it may be argued that these circumstances might have contributed to the final collapse of the Republic, the historian Klaus Scholder surmises that the actual reason for this should instead be sought in the fundamental role played by a “right-wing” opposition which undermined all attempts at political consolidation.⁵

The tale of the birth of the Third Reich cannot adequately be comprehended without reference to the Weimar Republic era. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that the end of the monarchy in Germany also signalled the end of the governance of the church by the ruler of the land. Jan Rohls argues that, in contrast to the separation of church and state in France, or the situation in Bolshevik Russia, the relation between church and state after the revolution of 1918 was defined not in terms of a

⁴ This subject can be approached from numerous angles. Scholars in sociology, politics, theology, etc. have all attempted to create a picture of Germany at the time and have suggested numerous reasons for the chaos which ensued after the defeat of Germany during World War I. One of the innovative and holistic studies is the one done by Shirer (cf. W Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1961). In this study, Shirer traces the way World War I ruined the socio-economic, cultural and political fibre of Germany. This made the German people vulnerable, something that could easily be capitalised on by leaders who knew this vulnerability. Shirer believes that Adolf Hitler was one such leader who understood this, and that World War II needs to take into account that which happened after the end of World War I. Klaus Scholder has also written numerous studies on the Third Reich and how the churches operated within the confusion created by the war (cf. K Scholder, *A requiem for Hitler: and other new perspectives on the German Church Struggle*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

⁵ Kurt Sontheimer cited by K Scholder, 1989: 36.

strict separation with the withdrawal of all the public incentives the church had previously enjoyed.⁶

Gorringe reminds us that the first national assembly was convened in Goethe's theatre in Weimar. The idealism of their great poets and thinkers was supposed to fill the life of their new Republic. It's new constitution, which was endorsed in August 1919, guaranteed freedom of speech and assembly, and rested on the principle that the state's power emanated from the people, but nevertheless vested great emergency powers in the president who was free to choose and dismiss the chancellor.⁷ Others (and Rohls in particular) maintain that this constitution also adopted the basic principles of the constitution of 1848, i.e. churches received the status of public and legal corporations to which specific privileges were granted and which were legally protected. The constitution guaranteed full freedom of belief and conscience, as well as undisturbed religious practice. Belonging to a specific ecclesiastical tradition neither evoked advantage nor disadvantage. In essence a state church no longer existed.⁸

The separation of church and state was welcomed by liberalism as well as religious socialism, but frowned upon by the conservatives. It was this separation which consequently gave rise to a movement for a "People's Church" (*Volkskirche*). Kurt Sontheimer made a distinction between the old nationalism of the Kaiser's Reich⁹

⁶ Cf. J Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1998: 274.

⁷ Cf. T Gorringe, *Karl Barth against hegemony*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: 74.

⁸ Cf. J Rohls, 1998: 274.

⁹ In 1888 Kaiser Wilhelm II (1853-1941) became the 9th King of Prussia and the 3rd Emperor of Germany. He dismissed the German Chancellor Otto Bismarck two years after assuming his position as Kaiser. Wilhelm was known to be a stern opponent of parliamentary democracy; the result was that he instead acted as an autocratic monarch. Wilhelm was also a devout adversary of socialism. He was nonetheless a zealous supporter of militarism and imperialism. Although Wilhelm was a grandson of Queen Victoria, he pursued an anti-British foreign policy. Because of this, his relationship with Britain was perceived to be controversial, for although he admitted that he did not want to get embroiled in a war with Britain, Wilhelm nonetheless supported South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), assisting Boers. This war was fought between the British and the descendants of the Dutch who had settled in South Africa. For a thorough discussion on the person of Wilhelm, his abdication and exile to the Netherlands in 1918, cf. C Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II: Profiles in Power*. Essex: Pearson Educational Ltd, 2000.

and the new nationalism which grew out of the World War I. He believed that this distinction could be perceived as having ushered in a new era which was characterised by a vehement rejection of Wilhelmism.¹⁰ This new nationalism which was also seen as the propagandist of the “conservative” revolution was regarded by many as being the real nucleus of the anti-democratic movement. One of its chief characteristics was its passionate rejection of liberal democracy.

Scholder maintains that although this movement was not in essence opposed to the Republic, it nonetheless cannot be denied that it remained tenaciously opposed to the issues upon which the Republic was founded –the liberal democratic system.¹¹ Although the opposition remained stubbornly opposed to such assimilation, the older generation of men such as Ernst Troeltsch, Friedrich Meinecke, Hugo Preus, Max Weber, Friedrich Naumann and Thomas Mann were ready to compromise this undesirable decision. On the other hand the defeat had created advocates who fused patriotic sentiments with Christian truth.

The separation between church and state also had further implications for church governance. Thus the “People’s Church movement” – in the form of people’s church councils – called for a general German Ecclesiastical Assembly to provide a constitution, as well as for a free electoral system based on the sovereignty of the people in all ecclesiastical offices and church councils. The goal was the establishment of the Free Evangelical People’s Church in Germany.¹²

The transfer of actual ecclesiastical authority to the territorial churches led to the individual territorial churches drawing up their own constitutions. These in the main were based on the model of parliamentary democracy and were strengthened by the synods. Rohls asserts that in most of the churches the ruler of the land as the supreme bishop was replaced by a collegial governing board which consisted of members of

¹⁰ K Sontheimer cited in: K Scholder, 1989: 36.

¹¹ Cf. K Scholder, 1989: 38.

¹² Cf. J Rohls, 1998: 274.

the synod and consistories – the latter being formally active as actual ecclesiastical administrative authorities.¹³

The consolidation of the territorial churches found expression in some form of “territorial Episcopal” office. The constitution of the Weimar Republic fundamentally retained the collegial system with the only difference being that now the elements of a constitutional monarchy was replaced by parliamentary democracy. No direct connection was established between the constitution and the confession of a church. The gradual erosion of the Weimar democracy together with its parliamentary system by the radicalism of the left and especially of the right was decisive for the further development of the relation between church and state in Germany.

However, the “German Christians” capitalised on elements of the conservative revolution as well as social nationalism. The emphasis on race is best understood when one comprehends that, on the one hand, the German people wanted to make sense of a war they had lost and of the numerous reasons cited as justification for the war. On the other hand, another “war” was being waged in the form of self-assertion of the German spirit over Roman/Anglo-Saxon thought. This manifested in what Scholder calls the Germans’ inability to admit that they had lost the war.¹⁴

The party platform of the National Socialists had already assumed the position of “positive Christianity” without any confessional ties, extending freedom of confession only to those confessions which did not offend the ethical and moral sensibilities of the German race.¹⁵ The notion of race was set above and consequently against that of Christianity, especially since a common notion of Christianity conceded

¹³ Cf. J Rohls, 1998: 274.

¹⁴ Cf. K Scholder, 1989: 40.

¹⁵ A Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler*. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press. 1976: 35; Hitler's party – the National Socialist German Workers' Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* – NSDAP) spelled out its position towards Christianity in point 24 of its constitution. This point reads: “We demand freedom of all religious confessions in the state, insofar as they do not endanger its existence or conflict with the customs and moral sentiments of the German race. The party as such represents the standpoint of a positive Christianity, without tying itself to a particular confession. It fights the spirit of Jewish materialism within us and without us and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our Volk can only take place within, on the basis of the principle: public need comes before private greed” (cf. R Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi conception of Christianity, 1919-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 14).

that in Christ there was no difference between Jew and Gentile and that both may be baptised. Cochrane argues that in the beginning only a few clergymen detected a few warning signs and that very few realised that an anti-Semitic racialism was utterly irreconcilable with Christianity. He comes to this conclusion because he is convinced that many were blinded by Hitler's repeated assurance that he stood for "positive Christianity" against "godless Bolshevism".¹⁶

The guiding principles of the Faith Movement of German Christians (1932) explicitly adopted the racist elements.¹⁷ These ideals were to be understood not as a replacement for a confession of faith, but instead as a 'confession of life'. The principles argued for a people's Reich church that abandoned the parliamentary system of ecclesiastical politics. They were looking for a church based on a belief in Christ in accordance with the German spirit of Luther and with heroic piety – a belief that regarded race, people and nation as God-given orders of life, and thus forbade any mixing of races.¹⁸ They called for a new church constitution that would replace the democratic right of election with the principle of suitability, and for a spiritual head of the Reich church, drawn up in accordance with the Führer principle.

The confusion which ensued placed Barth and others (especially E Thurneysen, R Bultmann and F Gogarten) "between the times". It must immediately be pointed out that the period in question may be interpreted theologically as well as politically. Theologically it can be said that this was a period between orthodox Protestantism and the new modern liberal direction indicated by the Barmen Declaration. A new theological pattern which broke radically from the theological pattern of the nineteenth century was introduced. It culminated in the Barmen Declaration.

Politically the exact dates that categorise this period vary from one interpreter to another. Cochrane is convinced that the period in question can be categorised as from 1917 to 1933. He draws extensively on the work of Karl Kupisch to substantiate his

¹⁶ A Cochrane, 1976: 36.

¹⁷ The details of these principles are contained in: A Cochrane, 1976: 222.

¹⁸ Cf. J Rohls, 1998: 275.

claim.¹⁹ He holds that Kupish had rightly observed that, from the standpoint of world history, the year 1917 was epoch-making: it was the same year in which the United States of America entered World War I and that Lenin led the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. According to Cochrane this would not be a war that would mark the end of all wars, but would be the initial bold phases of a series of events that culminated in the catastrophe of World War II.

The result was a world divided by an “iron curtain” which dropped right down in the middle of Germany between the East and the West and between Russia and America. The year in question is also important for it was roughly the date when a new theological period was ushered in; one radically estranged from the 19th century theology and which was crystallised in the Barmen Theological Declaration.²⁰ This theological trend was called dialectical theology.

Gorringe classifies the period “between the times” as October 1921 to March 1930, suggesting that the birth of the Weimar Republic signalled the start of this period. When Barth became professor at Göttingen, the Republic was nearly two years under way. McCormack has pointed out that the Germany to which Barth went in October 1921 was a Germany in the throes of an economic catastrophe.

Peace was signed on 28 June 1919, when the German government acceded to the terms of the Versailles Treaty.²¹ However, the terms of the treaty were devastating. Germany was stripped of all her colonies, Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France, and West Prussia, Upper Silesia and the Posen were given to Poland, thereby splitting East Prussia geographically from the rest of Germany. The military was reduced to 100 000 men and the Rhineland was occupied by allied troops to ensure its permanent demilitarisation. What is more, to this treaty was added the “war guilt clause” in terms of which Germany was to acknowledge sole responsibility for causing the war.

¹⁹ Cf. T Gorringe, 1999: 73 and A Cochrane, 1976: 50.

²⁰ A Cochrane, 1976: 50.

²¹ Cf. B McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997: 291.

As a result, it was further made responsible for compensating the Allied powers for all the losses and damages they had suffered.²²

It is against this backdrop that the German people at the beginning of the 20th century are to be understood. Their need for solidarity and mobilisation for the sake of reclaiming Germany for the German people reached its pinnacle in the call by some of the Weimar Republic's leaders. This was accompanied by a strident idealism, especially in the youth movement. Gorringer holds that on the right this centred on the exaltation of the German *Volk*, whereas on the left there was a striving, often pacifist idealism. Working-class Communists remembered Weimar as a hopeful time, when being socialist was self-evident. Both the hope and the faith in German *Volkstum* were shared by the church.

Cochrane asserts that, for a church that was so consciously connected to the nation, Germany's defeat in 1918 was a severe blow. The church too had suffered defeat. Yet, instead of undertaking a sober rethinking of its prophetic ministry within the state, the church consoled itself and the nation with the thought: "We have lost the war, but Germany is not lost. We still have the Reich". Instead of questioning the fatal line from Frederick the Great to Bismarck, and then to Kaiser Wilhelm, the church thanked God for its political leaders.²³

He continues to argue that the church had to identify itself with the state. It feared that, through the anticipated separation of church and state, it would be reduced to a voluntary religious society, a "free church" or a sect, deprived of the financial support of the state. But that fear was unfounded, for the very constitution of the German Reich of August 1919 marked the end of the church state. Article 137 guaranteed to all religious bodies complete freedom of association and equal rights before the law. Every denomination had the right to administer its own affairs and appoint its own officials without the co-operation of the state.²⁴

²² Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 291.

²³ A Cochrane, 1976: 53.

²⁴ A Cochrane, 1976: 53.

During this time in Göttingen, Barth plunged himself into the academic world. Although Gorringer maintains that Barth's years in Germany during this period were extraordinarily productive, the view is held by many that, for Barth personally, the decision to become a professor meant a revision of his approach to politics. Barth would not be able to deal with politics in the same manner as when he was a pastor in Safenwil. It can however not be maintained that he was not at all involved with politics since he began (with Gogarten and Thurneysen) to focus on "dialectical theology" – which was also called a "theology of crisis" – in 1922.

Barth, a man who once entertained the possibility of becoming a labour organiser, would now spend many sleepless nights preparing for classes and studying for lectures.²⁵ Hunsinger is of the opinion that Barth's decision to withdraw from praxis and concentrate on theology's conceptual task coincided with his new political sobriety and his turn to dialectical theology. He adds that despite this greater political sobriety, Barth did not abandon his socialist commitment even at the height of his dialectical period. His 1919 slogan – "social democrat, but not religious socialist" – remained in force, for in 1926 he could still speak of "the justice and necessity" of the socialist struggle while castigating theology and the church for not having supported the legitimacy of the socialist cause.²⁶

It is by locating Barth's theology against this cultural and intellectual background that Gorringer's assertion that Barth's theology was thoroughly contextual is justified.²⁷ His struggle to find his feet in that confusing context also impelled him to see himself as existing "between the times", a notion which explained the confusion he and his contemporaries felt and which was crystallised in the founding of the theological journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Between the Times). Barth founded this journal together with F Gogarten and E Thurneysen in August 1922 as a theological counterpart to other famous Weimar journals. Its sole intention was to oppose the

²⁵ Cf. H Gollwitzer, 'The kingdom of God and Socialism in the theology of Karl Barth' in G. Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976: 106.

²⁶ G Hunsinger, 'Towards a radical Barth' in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 217.

²⁷ T Gorringer, 1999: 78.

hitherto dominant liberal theology and to promote a theology of the Word. Barth's academic activities kept him busy to a large degree; some, especially Ragaz however thought that this was merely a ploy on his part to disregard the reality of politics.²⁸

There can be no doubt that the Weimar period was a difficult one, not only because of the many different sentiments which began to surface after the war, but also because many saw it as a period marked by a retreat to ivory towers. Most intellectuals either withdrew from politics or were openly hostile to the Republic. Klaus Scholder brings both of these accusations against Barth. He maintains that when Barth decided to accept the position of professor at Göttingen, his political concerns were submerged by his theological considerations. It is for this reason that he maintains that Barth's political involvement had certainly diminished. Simultaneously he argues that even though Barth's dialectal theology developed a sharp ideological critique of the Weimar period, this criticism was ambivalent, at least in its political effects.²⁹

Scholder seems to understand politics simply in the way Barth dealt with it prior to his move to the academic world. Scholder also seems to deliberately ignore the fact that Barth was prevented from directly getting involved into politics. However, the situation changed once he became more established in Germany towards the end of the 1920s. Busch asserts that at the beginning of 1926 Barth's status in the Prussian civil service had earned him German as well as Swiss citizenship.³⁰ This change in Barth's "social standing" would challenge the conditions contained in Heilmann's request (see chapter 1. 1.3).

Henceforth the new developments in Germany especially towards the end of the 1920s interested Barth enormously. He followed the efforts of the small group consisting of a few thoughtful people and men of good will who took the Weimar

²⁸ Cf. H Gollwitzer, 'The kingdom of God and Socialism in the theology of Karl Barth' in G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 79.

²⁹ K Scholder cited in T Gorringer, 1999: 84.

³⁰ E Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976: 189.

Republic and its constitution seriously and wanted to build a social democracy in Germany, loyally seeking to secure for their country an appropriate territory among the still distrustful neighbours. During this time he also saw and heard the notorious “German Christians” whom he thought to be the most undesirable of God’s creatures he had ever encountered.³¹

For some it would seem as if Barth had just woken up from a long academic dream in which he was dreaming of an intense conversation with Reformed teaching (theory) to the extent that he lost touch to some extent with the practical implications of this very teaching (praxis), for towards the end of the 1920s Barth would criticise himself for not having seen the danger in the rise of national socialism which had already begun. His position towards the end of the 1920s bears testimony to his unswerving conviction to get involve in politics.

2.3 Germany in a state of theological and political emergency

Barth was deeply disturbed by the events that succeeded the 1920s. Now teaching at Bonn after a stint in Münster, the heartland of Catholicism, Barth was irked by the political situation in particular.³² At the beginning of the 1930s, the National Socialists were increasingly making their presence felt in Germany. Already as early as 9 November 1923 Hitler, supported by Field Marshal Erich Lundenhoff, made his first attempt to seize the power in Germany.

The ‘beer hall Putsch’, as the attempt was named, was a dismal failure. Hitler was sentenced to prison, but pardoned in December the following year. His party was reorganised in 1925.³³ Barth either did not take note these events seriously, or considered them instead desperate measures by a few Germans who idealised Germany. Later on, at the beginning of the 1930s, Barth was convinced that German politics was in tatters.

³¹ E Busch, 1976: 189.

³² Cf. T Gorringer, 1999: 79.

³³ Cf. A Cochrane, 1976: 24.

He writes that “the German political situation is like sitting in a car which is driven by a man who is either incompetent or drunk”.³⁴ As a means of confronting this drunk or incompetent driver, Barth entertained the possibility of joining a political party. The loss of World War I had awoken in Germany the most fervent brand of nationalism and racial pride. United first under the autocratic Hohenzollerns of Prussia, the Germans perpetuated the antidemocratic views of Metternich and developed a centralised political government under the Kaisers and their theory of divine right.³⁵

Defending their national pride and pseudo sense of superiority, many Germans supported the notion of betrayal from within, believing that they had been sold out by government leaders and a faction of international Jewry. Rogers and others report that one of the products of this historic conflict was a young Austrian named Adolf Hitler.³⁶ Hitler had founded the Socialist Party in 1919, dedicating it to race, blood and the soil of the German people. He was convinced that he had a mission to regenerate Germany and save the German people from Marxists, Jews, capitalists, democrats and Freemasons.

In May 1931, Barth boldly confronted the “drunk driver” by gaining membership of the Social Democratic Party. Busch explains Barth’s decision for joining the party by maintaining that Barth did not regard this step as an acceptance of the ideas and world-views of socialism, but as “a practical political decision”. He identified himself with a party that he found to be the most aware of the “requirements of a healthy politics”.³⁷

What is worth noting is that, although some prominent theologians would oppose Hitler and his ideology, some of these very theologians had once been amused by Hitler’s ideas. Martin Niemoller personally welcomed the coming to power of the

³⁴ K Barth cited in: E Busch, 1976: 217.

³⁵ J Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A guide to the book of Confession*. London: John Knox Press, 1985: 176.

³⁶ J Rogers, 1985: 177.

³⁷Cf. E Busch, 1976: 217.

Nazis in 1933. It was within the same year that he released his autobiography entitled *From U-Boat to Pulpit*.³⁸

Shirer asserts that the Protestants in Germany were divided. By the time National Socialism came into power, only a few of the 47 million Protestants belonged to the various free churches such as the Baptist and Methodist churches, while the rest belonged to 28 Lutheran and Reformed churches.³⁹ A further division among Protestants resulted from the rise of National Socialism, giving birth to the “German Christians” as well as the confessing movement. Those who belonged to the former camp were the more fanatical Nazis who were organised around 1932. The “German Christians” were ardent supporters of the Nazi doctrines of race and the leadership principle and wanted these principles applied to a Reich Church that would bring all Protestants into one all-embracing body.⁴⁰

The confessing church, led by Martin Niemöller (a one-time sympathiser of the Hitler ideology) opposed the Nazification of the Protestant churches. He rejected the Nazi racial theories and denounced the anti-Christian doctrines of Rosenberg and other Nazi leaders. It is conceivable that Barth was at times quiet given the demands of his academic activities, but it is inconceivable that he was ever neutral when it came to political matters. Whether he actively opposed a diabolical regime (as in the case of Nazi Germany) or preferred to adopt a rather inactive approach to the other (as is the case with the East–West conflict), Barth clearly manifested his *theo-political* position.

The idea that one can never look at the political issues and pretend that “all cats seem grey”, propelled Barth into party politics. However, he had to remain cautious of party political snares. To this effect he wrote in his commentary on Romans that “a political career becomes possible only when it is seen to be essentially a game; that is to say, when we are unable to speak of absolute right, when the note of “absoluteness” has vanished from both the thesis and the antithesis, and when room

³⁸ Cf. W Shirer, 1961: 235.

³⁹ W Shirer, 1961: 235.

⁴⁰ W Shirer, 1961: 235.

has perhaps been made for that relative moderateness or for that relative radicalism in which human possibilities have been renounced”.⁴¹

This approach to party politics therefore reveals Barth as a person who engaged in politics without becoming a slave to it. It is for this reason that he wrote in 1915 that “I regard the “political pastor” in any form as a mistake, even if he is a socialist. But as a man and a citizen ... I take the side of the Social Democrat”.⁴² This helps us to understand the claims made by some that Barth treated his membership of Religious Socialism in a most anarchical way, as a peripheral matter in which he was every bit as quick to criticise the party as to support it. It was this very same attitude that impelled him to warn that we dare not put our “hearts” into our politics; that our political careers must be treated as ‘a game’;⁴³ and that, above all, we dare never use “God” (i.e. religion, theology, Christianity) as justification or support for what are actually our own political ideologies.⁴⁴

It has already been pointed out that the 1918 defeat of Germany was intensely felt by the church state which had blended Christianity with nationalism. When dealing with the issue of the rise of National Socialism, it is imperative that reference be made to the so-called faith movement of the German Christians (*Glaubensbewegung deutscher Christen*), as mentioned before.⁴⁵ This movement was established on 6 June 1932, when the guiding principles of this movement were published.⁴⁶

⁴¹ K Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Trans. E. Hoskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1977: 489.

⁴² Karl Barth cited in: E Busch, 1976: 88.

⁴³ K Barth, 1977: 489.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth cited in G Hunsinger, ‘Towards a radical Barth’ in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 208.

⁴⁵ With the rise of National Socialism a further division occurred among the Protestants. The one group was the Confessing Church led by the reverend Martin Niemöller, while the other group was the “German Christians” faith movement – the more fanatical Nazis led by Ludwig Mueller. He was an army chaplain of the East Prussian Military district and a devoted follower of Hitler. This movement ardently supported the Nazi doctrines of race and the leadership principle and wanted them applied to the Reich Church which would bring all Protestants into one all-embracing body (cf. W Shirer, 1961: 235); the ‘leader principle’ presupposed that the church was to be organised according to the same principle as the state: “one empire, one leader” (cf. M. Lehmann-Habeck, ‘Confession and Resistance in Hitler-Germany (1933-1945)’ in: *Mission Studies*. Vol 2, No. 1 (1985) 34-38.

⁴⁶ Cf. A Cochrane, 1976: 74; J Rogers, 1985: 178.

These principles set forth the methods and goals for a new order. Rogers argues that the principles reflected the main points of anti-internationalism, anti-Freemasonry; favouring racial purity and “Positive Christianity”.⁴⁷ In 1932 as a full-fledged German citizen Barth responded in favour of Roman Catholicism and its response to the German political situation. He argued that Catholicism is “an extraordinarily strong and profound conversational partner for Protestant theology. Indeed, in the last resort it was the only one which needed to be taken seriously”.⁴⁸ In applauding Catholicism, he concludes that “the proclamation of the church is by nature political in so far as it has to ask the pagan *polis* to remedy its state of disorder and make justice a reality. This proclamation is good when it presents the specific commandment of God, and is not good when it puts forward the abstract truth of a political ideology”.⁴⁹ The church can (and should) speak Scripture to the state; but once the church starts identifying itself with ideologies of particular political philosophies and cause groups, that becomes unacceptable.

The following brief statement is a clear indication that Barth was indeed aware of the political situation in which he practiced theology. It is a statement made as early as 1926. He maintains that “I also saw and heard the so-called ‘German nationals’ of the time ... in my memory the most undesirable of all God's creatures whom I have ever met ... With their inflammatory speeches they probably made the greatest contributions towards filling to the uttermost a cup of wrath which was then poured out on the German nation over the next two decades”.⁵⁰

There can be no doubt that Barth's choice to become a member of the Social Democratic Party (which Thurneysen argues was an unusual step for a pastor at that time)⁵¹ was a deliberate act of refusing to succumb to Nazism. In essence it is

⁴⁷ Cf. J Rogers, 1985: 177.

⁴⁸ E Busch, 1976: 216.

⁴⁹ E Busch, 1976: 216.

⁵⁰ E Busch, 1976: 189.

⁵¹ Cf. J Smart (ed.), *Revolutionary Theology in the making: Barth-Thurneysen correspondence, 1914-1925*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964: 14.

anarchical. Barth took some time to explain the manner in which he handled his membership in a letter to Paul Tillich:

“Membership in the SPD does not mean for me a confession to the idea and worldview of socialism. According to my understanding of the exclusivity of the Christian confession of faith, I can ‘confess’ myself neither to an idea nor to a worldview in any serious sense. Hence I also have no necessary intrinsic relation to ‘Marxism’ as such ... As an idea and worldview, I can bring to it neither fear nor love nor trust. Membership in the SPD means for me simply a practical political decision. Placed before the various options that confront a person in this regard, I consider it right *rebus sic stantibus* to espouse the party (1) of the working class, (2) of democracy, (3) of anti-militarism, and (4) of a conscious, but judicious, affirmation of the German people. I saw this requirements for a healthy politics fulfilled in, and only in the SPD. Therefore I choose this party. And because I do not want to assume and share this responsibility myself, I have become a member of it.”⁵²

All Barth’s activities cited thus far lead to the conclusion that his approach to politics was indeed serious, yet he remained aware that he could be assimilated by party politics if he was not careful. His seriousness about politics was clearly highlighted by the events of 1933. In March of this year, the Nazis had so much power that it spelled trouble for government employees (including university faculty members) who were SPD members. In that situation, the party itself recommended that, rather than jeopardizing their posts, SPD faculty members simply resigned their party membership and continued their political activities in private. Tillich accepted this as a good idea, but Barth refused to do so. For him, this was exactly the time to not back down on one's formal, public commitment, thus he said “anyone who does not want me like this cannot have me at all”.⁵³

Without any indication of insubordination, Barth straight away communicated his decision to the proper official, the Prussian Minister of Cultural Affairs, asking whether, as a SPD member, he would be allowed to continue his teaching for the

⁵² Karl Barth cited in: H Gollwitzer, ‘Kingdom of God and Socialism’ in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 116.

⁵³ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 225.

summer term. The minister gave permission – on condition that there would be no ‘formation of cells’.⁵⁴ However, in June the SPD was disbanded and prohibited nationwide. At this point the administrative head of the university asked Barth how he saw his relationship to the SPD.⁵⁵

Barth refused to be manipulated; he remained tenacious against doing anything that could possibly be interpreted as an indication that he was giving legitimacy to the regime, yet in the same vein, with a fair sense of politeness and propriety, he was careful to not be guilty of defiance and rebellion against the established order.

Hitler took over on 30 January 1933. Barth believed then already that his German people had begun to worship a false god.⁵⁶ In November of that very year, a day after the German people had overwhelmingly backed Hitler in a national plebiscite, the “German Christians” staged a massive rally in the Sportpalast in Berlin. Dr Reinhardt Krause, the Berlin district leader of the sect, proposed the abandonment of the Old Testament, “with its tales of cattle merchants and pimps” and the revision of the New Testament with the teaching of Jesus “corresponding entirely with the demands of National Socialism”. Resolutions were drawn up demanding “One People, One Reich, One Faith”, requiring all pastors to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler, and insisting that all churches institute the “Aryan paragraph”.⁵⁷ This was probably too much and probably the reason why Bishop Mueller was forced to suspend and disown Dr Krause.⁵⁸

Barth realised that the quick and easy submission of the German people, including many of his faculty colleagues and former students, was owing to the fact that the church had for so long been buying into whatever cultural or political ideology made messianic noises, that this seemed to be just one more such instance.

⁵⁴ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 225.

⁵⁵ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 225.

⁵⁶ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 223.

⁵⁷ W Shirer, 1961: 237.

⁵⁸ W Shirer, 1961: 237.

Following Busch it transpires that over the centuries the Protestant church had in fact been “assimilated” as a result of all kinds of other less ostentatious and aggressive alien pressures, to such a degree that it simply could not repudiate, promptly and confidently, the crude assumption that the church, its message, and its life could be assimilated into the National Socialist State.⁵⁹ Barth was surprised to discover that most of his friends who had joined him since Tambach had succumbed to the Nazi ideologies. Hans Frei persistently insists that during this period the great danger to the church’s witness was not in Barth’s view the stupid and fanatical German Christians so much as it was the more sophisticated theologians (like Friedrich Gogarten) who tried to strike a compromise between God’s self-revelation in Scripture and “the special vocation, culture and laws of particular nations at particular times”.⁶⁰

The position that these friends and former students were embracing was in the mind of Barth a purely “theologised political” position. It was therefore imperative for him to ponder ways of engaging this position. Barth sought a potent arsenal in theology because he was convinced that to combat the given politicised theological position with another form of politicised theology would be a futile exercise. Hunsinger argues that like today’s liberation theologians, Barth believed that reactionary politics was a sign that the gospel had been left behind.⁶¹ It is in this light that his statement of “doing theology as though nothing had happened”⁶² is to be understood. His first main concern was to urge the students for whom he was responsible to keep on working as normally as possible in the midst of the general uproar, and to maintain the biblical gospel in the face of the new regime and the ideology which had now become predominant.⁶³

Barth’s watchfulness in this regard can easily be misconstrued as insinuating that the theological task of preserving the biblical truth from any ideological conquest

⁵⁹ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 223.

⁶⁰ Hans Frei cited in: G Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002: 45.

⁶¹ Cf. G Hunsinger, 2002: 45.

⁶² Cf. E Busch, 1976: 222.

⁶³ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 224.

was much more important to the cause of history than the political effort to destroy Hitler. This conclusion can only be reached if Barth's theology is misunderstood to imply a separation between theology and politics.

Barth has always understood his theology in relation to the political context in which he had to say something about God. The thrust of his theological reflection is misconstrued if his theological reflection is regarded as displaying a clear distinction between his theology and politics. In acknowledging this, it would be impossible to speak about God in absolute terms. It must be noted that Barth had always been aware of the fallible position of the human being and remained cautious not to fall into the trap of absolutism. Those who have not seen this, have blamed Barth for being abstract. Barth's ability to see in Holy Scripture a more potent arsenal to confront Nazism had provided him with the possibility of noting when the gospel was being turned into a caricature. For this reason he entertained the possibility that the theological and political situation in Germany necessitated a confession.

In what follows, attention will be given to the question of why a *status confessionis* was considered inevitable at a certain point in the history of the German church. The next section will clarify the humility of a Reformed confession, i.e. a Reformed confession is not something that elevates the group that promulgates it above those who are making a mockery out of the gospel; instead it is made with the deepest conviction that the church cannot do anything else but confess.

Providing Barth's 1925 definition of what constitutes a Reformed confession, it will be argued that not only does a confessional approach (with regard to the church in Germany under the Hitler regime) assist us in reminding us of our limits as human beings, but it is also essentially contextual in the sense that it is always looking out to reinterpret God in new and changing situations. It is not the context however that informs our interpretation of God, but Holy Scripture alone. It must also be added that a confessional approach is important in two ways: first, it challenges those that find other means of interpreting the revelation of Christ and secondly, the

confessional nature of the Barmen Declaration will reveal that it is also fundamentally directed at those who are making this confession.

2.4 The theological-political situation in Germany: A stimulus for the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934

In the preceding sections, reference was made to the emergence of National Socialism (NS) which created divisions in the Protestant tradition in Germany. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the groups that appeared as a result was the ‘German Christians’. Another group was the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church). The Barmen Declaration was given form by this Confessing Church in Germany. The Confessing Church had grown from the “Pastors’ Emergency League” which was founded by Martin Niemöller in 1933. It took its name from the fact that it based its opposition to Hitler and the “German Christians” on the confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the one Lord and source of belief.⁶⁴

One way of looking at the formation of this movement and therefore also of the Barmen Declaration is to see it as a reaction against the “German Christians”. Some however challenge this view. Busch remarks in an article presented at one of the International Reformed Theological Institute (IRTI) conferences that “the Barmen Declaration did not object directly to the Nazi government, and the reason for it was simply that just in these months the government ruled cautiously and especially it did not interfere in the church affairs. But in those days the Protestant church revealed its susceptibility to the new mottos of the nation, *volk*, the race and the Führer, to a shocking degree”.⁶⁵

This movement in itself has not escaped criticism. Part of these criticisms was informed by the view that it did not resist Hitler per se. Busch describes the Confessing Church’s resistance to Hitler and the theological underpinning which was given to his rule as pathetic. He writes:

⁶⁴ E Busch, 1976: 235.

⁶⁵ Cf. E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration: Its theology, background and reception’ in: A J G Van der Borgh et al (eds.), *Studies in Reformed theology: Faith and Ethnicity*, Vol 1. Meinema: Zoetermeer, 2002: 64.

“Not only was the Confessing Movement pathetic because it did not oppose Hitler and his ideologies directly, but so did the Barmen Declaration also lag behind when it came to the physical opposition of Hitler.⁶⁶

George Harinck joined this chorus. He also blames the *Bekennende Kirche* for not taking adequate action against Hitler and his regime. He considers it as selfish because it did not oppose Hitler and his ideologies in essence, but was opposed to the fact that the state was dictating how the church should conduct its business. Harinck asserts that: “*de Bekennende Kirche was alles behalve anti-national-socialistisch*”.⁶⁷

Despite its “insufficient” action in responding to Hitler as well as its “insufficient” solidarity with the cause of the Jews, the Confessing Church was correct in its judgment that the theological and political situation in the 1930s in Germany warranted a *status confessionis*. This materialised during the Synod of Barmen in 1934. The concept in question had not been used since the time of the Interims⁶⁸. After the

⁶⁶ Cf. E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration: Its theology, background and reception’ in: A J G Van der Borgh et al (eds.), 2002: 64.

⁶⁷ “The Confessional Church was all but anti-national socialist.” Cf. G Harinck, ‘Tussen Barmen en Amsterdam’. Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van bijzonder hoogleraar. 6. Juni 2003: 9.

⁶⁸ Interims were temporary settlements between the Emperor Charles V and the Protestants. At least three such interims has been noted: The Ratisbon Interim (1541); the Augsburg Interim (1548), as well as the Interim of Zella. In the diet held at Leipzig in December 1548, the latter interim was adopted by the estates of the Electorate of Saxony, and was then called the Interim of Leipzig, or the Great Interim. Cf. C Herbermann (ed.), *The Catholic encyclopaedia: An international work of reference on the Constitution, doctrine and history of the Catholic Church*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910: 77-78. (a).The Ratisbon was published at the conclusion of the imperial diet, 29 July 1541. It was based on the result of a previous conference between Catholics and Protestants, in which an agreement had been reached on the idea of justification and other points of doctrine. Consequently the imperial ‘recess’ enacted that the adjustment of the religious question should be postponed until the next general council or imperial diet; that meanwhile the Protestants should not go beyond or against the articles agreed upon; that an ecclesiastical reform be inaugurated by the prelates; that the Peace of Nuremberg (1532) should be maintained; that monasteries and chapter-houses should remain intact; that the ecclesiastics should retain their possessions; that the Protestants should not draw anyone to their side; that all judicial proceedings in matters of religion should be suspended; that the imperial court of justice (*Reichskammergericht*) should remain as before; and that the recess of Augsburg (1530) should remain in force. Owing to the opposition of the Protestants, Charles V in a secret declaration made concessions to them, which practically nullified the recess. The articles agreed upon were to be accepted in the sense of their theologians; the monasteries and chapter-houses might be called on to inaugurate a reform; the ecclesiastics, monasteries, and chapter-houses, that had embraced the Confession of Augsburg, were to remain in the full possession of their property; the Protestants were not to compel the subjects of Catholic princes to embrace their Faith, but if anyone came to them spontaneously, he was not to be

defeat of the Protestant Schmalkald League, Emperor Charles V pressured the Reichstag in 1548 to announce the uniformity of the practice of the Mass as well as the authority of all bishops in all churches. Melancthon and others in predominantly Catholic areas of West Germany favoured a compromise in “*adiaphora*” (matters of indifference) as long as they did not threaten the heart of the gospel, which is the justification by faith. Matthias Flacius⁶⁹ who represented a large group in East Germany that was also considered a stronghold for the Lutherans, opposed this interpretation.⁷⁰ Flacius argued that in a case of confession and offence, there was no *adiaphora* (*nihil est adiaphora in casu confessionis et scandalii*).

The *status confessionis* of Germany was one which was precipitated by the so-called “Aryan paragraph”⁷¹. The manner in which this very phenomenon was transplanted into the church was spearheaded by the purported German Christians. This group became the voice of Nazi ideology within the Evangelical Church; it even went to so far as to advocate the removal of the Old Testament from the Bible. In the

hindered; the members of the imperial court of justice were not to be molested, if they turned Protestants; and the recess of Augsburg was to have force only in matters not appertaining to religion. (b). The Augsburg Interim was published at the conclusion of the imperial diet, 30 June 1548. In 26 chapters, it comprised statements on matters of doctrine and ecclesiastical discipline. The points of doctrine were all explained in the sense of Catholic dogma, but couched in the mildest and vaguest terms; and wherever it was feasible, the form and the concept approached the Protestant view of those subjects. In matters of ecclesiastical discipline two important concessions were made to the Protestants, viz. the marriage of the clergy, and Communion under both kinds. In addition, an imperial ordinance enjoined on the Catholic clergy the execution of reforms in the choice and ordination of ecclesiastics, the administration of the sacraments, and other similar matters. (c). The Interim of Zella was meant principally for the Protestants, whose return to the Catholic Faith was looked for; but nearly everywhere they very strongly opposed it. In order to make it less objectionable, a modification was introduced by Melancthon and other Protestant divines, commissioned thereto by Elector Maurice of Saxony (1521-53). In a meeting held at Alt-Zella in November, 1548, they explained in a Protestant sense what they considered essential points of doctrine, e.g. justification and others; they accepted the non-essentials or *adiaphora*, such as confirmation, Mass, the use of candles, vestments, holy days, etc.

⁶⁹ Flacius was born Matthias Flacius Illyricus in the city of Illyria, which is considered an imaginary country since it has vanished from the global map and is believed to be the country which is no longer exists. He was born a Lutheran theologian. Cf. J Bradley and R Muller, *Church History: an introduction to research, reference works and methods*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995: 99.

⁷⁰ E Teselle, ‘How do we recognize a *Status Confessionis*’. In: *Theology Today*. Vol. 45. (1). April 1998. Theological Table Talk. 1-7.

⁷¹ After Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor, a number of controversial laws were promulgated, among them the ‘Aryan paragraph’. This paragraph ensured the removal of all Jews from various spheres of society. All government employees had to show documentation of their ‘Aryan’ descends.

summer of 1933, citing the state *Aryan* laws that barred all “non-Aryans” from the civil service, the German Christians proposed a church “Aryan paragraph” to prevent “non-Aryans” from becoming ministers or religious teachers.⁷²

Retrospectively it has to be understood that the Confessing Church in Germany was not precipitated by Hitler’s notorious legislations and his National Socialism. Instead, this movement was precipitated by the theological hermeneutics of the “German Christians” which was comfortably at home with natural theology and thus saw no danger in advocating an Aryan paragraph for the church as well. Even Barth thought that the NS with its teachings of the Germans as superior to other nations could be construed as being innocuous if this were not incorporated into Christian teachings as was done by the German Christians.

Hunsinger reports that Barth himself pointed out in 1942 that most of the members of the Confessing Church “thought they could agree to, or at least sympathise with, the political and social aims of National Socialism”.⁷³ Barth furthermore admitted that up until the year 1934 while he was still in Germany, he thought that he could relegate his political opposition to the background and work along the lines of resisting Nazi intrusion in church affairs.⁷⁴ When Hitler appointed Bishop Muller to the office of protectorate for the German Christians, it became clear to the Evangelical Church that Muller was no longer a mere liaison between Hitler and the church, but had become a representative of a party in the church. The Confessing Church had to seriously take a stand of resisting forces which threatened to dictate its affairs.

This threat was contained in the state’s attempt to determine who made up the church’s membership, hence the *status confessionis*.⁷⁵ The Confessing Church was constituted by diverse Christian theological traditions such as Lutheran, United and

⁷² Cf. A Cochrane, 1976: 74.

⁷³ G Hunsinger, 2000: 78.

⁷⁴ G Hunsinger, 2000: 78-9.

⁷⁵ Cf. D Smit, ‘What does status Confessionis mean?’ in: Smit, D J *et al.* (eds.), *A moment of truth: The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984; E Busch, 1976, and A Cochrane, 1976.

Reformed. During the conception of the Barmen Declaration, Barth was confronted with the enormous challenge of having to also accommodate the Lutherans. Barth was impressed by the consensus that was reached between the Reformed and Lutheran groups present.

He refers to an incident of how Lutherans such as Sasse and Althaus insisted on the mentioning of “sacraments” throughout the declaration and how he insisted on the mentioning of the Holy Spirit. The compromise culminated in the statement: Christ acts in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶ That formulation impressed Wilhelm Niesel who was sitting in the audience next to Barth. He nudged Barth and said: “What a delight for Calvin in heaven!” The final format of the Declaration (as a result of the Lutheran intervention) had become a typical Calvinistic text.⁷⁷

Barth was particularly impressed by Niesel’s comment because he had come to view Calvin as an ideal theologian of union. Barth explains the main objection of the Barmen Declaration as such: “[I]n Barmen we wanted to gather the scattered Christian spirits (Lutheran, Reformed, United, positive, liberal, pietistic). The aim was neither unification nor uniformity, but consolidation for united attacks and therefore a united march”.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Cf. Appendix III: The Barmen Theological Declaration, 3rd thesis.

⁷⁷ E Busch, 1976: 246. Emphasis added.

⁷⁸ E Busch, 1976: 247; Ahlers has produced an innovative study in which he investigates the tension and compromises between Lutheran, Reformed and United traditions in the Barmen process. Ahlers also looked at the conservative, national and democratic progressive, as well as at the competing concepts of what it means to be church. Cf. R Ahlers, *The Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934: The Archaeology of a confessional text*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1986.

2.5 The Barmen Theological Declaration as confessional theology: Preparation site

When the Barmen synod convened in 1934 in the city of Barmen⁷⁹ to adopt the Barmen Theological Declaration, Barth had already taught at two theological institutions, namely Göttingen and Munster. He was then teaching at Bonn which had become a stronghold of Protestant theological convictions.⁸⁰ At Bonn Barth's audience had become more versatile and larger. Barth had in this audience a number of foreigners including some Africans. Busch remarked that Barth once wondered whether he might perhaps be a herald of awakening Africa, which "one day will put us into its pockets, lock, stock and barrel".⁸¹

Barth now focussed most of his energies on confessional theology. Among his numerous talks with pastors, he also dealt with the claims made by the "German Christians". In Bonn at a pastors' conference on 6 November 1931 Barth had expounded seven "answers" to the Rengsdorf theses of the "German Christians".⁸² It should therefore come as no surprise that Barth managed to deal in a very brief time with the Barmen Declaration. In the summer and winter of 1930-1931 Barth delivered his Münster lectures on ethics. He now dealt more intensely with Anselm and produced in 1931 the work which illustrated his delight of Anselm's work.⁸³ At one point he admitted that it was this work which possessed the vital key to the

⁷⁹ The city of Barmen is a link in a chain of cities in the winding valley of the Wupper River in North Rhine-Westphalia. It is located approximately 15 miles East of Düsseldorf adjoining Solingen to the Southwest and Remscheid to the South. Elberfeld is considered a twin city of Barmen. Cf. A Cochrane, 1976:146-148; www.schwebbahn.com/home.asp. These cities as well as Beyerburg, Cronenberg, Ronsdorf and Vohwinkel were incorporated as the city of Wuppertal in 1929. Before the date in question, as early as 1903 these cities were linked by the famous interurban suspension tramway over the Wupper River. Cf. Elberfeld became known for its mixture of orthodoxy and experientialism something which was continued by the Krummacher brothers, Friedrich Adolf (1767-1845), the professor, poet and preacher and Gottfried Daniel (1774-1837) who was a preacher in Elberfeld since 1816 until his death. These were the forerunners to Hermann Friedrich Köhlbrugger who was hospitably welcomed when he came to Elberfeld in 1833.

⁸⁰ E Busch, 1976: 199.

⁸¹ Quote cited in E Busch, 1976: 202.

⁸² E Busch, 1976: 231-232.

⁸³ Cf. K Barth, *Anselm: Fides quaerrens Intellectum*, Trans. I Robertson. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press. 1975.

understanding his theological reflection during the authorship of his *Church Dogmatics*.⁸⁴

Barth was 44 years old when he occupied the chair in systematic theology at Bonn after Otto Ritschl, the son of Albrecht Ritschl, retired. The Nuremberg committee – later called the council of Brethren of the confessional synod of the DER and commonly also referred to as the Reich Council of Brethren – appointed a committee of three, namely Karl Barth, Hans Asmussen and Thomas Breit at its meeting in Berlin on 2 May 1934 with the mandate to draft a confession on the theological situation in Germany.⁸⁵

During the succeeding meetings between these individuals, Breit continually urged the meeting to abide by the decisions of the Reformation lest it be thought that the Lutheran churches had abandoned their confession.⁸⁶ Already within this committee of three, one can detect the recurring themes of confessionalism. Two weeks before the commencement of the historic synod, a theological commission responsible for the deliberations on the draft by the committee of three, was chosen. It comprised the following individuals: Karl Barth, Hans Asmussen, Joachim Beckmann, Georg Merz, Wilhelm Niesel, Hermannus Obendiek, Eduard Putz and Hermann Sasse.⁸⁷ Sasse is of particular importance here because as a member of this committee, he later vigorously distanced himself from this confession⁸⁸.

⁸⁴ Cf. C Green (ed.), *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*. Glasgow: Collins Publishers, 1989: 140.

⁸⁵ E Busch, 1976: 245.

⁸⁶ Cf. A Cochrane, 1976: 176.

⁸⁷ For the biographical notes on these individuals, cf. A Cochrane, 1976: 152.

⁸⁸The Barmen Declaration did not escape criticism. In his attempts to 'free Reformed theology and therefore the Reformed understanding of confessions from the rule of Barthianism', Rohls conveniently portrayed the Barmen Declaration as a continuation of Barth's idea of what constitutes a Reformed confession as depicted in his response to the mentioned Council of Cardiff in 1925. Although this chapter concurs with Rohls's assertion pertaining to the view that the Barmen Declaration was indeed a continuation of what Barth understood by Reformed confession, it is contended that Rohls ignored the essence of the context which impelled Barth to negate natural theology, something which is evident in the first article of the Barmen Declaration. Rohls's ambition to illustrate the point that this confession was wrong in that it created a confessional difference impels him to conclude that Barth provided no space for the revelation of God through other means. He brings this charge against both Barth and Barmen without making reference to the Jewish question as well as the behaviour of the "German Christians" in their creation of a national god. Cf. J Rohls, 'Reformed Theology – Past and Future' in: W

In what follows the characteristics of confessional theology in the Barmen Theological Declaration will be investigated.

2.5.1 The Barmen Declaration as theology based on the Word of God

When the history of the church and theology in Germany during the Hitler epoch is considered, clearer light is shed on the traps of natural theology. It becomes evident that when theology takes its point of departure in something other than the Word of God, chaos inevitably ensues. As much as context plays a pivotal role in theological reflection, to insist on it as a point of departure can be dangerous. In this regard Busch reminds us that the Barmen Declaration was not simply an example of a contextual theology, but that it was a criticism of some contextual theologies of the time. He maintains that this confession rightly related to the situation of its time, but that it was not a captive of its time.⁸⁹

The quintessence of acknowledging the particular historicity, which underpins documents such as the Barmen Theological Declaration, facilitates our comprehension of why statements are phrased in the manner that they are in this document. The Barmen Theological Declaration consists of six self-evident theses or articles in which the very characteristics of confessional theology are located.⁹⁰ Each article is initiated with a positive thesis, followed by a negative thesis. Some of them are considered in greater detail below (see Appendix III for the full text).

The positive thesis of Article I, for example, reads: “Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God which we have to hear and obey in life and in death.”⁹¹ This is interpreted as the Barmen Declaration’s most fundamental

M Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003: 37-38.

⁸⁹ Cf. E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration: Its theology, background and reception’ in: van der Borgh et al. (eds.), 2002: 65.

⁹⁰ For the English translation of this declaration, cf. A Cochrane, 1976: 239f.

⁹¹ When dealing with a thesis that captures a characteristic of confessional theology, we shall refer to that thesis in detail the first time, thereafter an abbreviated version of that thesis will be given either as a footnote or it will be cited in the larger text. For the detailed referencing of these theses see appendix III. The detailed article of the first thesis reads as follows: ‘I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no

summary of its rejection of natural theology, as captured in the ensuing negative thesis. It reads: “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation”. This thesis was a clear negation of the German Christians who saw alongside the revelation attested in Scripture, the “German Hour of 1933” as a kind of divine revelation.⁹²

The chief aspect this declaration wished to repudiate was natural theology (and therefore the German Christians). Hunsinger agrees with this view. He argues that this article is the prime example that challenges natural theology in the form of culture-religion.⁹³ He admits that Barth was correct when he maintained that where Christ “no longer speaks the first and last word, but only at best an additional word”, an “assimilated and domesticated theology” will be the inevitable result.⁹⁴

In addition to the Declaration’s repudiation of natural theology, it must also be stated that this confession remained at loggerheads with the attitude of the Confessing Church, which it displayed towards the German Christians. By insisting that it was only this Word which must be heard, Barth set himself on a path towards purifying the church of all semblances of natural theology. Scholder considers this thesis the nucleus of the entire declaration because it simply repeats the powerful *solas* of the Reformation: *solus Christus, sola scriptura, sola fide*.⁹⁵ To reiterate this Reformed principle was necessary if the confrontation with the “German Christians” was to be

one comes to the Father except through me.’ (John. 14: 6). Truly, truly I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold through the door but climbs in somewhere else, he is a thief and a robber. I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved.’ (John. 10: 1, 9). **Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.** We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognise as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God’s revelation. Cf. E Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace: Toward a theology of the State*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992: xxii-xxiii.

⁹² E Busch, *The Great Passion: An introduction to Karl Barth’s theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004: 67. The “German Hour” here refers to the time when Hitler became ruler of Nazi Germany in 1933.

⁹³ G Hunsinger, 2000: 80.

⁹⁴ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957a: 163.

⁹⁵ K Scholder, 1989: 90.

effective, and to affirm that the theology espoused by them was in direct opposition to revelational theology.

For Hunsinger it is imperative that the Barmen Declaration's rejection of natural theology be understood as epistemological in character.⁹⁶ Although it rejects natural theology, this rejection does not imply that nothing good, beautiful, true or worth noticing exists outside of scripture or the church. Had it maintained the latter position, it would have contradicted one of Barth's famous statements: "God may speak to us through Russian Communism or a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to him if he really does so".⁹⁷

For Barth, the first thesis remains central and therefore any other "truth" that maintains that it ought to be interpreted alongside this truth nullifies the gospel and is consequently a betrayal of the church. When secondary elements of revelation are put next to Christian confessions, these confessions become nothing more than mere aspirations to make caricatures of the gospel.

The fifth article of the Barmen Theological Declaration is also worth considering here.⁹⁸ In essence, this declaration does not propagate anarchy but understands that the state, because God ordains it, is charged with the task of enforcing civil law. By insisting that Christ is the only Word that has to be listened and obeyed, it is not implied that disregard for authorities should be sanctioned. In maintaining this, the Barmen Declaration is opposed to an uncritical submission to the state if it distorts the gospel. Scholder maintains that: "the first part of this thesis is miles away from any enthusiastic or anachronistic ideas about the state". He continues to hold that there is

⁹⁶ G Hunsinger, 2000: 80.

⁹⁷ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. I/1. Trans. G W Bromiley. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936: 60.

⁹⁸ The initial half of the fifth thesis concerns the state and reads as follows: "The Bible tells us that according to divine arrangement the state has the responsibility to provide for justice and peace in the yet unredeemed world, in which the church also stands, according to the measure of human insight and human possibility, by the threat and rule and force. The church recognises with thanks and reverences towards God the benevolence of this, his provision. Cf. J Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A reader in Christian doctrine from the bible to the present*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973: 520.

no mention of a “sphere free from rule”. Rather, it not only makes solemn recognition of the necessity of the state, but also explicitly confirms its ‘monopoly of power’⁹⁹

The succinct difference between the theology of revelation and natural theology can briefly be characterised as follows: for the theology of revelation, the beginning has to be the covenant that “God has made and still makes with us. It has at its heart the knowledge that God is inseparably attached to the ‘there and then’. More seriously, this means for Barth that the revelation of Christ can never be detached from the history of Israel. Because of this, Barth can easily conclude that the separation of Israel from the church is characteristic of natural theology.¹⁰⁰ In revelation theology, we only know God because He wills himself to be known. In the latter theology, we see a reverse of the principle of the knowledge of God. For natural theology, the knowledge of God is always possible for the human being and therefore readily accessible regardless of whether this ability (to know God) is innate or learned.

Busch reminds us that the rejection of natural theology, which is evident in the Barmen Declaration, is not supposed to lose sight of the fact that God is not only revealed exclusively in the Easter event. Therefore, he refers to Barth’s comment immediately after the Confessing Church accepted this document: “We are not denying the statement that God holds the whole world in His hands, including all the individuals, events and powers, and that he reveals Himself in them”.¹⁰¹ Although Barth concedes to this revelation, he nonetheless remains careful not to be misunderstood on this point: “We do not recognise God in these individuals, events, and powers in such a way that we can point to them and say, here is God, so that this knowing could become knowledge next to the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ – as an example, the knowledge of the ‘German hour’! We have no certain knowledge of that ...”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ K Scholder, 1989: 92.

¹⁰⁰ E Busch, 2004: 69.

¹⁰¹ E Busch, 2004: 67.

¹⁰² Karl Barth cited in: E Busch, 2004: 68.

It is ironic that the fiercest resistance against the Barmen Declaration came not from the “German Christians” at whom this document was primarily directed, but from some of the most prominent Lutheran theologians in Germany at the time. Scholder maintains that this resistance was bolstered by two factors. Firstly, it was based on a historical concept of confession which drew above all on the 19th century Lutheran renewal movement and regarded the Lutheran confessional writings as the church’s foundation documents.¹⁰³ Secondly, the theology of the Declaration concerned three issues: natural theology, the issue of the orders of creation, and the ethos of Christian action.¹⁰⁴

Having pointed this out, it is understandable that the Reformed ideas represented by Barth were unacceptable. The Lutheran understanding of confessional writings led to the conclusion that the document which was discussed at the Barmen synod be called a “declaration” to make it clear that it was not a confession in the Lutheran understanding, but rather a declaration concerning current issues in Germany.

During Barth’s direct involvement with the church struggle in Germany, he insisted on the principle of the Word of God as the exclusive binding factor. This is evident not only in his rejection of the theology of the ‘German Christians’, but also in his criticism of those within the Confessing Church who rejected the ‘German Christians’. It was his activities in the church struggle as well as his insistence on the primacy of the Word of God that had great implications for his comprehension of the two-kingdom doctrine. In order to understand why Barth thought it necessary to deal with this doctrine and later on rejected it, brief mention will be made to the contribution the Barmen Declaration made to the deliberations concerning Reformed confessions.

The Barmen Declaration addressed a fundamental deficit in Reformed confessions that had been glossed over until then. In explaining this, Cochrane refers

¹⁰³ K Scholder, 1989: 89

¹⁰⁴ K Scholder, 1989: 89

to the following propositions in the first thesis¹⁰⁵: The Word of God is Jesus Christ; the Word of God is attested in Holy Scripture; the Word of God is one Word; and the Word of God is the only revelation of God, or the only revelation which the church could acknowledge as a source of its proclamation.¹⁰⁶ From the following presuppositions it can already be concluded that it was necessary to deal with the doctrine in question, for the presuppositions deny the independence of one entity from the other.

The deficit in Reformed confessions was that in teaching that Christ is the Word of God, it was contending to understand by this that Christ was the eternal Son of God. A comparison between the Reformed confessions and the Barmen Declaration reveals that none of the Reformed confessions taught that the Word of God was attested in Holy Scripture. Cochrane maintains that this was the case since they usually explained that God committed His Word to writing. In essence, the reformers dealt with all three forms of the Word of God – revealed, written and preached – but they did not concern themselves with the problem of their unity.¹⁰⁷

The first thesis to which reference was made above, registers the point that this confession affirms Christ as the only Lord that the church has to hear and obey. The insistence of this article on Jesus Christ as the only one who has to be obeyed corresponds with Holy Scripture, which is the only means that reveals this Christ. For this reason, writes Jüngel, “Whoever on the one hand claims to be able to recognise who Jesus Christ himself is, while ignoring Holy Scripture or, while in an unholy alliance with some other authority, whoever does this betrays Him and His Church”.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Article 1. The inviolable foundation of the German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the confessions of the Reformation. The full powers that the church needs for its mission are hereby determined and limited. Cited in: A Cochrane, 1976: 248.

¹⁰⁶ A Cochrane, 1976: 189.

¹⁰⁷ A Cochrane, 1976: 189.

¹⁰⁸ E Jüngel, 1992: 21.

A number of errors in interpretation occurred because the “German Christians” thought that the revelation was also possible by looking at other issues. The following interpretation by this sect that “Christ, as God the helper and saviour, has through Hitler, become mighty among us ... Hitler (National Socialism) is now the way of the Spirit and will of God for the Church of Christ among the German nation”,¹⁰⁹ was arrived at because of this sect’s unfaithfulness to the Holy Scripture.

The first article of the Barmen Declaration is a statement that clarifies the purpose of this confession. Jüngel says the confession speaks for itself and affirms that it was formulated in these words because “the theological presupposition” of the German Lutheran church of the time “was constantly and fundamentally contradicted and rendered invalid”.¹¹⁰

The formation of the article in question was not merely a result of a chance discovery by some theologians. Barth writes that the position *of the church and theology* in the spring of 1933 in Germany was not one in which a fortune could be made with small theological discoveries. The first article was simply a public statement of the miracle that had against all expectations once again happened to the church: the church saw itself pulled back and guarded by the Word of God in contemporaneous self-attestation.¹¹¹ It had no other option but to confess this Word of God alone.

This article also needs to be seen as a thesis that transcends the Confessing Church and therefore its opponents. Barth makes the fundamental point that “in our attempt to comprehend the origin of Barmen, we are impelled to look beyond the Confessing Church as well as its opponents”. He proceed to argue that “the Confessing Church was simply a witness of a situation in which simultaneously there occurred a remarkable revelation, as there had not been for a long time, of the beast of the abyss, and a fresh confirmation of the one old revelation of God in Jesus Christ”.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ E Jüngel, 1992: 22.

¹¹⁰ E Jüngel, 1992: 9.

¹¹¹ K Barth, 1957a: 176. Emphasis added.

¹¹² K Barth, 1957a: 177.

In dealing with this article, one cannot ignore the very conspicuous hermeneutics. The Barmen Theological Declaration points to the fact that a confession of faith is to acknowledge the unity between Jesus Christ and the Holy Scripture. Cochrane argues that the Declaration does this particularly by explicitly introducing a text of scripture before each article.¹¹³ The Bible verses indicated are imperative rather than decorative. Jüngel argues that the Bible texts have a pragmatic function beyond their semantic meaning: “they affect those concerned and qualify their situation so that as a result it becomes possible and necessary to speak the truth”.¹¹⁴ This was important because it needed to be understood first that the evangelical truth that was being confessed was precipitated by the truth in the form of Holy Scripture.

When Barth deals with the serious nature of the texts selected to give theological content to this confession, he cautions that this ought to be seen as something that characterises the confession. In arguing that the statement made by Christ about Himself, especially in John 10 and 14, that He is the way, the truth and the life; that He Himself is the door, ought to be understood not as the end of the Barmen Declaration but merely as the point that initiates this confession.¹¹⁵ The church therefore exists simply because it hears this claim, which is a claim by Christ.

It is in hearing this promise that the church comes to an understanding that it is not reliant on its own authority. The church lives on the basis of the necessity in which Jesus Christ Himself has said that no human being comes to the Father but through Him and that any by-passing of Him means theft and robbery, that the church makes its exclusive claim, negating every other way or truth or life or door apart from Him. In Jüngel’s opinion, all articles of this confession require that they be seen as gathering around the One who is saying “I” and as focusing therefore on Jesus Christ.¹¹⁶

The Barmen Declaration understands that, as a confession, it has to explicate the insight into the revelation attested by scripture. As a confession it relates by means

¹¹³ A Cochrane, 1976: 185.

¹¹⁴ E Jüngel, 1992: 13.

¹¹⁵ K Barth, 1957a: 177.

¹¹⁶ E Jüngel, 1992: 14.

of God's written word to Jesus Christ as God's Word become flesh. Rohls maintains that these points delineate an approach that not only takes its methodological starting point from ecclesiastical doctrine, but also takes its starting point in terms of content from the revelation of Christ alone.¹¹⁷

2.5.2 The Church as the primary community of the Barmen Theological Declaration

The church has always played a pivotal role in Barth's theology. This is no less the case with the Barmen Declaration. In addition, it has to be said that the ecclesiology of this confession is more complex than for example the ecclesiology of the Reformed confession that succeeds it. This complexity does however not overshadow the importance of this confession. Cochrane has mentioned the following important aspects which are conspicuous in the ecclesiology of the Barmen Declaration. He notes that the Declaration marked an advance to a confession by the church, and not by an individual theologian or group.

To substantiate this claim he refers to Karl Barth's explanation to the Barmen synod. In his explanation, Barth maintained that he "could not accept responsibility for presenting a confession; that he did not know whether the situation was ripe for a confession; that a confession could only be the act of the church; and that therefore the explanation he was presenting to the delegates was in the nature of a question that they have to answer as the representatives of their congregations".¹¹⁸

This explanation is reminiscent of Barth's response to the World Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches of 1925. He had raised his dismay with regard to a universal confession as well as his attempt to point out the fact that the act of a confession can only be the act of the church.¹¹⁹ The second fundamental aspect concerning the ecclesiology of this confession is that the synod declared that congregations, which have been united in the one Evangelical Church, are called upon to recognise the Lordship of Christ anew, in spite of their Lutheran, Reformed or

¹¹⁷ J Rohls, 1998: 297.

¹¹⁸ K Barth cited in A Cochrane, 1976: 133.

¹¹⁹ K Barth, *Theology and Church*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1962: 112ff.

United origins and responsibilities. By maintaining the majesty of the One Lord of the One Church, and rejecting the view that special denominational interests could take precedence over the need for common, evangelical confession, it was in fact a cry for a confession by the whole church.¹²⁰

The Barmen Theological Declaration belongs chiefly to the realm of the church. It looks upon the Christian church as the community of brethren¹²¹ gathered by Jesus Christ as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. Cochrane has rightly pointed out that the six theses (or articles) of the Declaration have to do with the basis, nature, form and task of the church.¹²² The third article, which concerns the nature of the church, is construed as the heart of this confession and simultaneously the axis around which the other theses revolves.¹²³ It is however imperative to note that this very important article is preceded by the two Christological articles that have to do with the source of the Church in the Word of God of revelation in Christ.

Because the church has its origin and existence exclusively in the revelation, authority, comfort and guidance of the Word of God, the church vehemently rejects that it could and should be based upon, or appeal to, a divine revelation in nature and history accessible to humanity. This emphasis should not confuse the church into thinking that it is removed from its concrete context. When the Declaration speaks of the church as “the congregation of the brethren [and sisters] in which Jesus Christ acts

¹²⁰ A Cochrane, 1976: 134.

¹²¹ As a confession of its time, the authors of this Declaration have stuck to the sexist language of the church. For the sake of consistency, it shall be endeavoured to render the words in the form that they appear in the text, but they will from time to time be expanded to include the female sex.

¹²² A Cochrane, 1976: 280.

¹²³ The third article reads as follows: ‘Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grow into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together.’ (Eph. 4: 15-16). **The Christian church is the community of Brethren in which, in Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.** We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over 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. E Jüngel, 1992: xxv-xxvi.

presently as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit”, it thinks of the church not as an obscure entity, but as a tangible congregation.

Cochrane therefore holds that the discrimination between an invisible and a visible church is alien to the Declaration because the church becomes visible in the event of brethren [and sisters] gathering.¹²⁴ The Declaration understands the form of the church as the visibly and temporally structured reality of the congregation which is called, assembled, upheld, comforted and ruled by Christ. It understands that its form is determined by the fact that its outward order as well as its inward life stands under the promise and command of Jesus Christ.¹²⁵

It is Scholder’s view that this thesis for the first time anchors the mission and essence of the Evangelical Church Christologically. It is this thesis, he continues, which gave German Protestantism what had been missing since the reformation, namely an evangelical definition of the church.¹²⁶ Ahlers on his part has argued that the *Confessio Augustana* does not contain an evangelical definition of the church (in contrast to the Barmen Declaration); according to him, it fails to do so because it dismisses the Reformers’ christologically grounded ecclesiology.¹²⁷ By maintaining this, Ahlers is clearly in line with Cochrane who argued that the Declaration presented a doctrine of the church that clarified and supplemented the ecclesiology of the Reformed confessions on certain crucial points displayed in Germany in 1934. He expatiates this claim by referring to the full title of this declaration which, according to him, is fundamental to a better comprehension of a church that is grounded christologically.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ A Cochrane, 1976: 282.

¹²⁵ Cf. The declaration concerning the right understanding of the Reformation confessions of faith in the German Evangelical Church of the present by the Free Reformed Synod in Barmen-Gemarke, January 3-4, 1934. In: A Cochrane, 1976: 230-234.

¹²⁶ K Scholder cited in R Ahlers, “The “Community of Brethren” The Contemporary significance of the third thesis of the Barmen Declaration’ in: *Calvin Theological Journal*. Vol 20 (April-November 1985). 7-33.

¹²⁷ R Ahlers, “The “Community of Brethren”, 7.

¹²⁸ The full title reads: “Declaration concerning the right understanding of the Reformation confessions of faith in the German Evangelical Church of the present by the Free Reformed Synod in Barmen-Gemarke, January 3-4, 1934” cited in: A Cochrane, 1976: 280.

In agreement with both Ahlers and Cochrane it needs to be emphasised that the third article is important in that it displays the issue of how the centrality of the Christian gospel can be expressed ecclesiology and morally in terms of our contemporary social and cultural presuppositions. However, while such an understanding of a Christian confession should be commended, it is nonetheless imperative to observe that the Barmen Declaration did not set out to present a complete ecclesiology. What is undeniable is that the Declaration does not understand the church as a religious alliance that could organise itself capriciously.

According to this confession the sovereignty and liberty of the church and state rejected the absolute state as well as the state church, or the church assuming the mode of the church. The church was to remain faithful to its specific task that the state could not fulfil, namely the proclamation of the gospel of Christ to the world. The responsibility rested with the offices that characterise the church's external order, defined as ministries.

In Nazi Germany, these were grounded in and fulfilled by Christ's commission to the individual church communities and not an ecclesiastical office of the Führer.¹²⁹ A confession (as the Barmen Declaration tried to illustrate) is a fighting action of the church, clearly directed against certain concrete errors and practices that threaten the unity of the church.

Another thesis that also deals with the church, perhaps not with the same vigour as the third article, is the fifth thesis.¹³⁰ This thesis begs the conclusion that the Barmen

¹²⁹ J Rohls, 1998: 300.

¹³⁰ The fifth thesis of this confession reads as follows: 'Fear God, honour the King! (I Pet. 2:17). **Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The church acknowledges with gratitude and reverences toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's Kingdom, God's commandment and justice and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.** We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfil the vocation of Church as well. We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity, which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State. Cf. E Jüngel, 1992: xxvii-xxviii.

Declaration's comprehension of the church is also informed by how it understood the two-kingdom doctrine. Busch has argued that Barth's attack of the two-kingdom doctrine was essentially an attack aimed at the roots of the church's political injustice.¹³¹ Jüngel has joined this claim by maintaining that the fifth thesis represents the Declaration's version of the Reformation's two-kingdom doctrine. He agrees that this reveals Barth as a resolute opponent of Luther's two-kingdom doctrine.¹³²

In order to understand why such an opposition was justified by Barth and therefore by the Barmen Declaration, it has to be noted that the church, apart from the fact that Christ determines its existence, stood in the tradition of Israel. Therefore, the church needed to assess its relation with Israel. For Barth the only blueprints required for this process are located within the biblical witness. Busch maintains that this approach to "scriptural proof" is essentially to admit that the church stands with Israel in an "indissoluble solidarity".¹³³

It was imperative that Barth made this proclamation given the theological state in which the church found itself and its attempts to hide behind the façade of the two-kingdom doctrine. Busch refers to Barth's retort that the church could only be the church "in its unity with Israel". He reports that in Barth's thinking of the relationship of the church to Israel, the church indeed "stands and falls". It is the very One who stands at the centre of the church's faith who binds it to Israel. Those who believe in Jesus "cannot fail to accept the Jews. They must accept them as the ancestors and relatives of Jesus. Otherwise, they cannot accept Jesus the Jew. Otherwise, along with the Jews they reject Jesus himself".¹³⁴ From what has been alluded to, it cannot be denied that the church has a particular responsibility to witness Jesus Christ to the world.

¹³¹ E Busch, 'Indissoluble Unity: Barth's Position on the Jews during the Hitler Era' in G Hunsinger (ed.), *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004: 53.

¹³² E Jüngel, 1992: 37.

¹³³ E Busch, 'Indissoluble Unity' in G Hunsinger (ed.), 2004: 61.

¹³⁴ Cf. E Busch, 'Indissoluble Unity' in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 2004: 61.

2.5.3 The essence of public witness to Jesus Christ in the Barmen Theological Declaration

The birth of the Barmen Theological Declaration falls within a period that Barth believed that the Christian church had to acknowledge its existence as one that was firmly grounded in Jesus Christ. Such a church would point to Jesus Christ as the only Lamb that took the sins of the world away. During the period between 1928-1938, Barth discovered that the transformation that had taken place in his theology had led him to the discovery that Christian doctrine, if it was to merit its name and build up the Christian church in the world as it had to and needed to do, had to be exclusively and conclusively the doctrine of Jesus Christ – of Jesus Christ as the living Word of God spoken to humanity.¹³⁵ The third thesis of the Barmen Declaration maintained that the nature of the church belonged essentially to its task which was its witness to the world.

This same idea is expounded in the sixth thesis, which deals with the church's commission upon which its freedom is anchored. This thesis contains the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead, and thus in the ministry of his Word through sermon and sacrament. The church has a responsibility of witnessing God's unmerited grace to the entire human race. Cochrane reminds us of a remark made by Barth concerning this task. He remarked at the height of World War II that "what after all do we know about Adolf Hitler except that Jesus Christ died for him, and that the book of life is not yet closed for him".¹³⁶

The German church found itself at a crisis point with regard to its doctrine and order, and consequently the church was threatened with becoming involved in a new heresy. Concerning the order of the church to which the Barmen Declaration attempted to retain its credibility, Rohls maintains that in line with the Reformed tradition, the order of the church is defined in this way (according to the Declaration) as no longer something external to the church itself which could change according the

¹³⁵ K Barth, *Karl Barth: How I changed my mind*. Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1966c: 43.

¹³⁶ K Barth cited in A Cochrane, 1976: 283.

dominant worldview or political persuasion. Instead, the church's order testifies (to the world) that the church is Christ's property and stands under His rule. The exclusivity of Christ's rule does not allow for the authorisation of any Führer to rule within the visible church.¹³⁷

This heresy (which had invaded the theology of the 'German Christians') was a concoction of Christianity and Nazism. Because the German Evangelical Church conceded to the context in which the mentioned heresy was revealing itself, it could not guarantee that it would not come under the domination of the so-called 'German Christians'. In addition to this dilemma, the Evangelical Church, being composed of representatives of the other theological schools and tendencies such as Liberal, Pietistic and Confessional, among others, affirmed this heresy and strangely opted to espouse a rather neutral and tolerant attitude towards it.¹³⁸

It was the neutral tendency displayed by members of the Confessing Church that impelled Barth to register his emphatic "No" stronger than he had done until 1934. For Barth the claims of National Socialism were an important impulse for the Barmen Declaration which witnessed the truth that the revelation of Christ was sufficient for the existence of the church in the world. Barth was quick to point out that as much as the Barmen Declaration was a theological decision, a decision of church policy, it was also *ipso facto* a political decision. He maintained that the church-theological conflict contained in itself the political conflict. It was no fortuitous happening that it revealed itself more and more as a political conflict.¹³⁹

In order to fully comprehend the essence of the Barmen Declaration as a confession of the church, first to the church itself and then also to the world in which the church existed, it is fundamental that brief notes be made with regard to the numerous drafts of this confession. The final draft of the Barmen Theological Declaration was revised several times.

¹³⁷ J Rohls, 1998: 302.

¹³⁸ K Barth, 1966c: 46.

¹³⁹ K Barth, 1966c: 47.

The January 1934 text of Barmen is a helpful indicator of what the church wanted to testify to the world. It has already been pointed out that Barth believed that a confession had to say something to the state as well. Hence he maintained that “we would be considered dumb dogs if we were to set up a Reformed confession without saying anything about the ‘total’ state”.¹⁴⁰

Article five of the Barmen Declaration does not speak of the state in the abstract, but formulates the state’s own function as opposed to that of the church. Jüngel reminds us that in relation to the background of the ‘January text’, implicit within this thesis concerning the state was the wider field of the “political, philosophical, and cultural projects of humankind”, i.e. everything which today is understood by the term ‘society’.¹⁴¹ The sixth thesis also deserves mention here, because this is the thesis that justifies the church’s task to witness Christ not only to its constituencies, but to the world as well.¹⁴²

Both Jüngel and Cochrane¹⁴³ have noted the positive affirmation of the state in the Barmen Declaration. This positive attitude towards the state is especially contained in the fifth thesis. To substantiate the point that the Declaration affirms the state, Jüngel wrote a book which he entitled *Christ, Justice and Peace* with the subtitle *Towards a theology of the State*.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ K Barth cited in E Jüngel, 1992: 38.

¹⁴¹ E Jüngel, 1992: 40-41.

¹⁴² The sixth thesis of the Barmen Declaration is phrased as follows: ‘See, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ (Matt. 28: 20). ‘God’s Word is not fettered.’ (II Tim. 2: 9). **The Church’s commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ’s stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver to all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.** We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes and plans. The confessional synod of the Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgement of these and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Churches. It calls upon all who can stand in solidarity with its Declaration to be mindful of these theological findings in all their decisions concerning Church and State. It appeals to all concerned to return to unity in faith, hope and love. Cf. E Jüngel, 1992: xxviii-xxix.

¹⁴³ The work by Jüngel indicated here is self-evident, while Cochrane’s notes on the theology of the Barmen Declaration remain instructive for our interactions with church and state in this current context. Cf. E Jüngel, 1992 and A. Cochrane, 1976: 284.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. E Jüngel, 1992.

Cochrane reminds us that Barth was never apolitical or a social conservative. He remained a socialist, but even in the time of Hitler affirmed the state because he believed that the state existed by God's appointment. Barth came to this conclusion because of his understanding of the German word "*Anordnung*" which is to be interpreted as ordination instead of *ordo*.¹⁴⁵ Although this illustrates the different roles of church and state, it nonetheless denies a strict separation between these entities.¹⁴⁶

The theses of this confession by no means create the impression that the Barmen Declaration did not exhaust the debate on confessional theology. This is highlighted by the fact that Barth's later work continued the claims made by this confession.

It has already been argued that this confession concedes to the existence of the state. Gorringer is once again called to mind here with his persistent argument that Barth's theology remains fundamentally opposed to hegemony.¹⁴⁷ The hegemony that Barth opposed is an absolutist and oppressive one. When Barth wrote his "*Rechtfertigung und Recht*" (Justification and Justice) in 1938, he attempted to expound a satisfactory interpretation between church and state in light of his Christocentric theological outlook. Around 1930 Barth who was then very much influenced by his study of Anselm, deserted the dialectical method of theology which had dominated his work since the second edition of *Romans*.

¹⁴⁵ A Cochrane, 1976: 284.

¹⁴⁶ The significance and relevance of this thesis was raised in 1963 when Barth had a conversation with the *Kirchlichen Bruderschaft* in Württemberg. Cf. K Barth, 'Die These 5 der Barmer Erklärung und das Problem des gerechten Krieges' in: K Barth, *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung*, Zürich: Theologischer-Verlag, 1984b: 185-212. One of the questions put to Barth was the question concerning the interpretation of the fifth thesis of Barmen. His response was that this thesis is based on the whole Scripture (186), that it acknowledges the "*Anordnung*" and not the "*Ordnung*" of the state. "*Anordnung*" here suggests that God wills that there be a state and therefore the church has to subject itself to this will. Because the state is not an "*Ordnung*" by God, the state is not immune and above criticism (186-187). Barth conceded that the function of the state was to enforce law and order through force. His ultimate answer to the question concerning the relevance of this thesis was that the text was in principle still good (191). Subsequent to this response an objection was registered with regard to the force which the state was permitted to use to achieve the ends of law. Admitting that force could also be abused, Barth maintained that the use of force should only be applied in cases of emergency. In this way he was suggesting that the message that this thesis wanted to convey concerning the use of force by the state had to be reviewed to include this idea (196).

¹⁴⁷ Cf. T Gorringer, 1999: 1f.

Thus instead of relativising all human experience in the face of the sovereignty of God and divine judgment, Barth began to employ a much more positive theological method that understood theology as faith seeking rational understanding.¹⁴⁸ McCormack agrees with Wanamaker about Barth's Christocentric theological outlook, but opposes him with regard to his claim that Barth abandoned the dialectical method. The reason for this is simple. For McCormack, Barth never abandoned the dialectical method; instead this just matured as he encountered other influences, hence his talk about Barth's critically realistic dialectical theology.¹⁴⁹

Following Barth's mature conception of his theology, he emphasised that the Bible as the written word of God was the major source for the understanding the relation between God and the world, between Christ on the one hand and creation and redemption on the other. In other words, the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humanity was replaced by an emphasis on the relationship through God's word. Wanamaker is correct when he asserts that this new methodological insight laid the foundation for his *Church Dogmatics* (the first volume that appeared in 1932) as well as the new attempt of interpreting Romans 13:1-7 and the whole question of the connection between church and state.¹⁵⁰

There can be no doubt that "church and state" informed Barth's works subsequent to the Barmen Declaration, among them his definitive interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 which appears in his essay *community, state and church*.¹⁵¹ With the Romans passage indicated, Barth undertook to articulate a fully biblical understanding of the church-state question for the sake of the church and its struggle against Hitler and Nazism. Barth also turned to John 19:2 and pointed to the fact that Jesus confirms Pilate's claim to have power over Him.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. C Wanamaker, 'Romans 13: A hermeneutic for Church and State' in C Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On reading Karl Barth in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988: 97.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. B McCormack, 1997.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. C. Wanamaker, 'Romans 13: A hermeneutic for Church and State' in C Villa-Vicencio (ed.), 1988: 98.

¹⁵¹ Cf. K Barth. *Community, State and Church*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960.

Barth maintains that when Christ was referring to this, he meant that such power was not accidental or presumptuous, but that it was a power given to Pilate from above. According to Barth, this power was neither an end in itself, nor an evil power. He arrives at this conclusion having considered 1 Timothy 2:1-7 as well as Romans 13:1-7. With the latter, he explicates the “*essence of the state*” as a necessary step in determining the relation of church and state. The incidents just mentioned enable us to comprehend what Hood describes as the Christological basis for Barth’s view of the state.¹⁵² In order for Barth to achieve this, he does what he should have done in his commentaries on Romans: he for the first time makes use of historical criticism and notes that the Greek term *exousias* (powers and authorities) can also refer to angelic powers.

Because they are angelic powers, Barth concedes that they can also become perverted. He goes further and discovers that the fate of these perverted powers is also subordinate to Christ and through him to God. It was for this reason that they were created in the first place.¹⁵³ Instead of trying to demythologise this biblical myth concerning the heavenly world or to expound it in symbolic terms, Barth treats it as a realistic presentation of reality and then relates it to Romans 13:1-7. According to Wanamaker, because for Barth, the God depicted in Romans 13 cannot be understood apart from the person and work of Christ; any interpretation that focuses on God under the general rubrics of “creator and ruler” must be rejected.¹⁵⁴ Having established that the state, like the church, exists in the Christological framework, Barth’s next step was to attempt and explain the specific connection between the two. Thus, he discovers the key in the exhortation to Christians found in 1 Timothy 2:1-7. According to his interpretation, a reciprocal relationship exists between the church and the state.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Cf. R E Hood, ‘Karl Barth’s Christological basis for the state and political praxis’ in: *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Vol. 33, pp. 223-238.

¹⁵³ Cf. K Barth, 1960: 116.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. C Wanamaker, ‘Romans 13: A hermeneutic for Church and State’. In: C Villa-Vicencio (ed.), 1988: 99.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. K Barth, 1960: 130.

It is inevitable that for Barth 1 Timothy 2: 1-7 constitutes the primary exhortation to the church concerning its relation to the state and provides the basis for understanding the command of Romans 13:1-7 to “be in subordination to the ruling authorities”. Because of the reciprocity, this subjection can never be absolute and unquestionable, for it must always be held in tension with the church’s obligation to preach justice.

In essence, the subjection required of Christians cannot mean that they must accept and take upon themselves responsibility for the intentions and undertakings of the state, which directly or indirectly is aimed against the freedom of preaching, and the pastoral involvement of the church. Barth goes as far as to suggest that “not to resist the state when it has become perverted” is to become enemies of this state by not calling it back to its true character and function, which is to create and administer justice.¹⁵⁶

The Barmen Declaration makes it clear that the message of the church relates exclusively to God’s free grace which is present in Jesus Christ, through which we are justified and sanctified. Justification and sanctification, which are synonyms for gospel and law, are both regarded as the one grace of Jesus Christ. It makes the point that the church community is a community of ministry and witness. The church’s witness here is to be understood as witness to all people and therefore witness to the world. It is a type of witness that is not oblivious to the church’s political responsibilities. The church is called to remind the state of its function which is ordained by God and has to be executed with diligence and in acknowledgment of God having conferred this function on it.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. K Barth, 1960: 149.

2.5.4 The theology of the Barmen Declaration as grounded in its context

The concept “context” – a phenomenon that is considered imperative in confessional theology – has to do with the socio-economic and political realities.¹⁵⁷ Confessional theology is not a mere branch of contextual theology since confessional theology insists radically on its characteristics and does not allow any other characteristic but the Word of God to be its point of departure in theological reflection.

Concerning the subject of context, Metzger is correct when he says the Barmen Declaration and Barth’s essay “Church and State” serve as the theological backdrop for Barth’s critique of the political problems of his day.¹⁵⁸ It should be clear that the political situation from which the Declaration emanated is imperative for a

¹⁵⁷ In his doctoral dissertation written during the South African state of emergency, Horn engages the distinction between theology and politics and how Barth related with them during his theological enterprise in his own context. Written from an Apostolic Faith Mission background, Horn seems fascinated by a maxim made popular by Barth, *Theologie treiben, als wäre nichts geschehen*, which is loosely translated “doing theology as if nothing had happened”. This maxim seems to have left an indelible impression on Horn. In the first instance he understands this maxim to be a guideline of insisting on the Word of God as one’s point of departure in theology in contrast to the “German Christians” who had found an ally in politicised theology. Horn rightly understands this maxim by Barth to have been temporal in that it challenged faithful Christians not to develop political ideals in combating the current political terror, but to radically insist on God in challenging political ills. More importantly, such an approach would have been a radical one as well, especially in the context of South Africa’s state of emergency. Secondly, Horn regards this maxim as a way of giving meaning to a theology that was otherwise discouraged within the tradition of the Apostolic Faith Mission – a theology that refused to ignore the political context in which it was conducted. It was especially important for Horn to point out the fact that Marquardt had misconstrued Barth’s engagement of theology and politics, creating the impression that it was his politics that influenced his theology. Horn realised that the choice between theology and politics did not exist in Barth’s theological reflection. For Barth it was always about theology, but this theology was never ignorant of its political context. Horn’s decision to confine his research on the subject of theology and politics to a specific period had inhibited him doing justice to the extensive progress that accompanied the theology of Barth. (Cf. J N Horn, *Teologie of Politiek? ‘n Sistematies-teologiese analise van die wisselwerking tussen Teologie en Politiek by Karl Barth met besondere verwysing na die jare 1933-1946*. Doctoral Thesis. University of the Western Cape, 1987.) Theology must continue as if nothing had happened simply because it considers the premium on the Word of God, the role of the church in executing the task of the church, the public witness of Jesus Christ, the importance of the context in which this theology occurs, and the ethics which is envisaged. Having taken all these into account, it becomes clear that theology can therefore not continue ‘as if nothing had happened’, that theology at all times must have something to do with politics (cf. *Nich mehr Theologie treiben, als wäre nichts geschehen* in: B Klappert, *Versöhnung und Befreiung: Versuche, Karl Barth kontextuell zu verstehen*. Düsseldorf: Neukirchenerverlag, 1994: 204). This point is consolidated by Barth in person (cf. K Barth, ‘Theologische Existenz’ in: *Theologische Existenz Heute*. Vol. 1. München: Kaizer Verlag, 1934: 1-40).

¹⁵⁸ Cf. P L Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular through the theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003: 169.

comprehensive understanding of what is meant by a confession. Reference to the political situation is also made with to address insinuations that the Barmen Declaration was chiefly necessitated by the theological crisis which confronted the Evangelical Church in Germany.¹⁵⁹

Talks concerning politics are best understood when one appreciates the controversial nature of the concept. The church (also in its opposition to the state) does not and should not see itself as a political party. It would therefore have been frivolous on the part of the church to suggest political alternatives to the state. However, although the church must admit that it is not a political party, it does not imply that the church cannot be politically involved in the world. The existence of the church in the world makes the church political, but does not turn it into a political party. In acknowledging that the Barmen Declaration was both a political and a theological response of the church against a politicised version of theology, it has to be stated that there was a definite political reason why it was possible to limit oneself to the theological concern: the contamination of the gospel.

It is for this reason that Hunsinger claims that several articles of the Barmen Declaration, when taken together, imply a relationship between theology and politics involving unity, hierarchy and differentiation. Hunsinger prefers to call this a “Chalcedonian” approach, meaning both a horizontal and a parallel approach. With this, he means that in admitting the full divinity of Christ, his full humanity impels us not to neglect the human aspects of our calling. This Chalcedonian relationship, he argues, is at the heart of Barth’s political theology, although he concedes that it has often been neglected.¹⁶⁰ He is of the view that theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr have often noticed the hierarchy and differentiation, but not the unity. By failing to see the unity, it is understandable that Niebuhr could accuse Barth of soaring

¹⁵⁹ Scholder argues that the Barmen Declaration must be seen as something that was instigated by the theological crisis in Germany during the Nazi regime. Nonetheless, it is contended here that those theological instigations were not isolated from the politics at the time.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 82.

above political reality in “an eschatological airplane” which never came down to earth.¹⁶¹

Hunsinger is correct when he maintains that the rest of the Barmen Declaration directly and indirectly spells out the political implications of the first article.¹⁶² It takes an attentive reader of this declaration to observe that, while the second thesis implies that theology and politics must not be divided,¹⁶³ the succeeding thesis warns that theology and politics must not be fused.¹⁶⁴

A lack of attentiveness to the political implications of the Barmen Declaration was evident also from the side of the Nazi authorities. Scholder reports that in the preparatory weeks, which preceded the synod of Barmen, church authorities were not concerned about police measures that might be meted out against them.¹⁶⁵ The reason for their lack of concern was that the announcement of the convention at Barmen had been noted and accepted by the Reich Ministry of the Interior. More significantly, the perilous Prussian Gestapo was counting on a possible split in the confessing front; any police measures against this meeting would have had serious implications for their hope that it would fail eventually.

¹⁶¹ R Niebuhr cited in G Hunsinger, 2000: 82.

¹⁶² Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 80.

¹⁶³ “Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (1 Cor. 1: 30.). Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.

– We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

¹⁶⁴ See third article, ‘Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grow into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together.’ (Eph. 4: 15-16). **The Christian church is the community of Brethren in which, in Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.** We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over 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. Cf. E Jüngel, 1992: xxv-xxvi.

¹⁶⁵ K Scholder, 1989: 88.

Earlier (see Section 2.5.1) it was asserted that the fiercest attacks against the Barmen Declaration came not so much from the state as from ecclesiastical groups, particularly the Lutherans. This attack, it was argued, was fuelled by an interpretation that the context in which the churches stood might usher into the Lutheran church a crisis that has not adequately been dealt with since the Reformation. Scholder maintains that the most important resistance which came from this group was harnessed by its fear of a 'unionism', which it was believed would corrupt that which was supposed to be saved viz. its confessions. He writes, "This resistance was orientated on a historical concept of the confession which drew above all on the 19th century Lutheran renewal movement and which regarded the Lutheran confessional writings as the church's foundation documents. Any involvement with Reformed ideas which was naturally suspected in a text drafted by Karl Barth must therefore endanger the foundations of the Lutheran churches".¹⁶⁶

A vehement lobbying for Christians across all ecclesiastical traditions resulted in the synod passing the title 'Theological Declaration on the Present situation of the German Evangelical Church'. This was done with the intent of explicating that this was not a confession with the same status as the *Confession Augustana* and other classical confessions, but simply a theological comment on the current issues of Germany. According to Scholder, another concern also has to be pointed out as relevant to explaining the resistance of the church by the church, namely that the theology of this confession related to three questions: "The question of natural theology, the question of the order of creation and the ethos of Christian action".¹⁶⁷ He suspects the main suspicions were removed by the reformulation of the fifth thesis, which Barth reworked, thereby putting more emphasis on the office of the state.

Whereas in Germany the Barmen Declaration was a catalyst for debates on ecclesiastical traditions, it became a potential yardstick to determine the church's involvement in its political contexts elsewhere. The confessional nature of the

¹⁶⁶ K Scholder, 1989: 89.

¹⁶⁷ K Scholder, 1989: 89.

theology of Barmen served as a symbol of liberation for the Confessing Church in Germany. It also became a yardstick to determine when the gospel was being caricatured by those that espousing a politicised theology.¹⁶⁸ In South Africa, for example, it enabled the church and its leaders to find ways of engaging a state and its policies that were making a mockery of the Christian teachings.

As much as the context was important for the Barmen Declaration during the Nazi regime, and as much as context proved to be important in later stages when some appropriated this declaration for their own contexts, it must at all times be remembered that context remained secondary in the hierarchy of confessional theology. Contextual theology during the Nazi regime was to a certain degree brought into question by the Barmen Declaration, which understood that the context remained crucial in theological reflections. The Declaration's uneasiness with "a context" which informed theology should be seen in the same light that it rejected the so-called contextual theology of the "German Christians".

Since the church remains part of the world, this confession admits that members of the Christian community who are at the same time also members of the civil community are in need of rulers. The fifth thesis is once again called to mind here, "Fear God, honour the King!" (I Peter 2:17), which was developed further post-Barmen. In his essay "Community, State and Church", Barth draws a vital distinction between the Christian and the civil community. He defines the differences between the two as follows: Christian community refers to what is traditionally called the "church", while civil community has the notion of "state" in mind.¹⁶⁹

These differences are fundamental in the sense that they ascribed different roles to each of these communities. Barth seems content that in using the concept "community" to describe both entities, the positive relationship and connection

¹⁶⁸ See the following two important articles written by two outstanding theologians both during the apartheid regime as well as in the current democratic South African context: J W De Gruchy, "Barmen: Symbol of Contemporary Liberation?," in *Journal of Theology for South Africa* No. 47 (June 1984), 59-71 and D M Tutu, "Barmen and Apartheid," in *Journal of Theology for South Africa* No. 47 (June 1984), 73-77.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. K Barth, 1960: 149.

between them are underlined from the outset. For him, this twofold use of the concept “community” was intended to draw attention to the fact that we are concerned not primarily with institutions and offices, but with human beings gathered together in corporate bodies in the service of a common task.¹⁷⁰

This view is of particular importance because it is by thinking not primarily of institutions but of people congregated for a common task that the church is able to approach the state. The communities to which Barth is referring have different functions. Fundamentally, these communities are seen as being complementary. Barth holds that the Christian community is the commonality of the people in one place, region or country, which is called apart and gathered together as Christians due to their knowledge of belief in Jesus Christ. The meaning and purpose of this assembly (*ekklesia*) is the common life of these people in one spirit, the Holy Spirit, in obedience of the Word of God in Jesus Christ. Thus the inward expression of their life as a Christian community is one of faith, love and hope by which they all stand; their jointly acknowledged and expressed responsibility for the preaching of the name of Christ to all humanity, and the worship and thanksgiving which they offer together.

On the other hand, the civil community (state) is the commonality of all people in one place, region or country in so far as they belong together under a constitutional system of government that is equally valid for and binding on them all and which is defended and maintained by force. The meaning and purpose of this mutual association, Barth says, is the safeguarding of external, relative and provisional freedom of the individual and the external, relative peace of their community. To that extent, it is also the safeguarding of the external, relative and provisional humanity of their life, as both individuals and a community.¹⁷¹

The significance of the context in which theology is practised today impels us to ponder ways in which this may be safeguarded. There can be no doubts that Christians have become restless in finding ways of being involved in current political

¹⁷⁰ Cf. K Barth, 1960: 149.

¹⁷¹ Cf. K Barth, 1960: 150.

events. During the opening of the Barth Centre at Princeton Theological Seminary in June 1999, the theme “For the sake of the World: Karl Barth and the future of ecclesial theology” was used as a rubric to entertain the restlessness of the church.¹⁷² Among the many informative contributions, some of which have already been alluded to in this chapter, is the contribution by Clifford Green. Green acknowledges Barth’s description of the church and state as two concentric circles, of which Christ and the kingdom of God are the centre, with the church as the inner centre and the state as the outer.¹⁷³ Green appreciates that Barth made room for the Christian’s participation in political affairs, but remembers that Barth viewed such involvement as being parabolic. The church and therefore the Christian ought to provide an example to the world. Green however begs that this should not confuse the church to not be involved in the practicality of politics.

This safeguarding takes place in three essential forms:

1. Legislation: this has to settle the legal system that is binding on all.
2. Government: this has to apply the legislation.
3. The administration of justice: this has to deal with cases of doubtful or conflicting law and decide on its applicability.

Given these, there can be no doubt that in the civil community, we do not necessarily have to do with Christians, i.e. it is not impossible for this community to be made up of those who do not share allegiance in Christ. For this reason, no appeal can be made to the Word or Spirit of God in the running of its affairs. Barth put it bluntly: “[T]he civil community as such is spiritually blind and ignorant”; it has neither faith nor love nor hope.¹⁷⁴ Klappert has noted that Barth’s work on this subject in the years 1945 and 1967 took a different direction because Barth had decided that theology could not continue to be conducted as if “nothing had happened”.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² A collection of essays delivered during this assembly are contained in G Hunsinger (ed.), 2004.

¹⁷³ Cf. C Green, ‘Freedom for Humanity: Karl Barth and the Politics of the New world Order’ in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 2004: 104.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. K Barth, 1960: 150.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. ‘Nicht mehr Theologie treiben, als wäre nichts geschehen!’ in B Klappert, 1994: 204.

The Civil community can only have external, relative and provisional functions and aims. That is why it is burdened and defaced by something which the Christian community can characteristically do without – “physical force law enforcements”. Barth takes it for granted that the Christian community has paid heed to the warning that it ought to be different from the rest.

In his opinion, humanity is more in harm’s way when it stands outside of the realm of the church, for the state is merciless. By comparing the church to the state in the manner that he does here, one can easily conclude that Barth’s view of the church here is idealistic and not realistic. But when one follows through, one comes to a different insight: Barth was a staunch opponent of the organised church.¹⁷⁶ On the affirmative, Barth admits that the Christian community exists alongside the civil community in a still unredeemed world, therefore there is no single problem the state has to contend with which does not affect the church in some way or the other.

2.5.5 Ethics as a focal point of the Barmen Theological Declaration

Numerous expositors of the theology of Karl Barth have suggested that there are significant grounds to surmise that the political-economic situation in which his theology was practiced is fundamental to a better comprehension of Barth’s theology.¹⁷⁷ Some of those who were uncomfortable with such a reading of Barth have ventured to dismiss such claims and therefore have deliberately ignored Barth’s frequent caution to the significance of keeping the newspaper in sight while attending to the matters of the Holy Scripture.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 282.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. F Marquardt, ‘Socialism in the theology of Karl Barth’ in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 47-77; T Gorringer, 1999.

¹⁷⁸ Reference has already been made to theologians such as R Niebuhr, C West and E Brunner who on numerous occasions had failed to see the unity between what Barth perceived to be divine affairs and the relation that the divine had with humanity. In exposing these theologians for their inability to see this connection, Hunsinger has insisted that to see Barth’s Christology in its Chalcedonian trimmings, helps one to see the unity between the divine and the humane. Therefore, because the humanity of Christ is thoroughly emphasised, the issues that affect humanity, including politics, can under no circumstances be ignored. Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 131-147.

It has been argued that Hunsinger understood this declaration to be primarily political and that the first article of the Barmen Declaration spells out its political implications. It is surmised here that the Barmen Declaration is pregnant with ethics. The ethical implications of this declaration are also spelled out in the very first article. When this article states that Jesus Christ is the only Word that has to be heard and obeyed, it clearly spells out what should and what should not be done. This falls perfectly into Barth's criteria for ethical action which is summarised in the question, "What ought we to do?"¹⁷⁹

The Barmen Declaration can be construed as a summary of Barth's theology, in which ethical considerations have always been important. The ethical action is best seen in the negations that accompany each of the affirmations of the six theses. Barth's famous maxim "reading the Bible while taking cognisance of the newspaper" illustrates that our political realities ought to be informed by our reading of the Bible. The insistence on the primacy of the Word of God in his theology is a means of examining the church's role in the world.

Ethics is understood as a focal point in the Barmen Declaration primarily because it flows obviously from its theology. This is something which at some stages was not adequately understood by the Confessing Church, hence the important question with regard to this church's position on the Jews. A distinction between the Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church ought to be made when dealing with the ethical questions of the Declaration. It is particularly important that dealing with the ethical situation that necessitated Barth's theological position on the question of the *Jüdefrage* (the question of the Jews in Germany) and the consequent tension that ensued between him and the Confessing Church.

The positions of Barth, as chief author of the Barmen Theological Declaration, and the Confessing Church were for a long time seen as being controversial. With reference to Barth, it must be pointed out that he was blamed for not having said and done enough to alleviate the plight of the Jews under the Hitler regime. Busch refers

¹⁷⁹ Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957b: 654ff.

to a critique by Scholder levelled against Barth in which Scholder explains Barth's theology in light of the political situation in Germany.

He maintains that in 1933, Barth with his strong emphasis on the first commandment and the exclusive and binding force of God's Word made a decision that, though well-intentioned, should have been expressed with less tolerance. Scholder charged that the weakness of this lay in the fact that, in focusing upon the preservation of pure doctrine on the pulpits of the church, it did not challenge the Nazi state itself. Thus it had the disadvantage of inevitably glossing over the significance of the so-called Jewish question. Scholder blames Barth for the Confessing Church's hindsight on the plight of the Jews, simply because he was a chief contributor to a decision that called into disrepute the theological justification of the discrimination against the Jews.¹⁸⁰

Busch questions the sincerity of those who hesitate to agree that Barth was on the contrary not unaware of the plight of the Jews. Admitting that Barth personally thought that he had not done enough in this respect, Busch asserts that the allegation which implies that Barth had remained lethargic towards the Jews is a frivolous one. It is frivolous since it was Barth and not Gogarten, Hirsch or Althaus who finally articulated a confession of repentance towards the Jews; a confession which is also interpreted as his admission of failure in this regard.¹⁸¹ It is Busch's view that during the time of Barth's direct involvement in the German church struggle, he fought for the principle of the exclusive binding character of the Word of God.¹⁸² He however cautions us to comprehend the motive behind this. Initially it ought to be understood that what was central to Barth was not his criticism of the "German Christians" – who

¹⁸⁰ E Busch, 'Indissoluble Unity: Barth's Position on the Jews during the Hitler Era' in: G. Hunsinger (ed.), 2004: 54.

¹⁸¹ E Busch, 'Indissoluble Unity' in G Hunsinger (ed.), 2004: 54-55.

¹⁸² Barth did not remain indifferent to the Jewish issue. Anti-Semitism (of which Barth certainly was not guilty of) and anti-Judaism are two distinct phenomena; the latter has nothing to do with racism, but is simply driven by the hope of converting Jews to Christianity. While Barth was an outspoken critic of anti-Semitism, Barth is criticised for not being helpful with the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Kathrine Sonderegger is one who criticised Barth harshly along this line (cf. K Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew: Karl Barth's "doctrine of Israel"*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.)

admittedly were unacceptable to him – but of the inner church opposition against the ‘German Christians’.

It must then be stated that as much as the Barmen Declaration was opposed to the ‘German Christians’, it was opposed to the Confessing Church which became the revised version of the Pastor’s Emergency League. It was to this group that the likes of Karl Heim, Hanns Lilje, Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer belonged.¹⁸³ The Barmen Declaration opposed this group, for it called for the complete freedom of the church “from all political influence” and in this sense criticised the ‘German Christians’. It cannot be emphasised enough that this confession was a confession not of a triumphant church, but of a repentant church.

In reaction to this, Barth maintained in 1933 that the Confessing Church was saying secretly the same thing that the “German Christians” were saying openly.¹⁸⁴ Busch maintains that while on the one hand the Confessing Church called for the complete freedom of the church “from all political influence” and in this sense criticised the ‘German Christians’, it on the other hand articulated a “joyful Yes to the new state”, and wanted to bind the church to an “indissoluble service to the German *volk*”.¹⁸⁵ By doing this, this group was advocating an analysis which insinuated that the church and the state were two co-existing entities that mutually recognised each other without intervening in the other’s affairs.

Busch charges this group with having misunderstood what confessing meant. He believes this group understood by confession not God’s mercy and righteousness over destructive powers, but that the fundamental point was to protect the church and its confessional stance against interventions from outside.¹⁸⁶ It was this view that allowed this group to declare the unshakable loyalty of the church to the authoritarian nationalistic state. This was the very issue which forced Barth to register his disdain

¹⁸³ E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration: Its theology, background and reception’ in A J G van der Borght *et al.* (eds.), 2002: 67.

¹⁸⁴ E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration’, 69.

¹⁸⁵ E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration’, 67.

¹⁸⁶ E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration’, 67.

with the conduct displayed by this group. In opposing this conduct, Barth wrote in 1933 that “the assumption that one could be in agreement with the preamble of the “German Christians”(in their affirmation of the Nazi state), and then later, have a pure church in opposition to them ... will prove to be one of the most deceptive illusions of an era replete with such illusions. Let us leave out the preamble, completely and sincerely, and then we will speak further about that which follows”.¹⁸⁷

The difference between the “German Christians” and the Confessing Church is to be located in the theology of the latter. While it was clear that in the case of the former a concoction of Christendom and Nazi ideology dictated the politicised theology of the “German Christians”, in the latter group one is confronted with a type of two-sector doctrine which was predominant in this church’s opposition to the “German Christians”. This two-sector doctrine can briefly be explained as follows: Politically one could be a brown-shirt or German nationalist, and therefore *ipso facto* be supportive of the state’s treatment of the Jews as long as it proceeded “lawfully”. Ecclesiastically, one wanted to preserve the confessional stance as inviolable, and therefore not separate oneself from the Baptised Jews, even though one saw them as a foreign race. Barth thought that it was entirely pointless to leave the church because of the latter, as Bonhoeffer once recommended, in order to build a free church on the foundation of such a two-sector doctrine.¹⁸⁸

It is this interpretation which forced Barth to respond to Bonhoeffer when he maintained that: “the true church of Christ ... will never meddle in the state’s affairs ... The church knows that in the world the use of violent force inevitably is joined with the moral injustice of certain actions of the Government.” Therefore, in the question of the Jews the church today is not allowed to interrupt the government immediately and to demand another policy.’¹⁸⁹

Barth according to Busch was particularly critical of the Confessing Church because he believed that it had erred in its idea that for Christians in their life outside

¹⁸⁷ E Busch, ‘Indissoluble Unity’, 56.

¹⁸⁸ E Busch, ‘Indissoluble Unity’, 57-58.

¹⁸⁹ E Busch, ‘The Barmen Declaration’, 68.

the church the Word of God, as attested in Scripture, was suspended. It was this suspension, which then enabled a surrendering of their daily lives to the secular powers, that was no different from the “German Christians”. The removal of the “German Christians” from the church was therefore in Barth’s opinion no gain, because their errors remained in the church, making the church was wrong in itself. Barth believed that the church could therefore only become a Confessing Church when it rid itself from that idea.

It was important for Barth to spend some time discussing the problematic aspects of this two-sector doctrine, which for him was located in the heart of his engagement with gospel and law (the inseparability of dogmatics and ethics). It has been pointed out that Barth’s Christian ethics takes its point of departure in the formula “Gospel and Law” which for him was also the basic substance of his dogmatics.¹⁹⁰ While the fifth thesis has been used to expose the fallacious understanding of the two-doctrine teaching that was rampant especially among the Lutherans, the second thesis is also important here in that it claims the entire human life for Christ. Simply stated the gospel speaks about God’s will for us while the law tells us what God wills from us. Although they are two issues, in both we encounter the same God who has a relationship with humanity. They are therefore not to be separated although they are two distinct issues.

Barth in his *Church Dogmatics II/2*, especially in chapters 36-39, extensively deals with the concepts “Gospel and Law”. In the chapters mentioned, Barth makes it clear that ethics interprets the law as the form of the gospel.¹⁹¹ Barth’s usage of ethics in line with gospel and law also demonstrates once again his disdain for the strict separation of ethics from dogmatics. Having pointed this out, it then is understood that ethics remains essential in our deliberations concerning gospel and its relationship to law.

¹⁹⁰ E Busch, 2004: 152.

¹⁹¹ K Barth, 1957b: 509.

As much as the chapters in question remain fundamental to our understanding of how the gospel relates to the law, it is Barth's later work that re-invites us to ponder the significant relationship between gospel and law. In *Church Dogmatics IV/3.1*, it becomes almost immediately clear that the compulsion that Barth felt for dealing with these subjects once again stemmed from the criticism he received from theologians of the Lutheran traditions, especially the likes of W Elert, P Althaus, E Sommerlath, and H Thielicke.¹⁹²

They believed that Barth did not comprehend the relationship between these concepts and that his interpretation, which insisted that they ought to be seen as unified, was not convincing. The issues raised by these theologians left Barth with the need to decipher the possibility of whether he had completely misread Luther or whether he simply did not know Luther at all, both of which were postulates he did not seem to want to entertain. Barth was certainly aware that Luther himself had been a rather controversial person when it came to these issues. He believed that in the following issue (the two-Kingdom doctrine) in which Luther outlined his confusion with regard to the interpretation of gospel and law, one saw more than one Luther.¹⁹³ It is for this reason that Barth felt compelled to take issue with an interpretation that insisted on the separateness of "Gospel and Law".

Barth seemed to be of the view that the Lutheran theologians in question did not have sufficient biblical grounds to dispute his interpretation of these subjects. He therefore tabled the following points that registered his confusion about the counter-thesis raised by them: "I do not understand with what biblical or inherent right, on the basis of what conception of God, His work and His revelation, and above all in the light of what Christology, they can speak, not of one intrinsically true and clear Word of God, but of two Words in which He speaks alternately and in different ways to man [sic] according to some unknown rule".¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/3.1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961a: 370.

¹⁹³ K Barth, 1961a: 371.

¹⁹⁴ K Barth, 1961a: 370.

Barth believed that the type of gospel they advocated was problematic, since it did not deal with the matters of forgiveness adequately. In light of this view, he raised the following with regard to their critique of his interpretation: “I do not understand the meaning of a supposed Gospel the content of which is exhausted by the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins and which is to be received by man [sic] in a purely inward and receptive faith; nor of a supposed Law which as an abstract demand can only be an external ordinance on the one side but on the other is ordained to accuse man and therefore to indicate and prepare the way for the Gospel”.¹⁹⁵

Barth continued to raise another point, claiming that he found it “difficult to comprehend how a concept of a supposed Law can be attained or exploited except (as in the 16th century, and with very serious consequences in the 17th, 18th and 19th) by appealing to the idea of a natural law and therefore of a general natural revelation, or by falling back on a most primitive form of Biblicism; and I am surprised that this dilemma has not been accepted as a warning”.¹⁹⁶

Karl Barth believed that it was the divorce between these issues that in 1933 and 1934 enabled the Protestant theologians to affirm the authoritarian and radically nationalist Führer-state. Because Barth believed that gospel and law belonged together, he argued that to equate obedience to the Führer with obedience to God was the fruit of an older theological error.¹⁹⁷

This error arose because the gospel was interpreted independently of the law, allowing the likes of Friedrich Gogarten to declare that the law of God “encounters the modern generation concretely in the form of the national socialist movement in both state and people”, as a “hard” but for this reason an “authentic law”.¹⁹⁸ Busch rightly maintains that this would exclude a “specifically Christian” or “biblical” law”. Instead the church must be the “nurse and guardian” of the law that is given in

¹⁹⁵ K Barth, 1961a: 370.

¹⁹⁶ K Barth, 1961a: 370.

¹⁹⁷ E Busch, 2004: 156.

¹⁹⁸ F Gogarten cited in: E Busch, 2004: 156.

nationhood. It must also preach the gospel of forgiveness, though this does not relate to offences against that external “law”.¹⁹⁹ Klappert has pointed out that the Barmen Declaration cannot be relegated to its historical prison. For this reason he maintains that this Declaration can be appropriated for issues such as politics in different contexts, church and state relations, as well as issues on economic justice.²⁰⁰

2.6 Conclusion

An attempt was made in this chapter to explore the political and theological situation of Germany after World War I. By focusing on these issues, this chapter was able to catalogue the means that were devised to give theological justification to the atrocities that ensued under the Hitler regime. It was indicated that the prehistory of the Barmen Theological Declaration was pivotal in any endeavour to come to grips with this document.

The Barmen Declaration has been severely criticised for not proving sufficient ethical impetus that would precipitate a strong identification of the church with the suffering of the Jews. Making reference to Barth’s agreement in this regard, it has been argued by some that the *status confessionis* that was confined to the church has proven to be futile.²⁰¹ This understanding was arrived at because of the failure to discern between the Confessing Church, which was divided on the understanding of the two-kingdom doctrine, as well as the failure to note the unity suggested in this statement as pointed out by Hunsinger.

This prehistory ranged from the marks left on German society by World War I to the confusion that accompanied the after-effects of that war. These factors made it easy for those who were vulnerable to find solace in the idea that there was hope for the German nation, as preached by some with sinister motives.

¹⁹⁹ E Busch, 2004: 156.

²⁰⁰ Cf. ‘Barmen – Ruf nach vorwärts’ in: B. Klappert, 1994: 231.

²⁰¹ Cf. M Lehmann-Habeck, ‘Confession and Resistance in Hitler-Germany (1933-1945)’ in: *Mission Studies*. Vol 2, No. 1. (1985), 34-38.

During these confusing times when some were impelled to associate themselves with one of two dominant positions that prevailed after World War I, those who were not content with these options had to wait for a position that would give meaning to their existence. Many politicians and theologians who were traditionally seen as being the champions of those on the margins have been blamed for not being vocal enough during these confusing times.

The theological and political confusion climaxed when some Christians began to show signs of faith in the sinister “theologised politics” of the “German Christians”. It was during this time that Barth coined the phrase “doing theology as if nothing had happened”. This concept is best understood when one realises that in saying this, Barth was not advocating a theology that had nothing to do with politics. Instead, it meant Barth had realised that it would be disingenuous to devise a reactionary “theologised politics” to combat the very evil of “theologised politics” facing theology in Germany. Barth had become aware of the potential of the gospel in combating this theological fallacy. By insisting that God through His Word should be the point of departure in theology, the Barmen Theological Declaration was a direct theological response to the politicised contextual theology of the “German Christians” and, as such, confessional.

The characteristics of confessional theology were used as rubrics under which a number of important issues were discussed. These included issues such as the relationship between law and gospel, as well as the Jewish issue. A better understanding of these issues gives meaning to the concrete way in which Christians have to be involved in the affairs of the world. Karl Barth’s works, which succeeded Barmen, were also imperative to highlight this important Christian responsibility.

In essence, the confessional theology of Barmen attempted to remind those who subscribed to it that theology ought to be undertaken as a humble discipline at all times. It wanted to communicate the message that a confession is not made in an accusing and judging manner, but that it always stands under the correction of the

Word of God. In the next chapter, we shall explore the significance of the confessional nature of the Church Dogmatics.

CHAPTER 3

Confessional theology in action: Church Dogmatics

“Recently it happened to me that at three o’clock in the morning I recognised that what I had written on De Foedere [Of the Covenant] for the next morning was nonsense and dangerously false teaching. I had simply to cancel the lecture at eight o’clock.”

Karl Barth¹

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will endeavour to explain the confessional nature of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics. The quotation cited illustrates Barth’s attitude towards his entire theology. This chapter will argue that confessional theology operates without the incentive of being embedded in a system, therefore it remains open for continuous correction.² This chapter also rests on the assumption that contextual theology lacks flexibility. However, while taking cognisance of this aspect, confessional theology nonetheless does not deny the importance of context in theological reflection. The view concerning the inflexibility of contextual theology is informed by an understanding that its insistence on context as its point of departure inhibits flexibility, which remains intrinsic to confessional theology.

Throughout his theological career Karl Barth demonstrated on a number of occasions that his theological reflection revolved arrogantly around the premise of the Word of God as revealed to the church through the Holy Scriptures. In addition to this fundamental ideal stands a notion that is imperative in its own right, i.e. the church. Barth’s Church Dogmatics contains the most concise and detailed catalogue of the

¹ K Barth, *How I changed my Mind*. Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1966c: 30.

² Barth’s inclination to change his mind cannot go unnoticed. Most of his students were aware of this; it is not by chance that Yoder wrote an article on how Karl Barth kept changing his mind. Cf. J Yoder, ‘Karl Barth: How his mind kept changing’ in: D McKim (ed.), *How Karl Barth changed my mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986: 166.

importance of the church to the subject of theology. It was argued in the previous chapter that the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934 attempted to address not only its immediate audience, but understood that it also had to say something to the world.

Barth's Church Dogmatics stands in the tradition of the Barmen Declaration (chronologically it precedes it) in insisting that it has to witness Jesus Christ not only to the church but also to the world. The Church Dogmatics' consciousness to witness Jesus Christ is governed by its understanding of being situated in a particular socio-economic and political context. In conceding this, it must however not be concluded that geography and history as such are the most important aspects that dictate the structure of the church. The essence of context is relevant in so far as it explains why the Church Dogmatics deals with particular issues. Any reading that ignores the fact that the Church Dogmatics is underpinned by a particular historicity and context would be a futile and ridiculous exercise.

By comprehending that the church also exists in the world and that it has not arrived at its desired destiny yet, Barth's Church Dogmatics understands the implications of the church looking forward to that destiny while it waits on earth.³ The ethics that flows from the theology of the Church Dogmatics serves to remind the church of its obedience to the Word and its responsibility to the world. By insisting on this, the Church Dogmatics deprives ethics of its purported independence from theology.

Although Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics stands out as his most important work, there are numerous other works in which Barth dealt with the major themes in a more comprehensible fashion. In the previous chapters it was asserted that Barth's interest in Christian confession helped him to understand the role that he had to play in the realm of politics. This chapter will continue this assertion and in the process reveal Barth's loathing of confessionalism. The primary reason for this loathing, it will be argued, was located in his disavowing of systems. Here confessionalism refers to

³ Cf. N Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

the division of the church into numerous confessions with each one contending that its confession is better than the others' and, more importantly, creates the impression that a confession threatens the centrality of the Word of God. Barth once wrote that the division of the church into confessions was a scandal for which there was no justification.⁴

The characteristics of confessional theology are the themes that this chapter endeavours to trace in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, viz. Confessional theology as a theology based on the Word of God, the church as the subject of this theology, a theology with its inclination to witness Jesus Christ to the world, a theology that is mindful of its context, as well as a theology which sees ethics as pivotal. The characteristics of confessional theology are well articulated in Green's explication of Barth's theology. He asserts that Barth believed that "Christian theology is simultaneously rooted in the church while actively engaged with society and politics that it is simultaneously "dogmatics" and contextual, historically anchored and contemporary. In other words, ecclesial theology and public theology are two sides of the one activity, as are dogmatics and ethics".⁵

Barth's *Church Dogmatics* will be treated as the primary source here, while other works by Barth that illuminate the *Church Dogmatics* will also be consulted. A motivation will be given as to why it is imperative to read the *Church Dogmatics* as confessional. It will also be made clear that, in attempting this, the *Church Dogmatics* can never be regarded as a confession in the true sense of the word. An attempt will also be made to evaluate the *Church Dogmatics* in the light of views that it stood against hegemony. It will be explained that although Barth radically emphasised the centrality of the Word, he never thought that a pure theology was possible. This view was held primarily because he remained aware of the reality of ideologies to which Christians are also subject.

⁴ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Edinburgh: T& T Clark. Vol. IV/ 1. 1956b: 675.

⁵ Cf. C Green, 'Freedom for humanity: Karl Barth, Ecclesial theology and Public Life' in: L Holness and R Wüstenberg (eds.), *Theology in Dialogue: The Impact of the Arts, Humanities and Science on Contemporary Religious Thought*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002: 81.

3.2 Karl Barth's *Magnum Opus*: Church Dogmatics

Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics is without a doubt his most important work. Its gigantic size (14 volumes) acts as an impediment to many who do not have the time to sincerely scrutinise the thought of this important theologian.⁶ Although this work was reasonably prolonged, being published over 35 years from 1932 to 1967, Barth's chief objective was to say the same thing differently, viz. that Jesus Christ as He is attested to us in Holy Scripture is the only Word that we have to hear and to obey. Busch is therefore correct in asserting that at every point, from various angles, the Church

⁶ Acknowledging that the gigantic size of the Church Dogmatics might inhibit a sincere attempt at understanding the crux of Barth's theology, George Hunsinger has managed to deal with this threat and in the process has embarked upon a process of chastising attempts at settling for a single unifying conception by which the coherence of Barth's theology could be displayed. In the place of a single coherent interpretation of Barth's theology, Hunsinger suggests a multiplicity of 'motifs'. He opts for a multiple approach at reading Barth because he realises that when one pattern is extracted from Barth's argument, danger inevitably ensues. It is his opinion that there are several motifs that run through the Church Dogmatics. These are the very same motifs that shape Barth's mature theology as a whole. Cf. G Hunsinger, *How to read Karl Barth: The shape of his theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. The six motifs are briefly summarised and the relevant page numbers are indicated. 'Actualism' (30-32), 'Particularism' (32-35), 'Objectivism' (35-40), 'Personalism' (40-42), 'Realism' (43-49) and 'Rationalism' (49). With 'Actualism' Hunsinger claims that the entire theology of Barth governs his complex conception of being and time. Being is the event and often an act. These motifs therefore help Hunsinger to bring into dialogue the relationship between the divine being and the human being which rightly remains an irksome subject in the theology of Barth. 'Particularism' according to Hunsinger is a motif that designates both the noetic procedure and an ontic state of affairs. The noetic procedure is the rule that implies that every concept that is used in dogmatic theology has to be defined on the basis of a particular event called Jesus Christ. This suggests that one is to move from the point of departure of the event of Jesus Christ. 'Objectivism' is a motif pertaining to Barth's understanding of revelation and salvation. Barth insists on revelation because he realised that the knowledge of God as confessed by faith is objective in that its basis lies not in human subjectivity but in God. Revelation and salvation both occur through the mediation of ordinary creative objects, so that the divine self-enactment in our midst lies hidden within them. 'Personalism' governs the goal of the self manifestation. With this Hunsinger understands that God's objective self manifestation in revelation and salvation comes to the creature in the form of a personal address. 'Realism' is used in relation to Barth's conception of theological language. Through transcending itself by grace, theological life attains sufficient likeness and adequacy to its object for reference truly and actually to occur. It also relates to the modes of address, certainty and narration found in scriptures as well as in the language of the Church based upon it. 'Rationalism'- this motif refers to the construction and assessment of doctrine. Theological language is understood to include an important rational and cognitive component. Here the concept has nothing to do with the conventional philosophical explanation but is understood to find its expression within revelation. The rational and cognitive components are subject to conceptual elaboration and that elaboration (alongside with scriptural exegesis) and this is what constitutes the theological function.

Dogmatics focuses on the one totality of this Christian confession of faith.⁷ The material which made up Barth's Church Dogmatics was retrieved from his lectures and talks and was then further developed.

There are a number of fundamental aspects that warrant consideration in trying to understand this work. It is initially important to note that with the Church Dogmatics, Barth is engaged in a dialogue and not a monologue. This dialogue is undertaken with both named and silent conversational partners, eradicating any monolithic impression. Additionally, it has to be acknowledged that in Barth's dogmatics all theological disciplines are interrelated and interdependent. Busch admits that such a fullness does not deny the distinctive character of the various tasks, but instead makes us cautious of the fact that theology becomes "unhealthy and more dangerous than useful" when there is a "disintegration" of its disciplines "into a relationship of indifference or concealed or open hostility."⁸

Being tenaciously opposed to systems, there is no doubt that Barth's Church Dogmatics suggests no system, no complete views as well as no final conclusions and results.⁹ This is primarily the case because Barth never thought that his theology wanted to have the last word but, being in conversation with others, wanted to participate in a dialogue which concerned God's affairs with humanity. Busch warns that "if we detach individual sayings from this train of thought, we will easily make nonsense of Barth's dogmatics".¹⁰

Within this dialogue Barth also seeks a way of relating his theology to its context. The psychological motivation behind his dogmatics is therefore of paramount importance here: prayer and study belong together. The theological dialogue is initially a dialogue with God and then with the Holy Scriptures; it has a fundamental

⁷ E Busch, *The Great Passion: An introduction to the theology of Karl Barth*. Trans. G. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004: 39.

⁸ E Busch, 2004: 41.

⁹ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. I/2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956a: 868.

¹⁰ E Busch, 2004: 41.

Biblical hermeneutical component, which explains why the Church Dogmatics contains such a large number of biblical excursions.

The word “process” also characterises the Church Dogmatics. In this sense “process” does not stand in contradistinction to Hunsinger’s motif of “actualism”.¹¹ Instead, it refers to Barth’s belief that he did not have the final word, just like his predecessors did not have the final word concerning God’s relationship with human beings. The Barmen Theological Declaration was a process and had its culmination in the synod of 1934. Consequently it must be said that the Church Dogmatics was an elongated process and Barth never thought it necessary to foresee its conclusion. In 1927 Barth wrote his prolegomena to Christian Dogmatics. He would later chastise this work as his infamous “false start”.¹² In 1932 he published the first volume of the Church Dogmatics Vol. I/1 under the title “The doctrine of the Word of God”. This idea was continued in 1938 with the publication of Church Dogmatics Vol. I/2 which bore the same title as the first volume.

In 1939 Barth published Church Dogmatics Vol. II/1 with the title “The doctrine of God”. Church Dogmatics Vol. II/2 followed in 1942; three years elapsed before he published Church Dogmatics Vol. III/1 which carried the title “The doctrine of Creation” in 1945. Almost immediately after this publication Church Dogmatics Vol. III/2 saw the light in 1948. Church Dogmatics Vol. III/3 was published in 1950 and a year later, Church Dogmatics Vol. III/4 appeared.

Barth began to devote time to his fourth volume which dealt with the theme of “The doctrine of reconciliation”. Church Dogmatics Vol. IV/1 appeared in 1953, followed by Church Dogmatics Vol. IV/2 in 1955. Church Dogmatics Vol. IV/3 is divided into two parts. The first part of this volume, Church Dogmatics IV/3.1

¹¹ Cf. G Hunsinger, 1991: 30f.

¹² The reason that Barth gives to justify this ‘false start’ is succinctly articulated in his preface to his first volume of the Church Dogmatics. He writes: “In substituting the word Church for Christian in the title, I have tried to set a good example of restraint in the light-hearted use of the great word “Christian” against which I have protested. But materially I have also tried to show that from the very outset dogmatics is not a free science. It is bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful”. Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. I/1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936: xii-xiii.

appeared in 1959 while the second part, Church Dogmatics Vol. IV/3.2 was published in 1960. Church Dogmatics Vol. IV/4 appeared in 1967.

Barth was working on his fifth volume when he died. Thus, although Barth never managed to complete it, the fifth volume was set out to deal with the doctrine of redemption (V). Küng is correct in noting that in the Church Dogmatics (hereafter referred to as CD) we are confronted with the relationship between faith and knowledge, nature and grace, as well as creation and redemption.¹³ The theology of the CD is not shy of its Christocentrism. It is this Christocentrism which enhances the relationship between faith and knowledge. This Christocentric approach would be the cause of much harsh criticism from his opponents.

These relationships are restructured according to three parallel trains of thought; a space is afforded to each train of thought in CD Vol. IV. Concerning the relationship between faith and knowledge, Barth deals with the Lord as servant which is the priestly office of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ This section engages human pride but justification through faith and the gathering of the Christian community. Concerning the relationship between nature and grace, Barth deals with the question of the servant as the Lord (the royal office of Christ).¹⁵ This is where he explores the question of human weariness, but sanctification in love and the building of the community. Finally, concerning the relationship between creation and redemption, Barth entertains the question of Jesus Christ as the true witness (his prophetic office).¹⁶ Under this rubric Barth examines human lies, but orders the community to its hope and mission.

It is worth noting not only the intensity with which Barth engaged his conversational partners and therefore the subjects that he wrestled with, but it is even more fascinating to note how he turned issues on their heads. From the word prolegomena which had a particular meaning, at least for his counterparts, to the

¹³ Cf. H Küng, *Hans Küng: My struggle for freedom*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002: 121.

¹⁴ K Barth, 1956b: 157ff.

¹⁵ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958: 3ff.

¹⁶ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/3.1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961a: 3ff.

concept election, we are confronted with an individual who went further than merely accepting concepts without questioning them.

Set in the sphere of the church, Barth's dogmatics is assumed with the same temperament as any other activity in that field. By not granting reason much authority, one can understand why he saw dogmatics as an activity of faith. It is an activity which stems from that "determination of human action by the being of the church and therefore by Christ, by the gracious address of God to man [sic]".¹⁷ Very closely associated with this action is prayer, which is a quintessential attitude without which dogmatics remains impossible and which in Barth was the ethical function of the church.¹⁸

Nineteenth century dogmatics understood the term "prolegomena" as a preamble to one's theology. After having probed the historicity of prolegomena, without rejecting the essence of this concept Barth deviated intentionally from this understanding and suggested that the term in question was the first part of dogmatics rather than that which came before it.¹⁹ Barth's objection to a modernistic answer which therefore proposed a new meaning for the concept prolegomena was twofold. Firstly, Barth rejected this modernistic answer because it presupposed that there was some point of contact between God's revelation and the recipient of that revelation other than that which revelation itself established by its occurrence.²⁰

Barth was concerned that once we commenced a discourse on dogmatics by conceding that the contact between God and humanity could also be located in a place other than in revelation, we ended up with anthropology and not theology. Secondly, Barth opposed apologetic prolegomena because it assumed that the church and faith were to be understood as links in a greater nexus of being.²¹ Once this became inculcated, it was taken for granted that the church – and therefore its speech, thought

¹⁷ K Barth, 1936: 17.

¹⁸ K Barth, 1936: 23.

¹⁹ K Barth, 1936: 42.

²⁰ K Barth, 1936: 36.

²¹ K Barth, 1936: 36.

and action – instead of being a miracle, were reduced to mere contingent historical realities which could be discussed through some general theory of knowledge or ontology.²²

In what follows, the focus will fall on the confessional nature of Barth's Church Dogmatics. The characteristics of what constitutes confessional theology will be explored, but first, that which describes the Church Dogmatics as confessional will be briefly discussed.

3.3 The confessional nature of the Church Dogmatics

Karl Barth's response to the World Council of Alliance of the Reformed Churches in 1925 regarding the question of the desirability and universality of a Reformed confession²³ reverberates through his Church Dogmatics (CD). He understood that a confession expressed witness of God as claimed by His command. In appreciating this, Barth does not lose sight of the fact that a confession is an act of the lips – it remains essentially a human act. It is for this reason that wrote:

“the witness and confession claimed from man [sic] must always bear the character of an action without an ulterior goal ... What particularly marks out confession is that man may and must temporarily step out of the sphere of purpose, intentions and pursuits ... He aims at no results and expects none. But he confesses because God is God and governs and does all things well, and because he knows this and therefore cannot keep silent. Confession is a serious act; but in its freedom from purpose it has more of the nature of a game or song than of work and warfare. For this reason confession will always cause head-shaking among serious people who do not know the particular seriousness of confession”.²⁴

²² K Barth, 1936: 36.

²³ In his response Barth said this about a Reformed confession: “A Reformed Creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, **which until further action**, defines **its character to outsiders**; and which **until further action**, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the **insights currently given** to the **whole Christian Church** by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, **witnessed to** by the Holy Scriptures alone”. Emphasis added. For his general response to the question of the desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed confession, cf. K Barth, *Theology and Church*. London: SCM Press, 1962: 112.

²⁴ Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. III/4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961c: 77.

When the response given to the council in question is carefully scrutinised, it becomes evident that the very issues that Barth thought were imperative for the adoption of a confession are reiterated in CD III/4:²⁵

- (a) Barth held that the primary motive of a confession was witnessing the revelation of Christ through the Holy Scriptures. In the volume cited Barth continued this view, stressing that the primary motivation of a confession was to honour God. It is therefore an action that is not informed by an ulterior goal.
- (b) For Barth a confession was something that made more sense in the church. Therefore the church ought not to be too alarmed when others who are not serious about confession shake their heads in confusion.
- (c) Witness to Christ is at the core of a confession.
- (d) The context has always played a pivotal role in confessions. In his response he referred to the geographically limited area; in his CD he asserts that a confession occurred in a particular situation not created by us.²⁶
- (e) He insisted on action, both in his response and in the volume indicated. This action can be nothing but ethical since a confession wills to honour God and nothing and no one else.

Before elaborating on the confessional nature of the CD, it is imperative to realise that, as much as Barth was engrossed in confessions, he nonetheless remained very much opposed to confessionalism. There are many reasons which substantiate his opposition to confessionalism, but what is clear is that this opposition was stimulated by his discomfort with “-isms”, as illustrated by his caution of systems. One of the main reasons why Barth felt it unnecessary to write dogmatics in the tradition of any confession was simply because he never wanted to become an orthodox “Calvinist” and had an even lesser desire to support a Lutheran confessionalism, hence *Dogmatics for the church*.²⁷

²⁵ Cf. K. Barth, 1961c: see especially pages 73-89.

²⁶ Cf. K. Barth, 1961c: 80.

²⁷ E Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from letters and autobiographical texts*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976: 211.

The exchange that he had with most theological traditions, especially Roman Catholic and Lutheran, must thus be appreciated. There cannot be much doubt that Barth's criticism of other ecclesiastical traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism was motivated by his Reformed bias. But in maintaining this bias, he nonetheless remained of the view that dogmatics belonged to the realm of the church and not to denominations. It would be frivolous to discount the influence that Reformed theology had on him, as was indicated in the first chapter.

Numerous studies have been conducted to illustrate the shift in Barth's theological thinking.²⁸ This constant change in theological reflection needs however to be located within the framework of how Barth thought theology ought to be practised in relation to the challenges raised by other disciplines. Although Barth's theology moved from the particular to the general, he did not succumb to the call that philosophy and other disciplines needed to dictate theology. Barth always left room for the cognitive aspect of the human being. Hunsinger has observed that since such a theology implies a set of internal logical and cognitive relations, this theology can be explained by noting several "rationalist" procedures: such as deriving, grounding, ordering, testing and assimilating.²⁹

²⁸ Two most important studies deserve mention here. The one is by Hans Urs von Balthasar and the other a study by McCormack in which he reacts critically to the thesis set forward by Balthasar. Although these works are acknowledged, this chapter shall not explore the differences between them extensively. Suffice it to mention that each of the two parties attempts to read Barth in a single pattern. Hunsinger had already challenged attempts of opting for a single coherent reading of the theology of Barth. Balthasar's work was among the works that he challenged; he also criticised the work by G C Berkouwer, F Torrance and Robert W Jenson, which in his view also suffered from the inclination of reading Barth in a single coherent pattern (cf. G Hunsinger, 1991: 6-23). Although McCormack was aware of Hunsinger's thesis, he nonetheless challenged Balthasar's thesis without conceding that a single reading of Barth could lead to a deliberate understatement of Barth's theological project.

²⁹ Cf. G. Hunsinger, 1991: 55. With the notion "deriving", Hunsinger suggests that aspect of the *intellectus fidei* which is employed in the invention of doctrines. He reminds us that Barth understood that doctrines are derived in a consistent manner within the confines of faith. After they are constructed, doctrines are regarded as constitutive. Thus although they can also function as rules they are also legitimate extensions and clarifications of the knowledge of faith. 'Grounding' is supposed to indicate that aspect of *intellectus fidei* which contemplates the relations of necessity, possibility and actuality. 'Ordering' is meant to indicate that aspect of the *intellectus fidei* which probes how the part is related to the whole and the whole to the part in Christian theology. Hunsinger believes that Barth's sense of interrelatedness of all Christian doctrines leads him to work with patterns of 'dialectical inclusions', in which the part is included in the whole. 'Testing' or substantiation is meant to indicate

The insistence on the confessional nature of the Church Dogmatics is underpinned by Barth's famous maxim that God is God and that we are human beings. This emphasis understands that since God in Christ has adopted humanity into a relationship with Him, this relationship puts humanity in a position of having to speak about God. Yet the distinction between God and humanity impels us to speak about God only in a confessional manner, i.e. to speak about God not as if we knew God entirely, but speaking about God with all the characteristics of confessional theology in sight. Karl Barth understood this predicament, hence his constant revision of the manner in which he spoke about God – saying the same thing differently.

Barth took his theology very seriously. He nonetheless acknowledged the mistakes that he as a human being might have made along the way, since for him theology was nothing more than a conversation. It was a conversation in which he also wanted his voice to be heard. His main aim with this work (as with all his other work) was merely to start at the beginning on a constant basis.³⁰

Because the CD is understood best only by carefully considering the issues that motivated Barth to write it, one is able to detect for instance how Barth engaged even some of the famous atheists. Since Barth's aim was not only to listen to what these individuals had to say about God, but also wanting to say something about God, his comments in that regard can be construed as confessional. The CD is therefore a confession in that it presupposes making the point that theology cannot be re-established except with audacity.³¹

Some parts of the CD were written in the era of people like Ludwig Feuerbach (who had passed away a century before Barth was born), who had successfully sold

that aspect of the *intellectus fidei* which justifies doctrinal beliefs not by direct appeals to scripture (although a scriptural foundation is presupposed), but by appeals to the relation of the part to the whole, and of the periphery to the centre. 'Assimilating' is meant to indicate that aspect of the *intellectus fidei* which explicates the content of faith by critically appropriating concepts first used and developed outside the circle of Christian theology.

³⁰ Cf. E Busch, 2004: 57-61.

³¹ Cf. K Barth, 1962: 72. Barth was quoting Overbeck who made the point that for theology to be taken seriously it needs audacity.

the idea that theology had long since become anthropology.³² Because theology was confused with anthropology, theological talk had for many theologians become sick of the Word. Busch puts this aptly when he says: “[I]t was seriously sick for Barth because so many theologies ... have fallen under the shadow of the suspicion that even if they speak so very ardently of God, they are not really speaking about God but only about the human ”.³³

Apart from the view that Barth became uncomfortable with the word “Christian”, he also had great trouble with the casual usage of the word “God”. This is well summarised in his response to Gogarten’s request that they name their newly founded journal *Das Wort* (The Word). For Barth, *Das Wort* seemed unbearably pretentious.³⁴ One of the imperative questions during Barth’s theological era was: “How do we arrive at the knowing of God?” In his opinion this question was completely wrong. Barth argued that humanity does not arrive at such knowledge, and as long as we try to do so we will always make images of God that are in truth only reflections of ourselves.³⁵

The same pattern of consistently attempting to say the same thing differently can also be located in Barth’s theological commentaries of the epistle Paul to the Romans. In his initial commentary on the book, a number of differences can be pointed out. These revisions not only indicated that Barth was aware of his limits and that he still enjoyed the audacity to speak given his limits, but also allowed a glimpse at our humanness which ought to be equally emphasised as we deal with this science. It is this which forced him to speak, albeit in a confessional manner.

Doing theology in this manner also acknowledged that no one is ever original in their speech about God. Barth always acknowledged the fact that in our speech about God, we ought to concede to the fact that we stand within particular theological traditions. He asserted that:

³² See especially for example K Barth, 1936: 128.

³³ E Busch, 2004: 58.

³⁴ Cf. E Busch, 1976: 145.

³⁵ E Busch, 2004: 61.

“my task was to take all that has been said before and to think it through once more and freshly, and to articulate it anew as a theology of the grace of God in Jesus Christ ... I have discovered that in this concentration, I can say everything, far more clearly, unambiguously, simply, and more in the way of a confession, and at the sometimes also much more freely, openly and comprehensively than I could ever say it before”.³⁶

It has been argued that Barth went from a theology of crisis³⁷ – or dialectical theology – to analogical theology. Among the many studies conducted to illustrate this point, the study by McCormack is of special importance. This study was a deliberate attempt to dispute (among others) the conclusion of Hans Urs von Balthasar that Barth did not necessarily break drastically from his earlier theological methods.³⁸

The debate between Balthasar and McCormack on the subject mentioned helps us to amplify our claim that Barth avoided at all costs thinking in terms of systems. In an authoritative study by Busch concerning Barth’s theology, Busch appears to be comfortable with Balthasar and does not seem to think that this debate was necessary. However, he admits to the shifts that had taken place in Barth from dialectical to analogical theology.

It has to be noted that in Barth’s *Ethics* of 1928-1929 he had worked with the idea of the orders of creation, which he later rejected as useless.³⁹ The rejection of this idea was motivated by an anthropology which was being advanced as the supposed basis on which we know decisive statements about God’s Word. According to Busch,

³⁶ K Barth, 1966c: 44.

³⁷ Martin Rumscheidt prefers to believe that this identification does not apply to Barth, but the best way to look at this is to see Barth as someone that presented a crisis to the liberal theology of his time. Cf. M Rumscheidt, *Political worship- the example of Beyers Naudé*. In: *The beyers Naudé legacy series*. The Beyers Naudé Center for Public Theology: Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2005.

³⁸ Cf. B McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936*, 1997: 1-28. In this study, McCormack maintains that for 40 years, the interpretation of Karl Barth’s theological development has stood beneath the massive shadow cast by Hans Urs von Balthasar’s book which appeared in 1951 entitled: *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner theologie*, translated into English by Edward Oakes and reprinted in 1992 under the title, *The theology of Karl Barth*. In pointing out this difficulty, McCormack seems to be suggesting an alternative single approach to the theology of Barth, and it could be said that he falls in the same snare as Balthasar. He does not seem to have heeded the warning by Hunsinger that Barth is best understood when it is agreed that there are multiple approaches to his theology.

³⁹ K Barth, *Ethics*. Trans. G W Bromiley. New York: Seabury, 1981b: 215-6.

Barth was afraid that if theology presupposed an anthropology of its own concoction apart from its knowledge of God, and if its knowledge of God was suspended even temporarily in favour of its knowledge of humanity, then theology would set itself under conditions that would dominate its knowledge of God and have indeed the quality of a prior human knowledge of the divine.⁴⁰ Because that could not be allowed in Barth's thought, he had to alter the form of his own knowledge. Hence he moved from "dialectics to analogy", which subsequently ended the circle of "Dialectical Theology".⁴¹

Barth was afraid that his views might be used to give legitimacy to and justification of the personal ideals of some. One of the reasons why he abandoned the initial road which he took with the Christian Dogmatics was to guard against giving theology a basis as was done with existential philosophy.⁴² The confessional nature of Barth's CD is characterised by the fact that Barth's theology was scripturally inspired, that it was very much interested in the means it used to interpret the context in which it found itself, and that it acknowledged its limits, for it remained a human comment on the Word of God and not the Word of God *per se*.

Karl Barth maintained that to determine the concrete formal characteristic of dogmatics and church proclamation, it was necessary to make reference to the authority of the "fathers" and of dogma, so that the confessional attitude could be defined.⁴³ What is suggested here is that the confessional attitude of the CD was dictated by its particular ecclesiastical context and that dogmatics therefore had to take its confessional allegiance seriously.⁴⁴ In maintaining this it has to be realised that this does not nullify Barth's insistence that he wrote his dogmatics for the church and did not necessarily have a single confessional tradition in view.

⁴⁰ E Busch, 2004: 26.

⁴¹ E Busch, 2004: 26.

⁴² K Barth, 1936: x.

⁴³ K Barth, 1956a: 822.

⁴⁴ J Webster, *Karl Barth*. London: Continuum. 2000: 69.

3.3.1 The Church Dogmatics as a commentary on the Word of God

Karl Barth considers both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament as the witness to the revelation in which God remains a hidden God. It is only through this medium that God indeed declares himself to be the hidden God by revealing himself.⁴⁵ The Bible is considered Holy Scripture simply because its witness to revelation and the events of its prophetic-apostolic function are remembered.⁴⁶

Barth amplifies this statement by saying that this remembrance can only be effective when those who remember are reconciled to the effective power of the command of the Bible. Knowing that there is a danger of trading the revelation of the Word for other events, he asks the question:

“[W]hen the Christian Church makes the act of remembrance and the corresponding self-reconciliation, in which it gives to the Bible the authority of Holy Scripture, and expects to hear in the Bible and only in the Bible the Word of God, does there not take place something which cannot be squared with the majesty of God: the absolutising of a relative, that is of the Word that is always human, and which cannot stand side by side with the One who himself is and wills to be God alone?”⁴⁷

In asking this question, Barth admits that the distinction between “absolute” and “relative” appears to be an easy one – it could be perceived as childish to assert that God alone is absolute and everything else is relative. He is of the view that “according to the Bible, the in itself unthinkable coexistence of absolute and relative is made possible by the fact that it does not speak of the absolute but of the goodness and patience of the Creator of all things revealed to us in Jesus Christ”.⁴⁸

By assuming this approach, he finds it necessary to deal with the 17th century doctrine of inspiration.⁴⁹ Barth argues that this doctrine increased the danger mentioned above with its development and systematisation of statements. He

⁴⁵ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 84; see also K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. II/1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957a: 4.

⁴⁶ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 497.

⁴⁷ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 497.

⁴⁸ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 498.

⁴⁹ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 524. Barth refers to 2 Tim. 3: 16.

explains that the intention behind this doctrine was ultimately only a single “naturalist” postulate: “that the Bible must offer us a divine infallible history; that it must not contain human error in any of its verses”.⁵⁰

He rejects this doctrine on the grounds that in it the Word of God could no longer be the Word of God and thus was no longer recognised as such. According to him, this doctrine grounded the Bible upon the Bible itself and in ignorance of the mystery of Christ and the Holy Ghost.⁵¹ For him, to say “the Word of God” is to say the Word of God. It is to speak about a being and event which are not under human control and foresight. For this reason Barth argued that when we have the Bible as the Word of God, and accept its witness, we are summoned to remember the Lord of the Bible and to give him the glory.⁵²

Barth’s approach in his dogmatics is characteristic of how he dealt with his theological reflection in general. For Barth the Church Dogmatics was never meant to be a complete account of his commentary on what the Word says to us today. Seen in this way it becomes easy to understand that for Barth, God continues to engage his creatures and to communicate with his people.⁵³ This attitude is clearly articulated when he wrote about his only visit to the USA in 1962 that “I also understand the Church Dogmatics (which can now also be read in America), not as the conclusion, but as the initiation of a new exchange of views about the question of proper theology, the established knowledge of God, and the obedient service of God among and for humanity”.⁵⁴

The Word of God is considered the primary factor in explaining the relationship between God and humanity. Watson maintains that Barth’s Church Dogmatics is nothing other than a sustained meditation on the texts of Holy Scripture,

⁵⁰ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 525.

⁵¹ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 525.

⁵² Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 527.

⁵³ It is for this reason that Klappert chose to locate under the rubric of the foundations of Karl Barth doctrine of reconciliation the theme “Gottes Offenbarung und menschliche Erfahrung”. Cf. B Klappert, *Versöhnung und Befreiung: Versuche, Karl Barth kontextuell zu verstehen*. Düsseldorf: Neukirchener-verlag, 1994: 3ff.

⁵⁴ Cf. K Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963: xi-xii.

in all the richness and diversity with which these texts elaborate their single theme: a divine-human action constitutive both of divine and of human being.⁵⁵

He continues to assert that “attentiveness to the biblical texts is required of the theologian because of the *particularity* of theology’s subject matter. If theology consist in the study of the manifold phenomena of human religiousness, with the intention of tracing them back to their common roots in human experience of the world’s transcended limit, then the theologian’s attentiveness to the Bible would be a matter of secondary rather than primary importance”.⁵⁶

Barth’s engagement of the Bible as the Word of God has not always been of this nature. McCormack for instance argues that in Romans I and II, the central theological theme was that of the Kingdom of God and that this was only emphasised less since 1924 when the theme of the Kingdom gave way to the centrality of an incarnational Christology.⁵⁷ Whatever the case may be, it cannot be denied that the centrality of the Word occupied a pivotal place in Barth’s theological reflection since his abandonment of liberal theology.

That the Church Dogmatics should be construed as incomplete suggests the possibility that God still wills to speak to us in this current context. Scripture is therefore witness to the fact that God wills to speak to us in the current situations.⁵⁸ This understanding is already visible in Barth’s 1925 response to the World Council of Alliance of the Reformed Churches held in Cardiff, where Barth delineated his understanding of what constituted a Reformed creed.⁵⁹ These views are also contained in his Church Dogmatics, which followed later. Webster was certainly correct when he maintained that the CD was not an authoritarian final expression of some truth about God, but a work of celebration, a work which tried to put into words

⁵⁵ Cf. F Watson, ‘The Bible’ in: J. Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Karl Barth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 57.

⁵⁶ Cf. F Watson, ‘The Bible’, 59.

⁵⁷ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 19.

⁵⁸ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 473.

⁵⁹ See Barth’s response to the question of the desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed confession in K Barth, 1962: 112.

what happens when we are caught up in and transformed by a movement, by a living, speaking event and gift.⁶⁰

Similarly, maintaining that this work was merely a commentary on the Word of God and not the Word of God as such, impels us to ponder Barth's fixation with biblical exegesis. There have been numerous instances where commentators of Barthian theology have picked up on his intense engagement with the Bible and theist explication.⁶¹ To this effect, Webster has noted that Barth's biblical writings are treated in the CD as a quarry for theological themes, or as exemplification of his break with theological liberalism, rather than as straightforward attempts to talk about the contents of the Bible.⁶²

Barth grasped however that the Bible is a field of divine activity, thus to speak of scripture as the Word of God is to offer "a description of God's action in the Bible".⁶³ What is of particular importance of Holy Scripture is that it assumes a witnessing position which points away from itself and thereby generates a testimony of speaking and writing about that other.⁶⁴ For Barth the church was the most likely place where this word could be best understood.

Barth conceded to the interaction between the Word of God and the words of human beings. It is for this reason that he wrote:

"[W]hen we speak of the inspiration of the Bible or when we confess that the Bible is the Word of God, on the one side, in the sphere of time and sense, in the concrete life of the church and of our own life as members of the church, we have to think of a twofold reality. There is first the question of the text of the biblical witness or rather of a definite portion of this text, which in a specific time and situation claims the attention of specific human beings or of a specific individual. If now it is true in time, as it is true in eternity, that the Bible is the Word of God, then ... God himself now says what the text says. If God speaks to humanity he really speaks the language of this

⁶⁰ J Webster, 2000: 53.

⁶¹ Cf. J Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001: 87-110.

⁶² J Webster, 2001: 89. Emphasis added.

⁶³ K Barth, 1936: 110.

⁶⁴ K Barth, 1936: 112.

concrete human word of humanity. That is the right and necessary truth in the concept of verbal inspiration”.⁶⁵

Fundamentally, Barth wished to illustrate an affirmation in the CD. He wanted to emphasise that we cannot think about the event of revelation without remembering at once the human being who hears and knows it.⁶⁶ For that reason there is a definite anthropological dimension to our talk about the Word of God. Webster asserts that this dimension is not free-standing, nor something contributed by the human hearer independent of the event of the Word; instead, revelation itself creates its own hearers, thereby placing the hearer firmly in the picture.⁶⁷ It is certainly true then that Barth’s concern during the 1920s was not necessarily the ostensible “crisis of representation” in European high culture. Instead, he was more anxious about dogmatics and exegesis and what proper yardstick could be devised that could serve the hearing of the Word best.

The work that Barth did on the interpretation of the Bible is therefore of great importance. He was attempting to tell the history of the broader reality, a reality informed by God as its author, in order to point out our own reality and locate it within the broader reality. This is precisely what moved Webster to assert that the CD differed sharply from a dominant mode of theology, which could be termed apologetic or foundationalist because it understood theology as critical, transcendental inquiry into the possibility of Christian belief. Barth’s concern, by contrast, was not with the possibility of “church” but with describing how things looked once one was inside the region or culture of the church.⁶⁸

The panorama of this culture is what Barth was trying to explicate in an article entitled “The Strange new world in the Bible” which he published as early as 1916.⁶⁹ There are certain things that make this strange world interesting to those who are

⁶⁵ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 532.

⁶⁶ K Barth, 1936: 191.

⁶⁷ J Webster, 2000: 57.

⁶⁸ J Webster, 2000: 51.

⁶⁹ K Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of man*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928: 28ff.

obedient. It does not promise interesting incentives and yet it promises a number of innovative incentives. The door to this world and into this culture is the Bible, Barth wrote:

“We are with Moses in the wilderness. For forty years he has been living among sheep, doing penance for an over-hasty act. What change has come over him? We are told; it is apparently not our concern. But suddenly there comes to him also a call: Moses, Moses! – a great command: Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt! – and a simple assurance: Certainly I will be with thee”.⁷⁰

Barth’s emphasis on the importance of the Bible clearly demonstrates that he wished for the CD to be dictated to by the Holy Scriptures alone. Wallace is therefore correct in maintaining that to understand Barth’s theological hermeneutic, one must first grasp his doctrine of the Word of God.⁷¹ This emphasis on the centrality of scripture echoes what Webster thought when he said “Barth is presenting a more extended and architectonic version of the understanding of the Bible and its interpretation with which he had worked in the biblical commentaries he began writing twenty years before. As with those earlier treatments, the claim from which everything else radiates concerns the relation between Scripture and revelation”.⁷²

There is a paramount reason why Barth saw his CD as a comment that the Word of God had to be central in any theological discourse. Barth stresses the centrality of the Word and with this insistence puts the CD in contradistinction to Roman Catholicism which, in addition to the Word, adds secondary authorities such as the apostolic tradition and the tradition of the church as embodied in the doctrinal office of the Pope, thus identifying the church with revelation.

Barth’s insistence on the CD as a comment on the centrality of the Word of God was radical in that it also challenged modern Protestantism. He differentiated modern

⁷⁰ K Barth, 1928: 29-29.

⁷¹ See M Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur and the New Yale Theology*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990: 3.

⁷² J Webster, 2000: 65.

Protestantism and especially the sects in so far as they gave to history or to single significant historical events a character from the revelation which was fundamentally but quantitatively different from the revelation of the Bible.⁷³

When arguing that dogmatics takes cognisance of the biblical revelation, one can understand why it is necessary to deny dogmatics the freedom to be an autonomous branch of church theology independent of the witness of Scripture.⁷⁴ Stripping it of this freedom insinuates that it has no potential of becoming an a-historical or a psychological, political or philosophical dogmatics. Dogmatics may or may not be directly concerned with exegesis; it may or may not make actual textual references. But necessarily it takes the form of its thought from its submission to the biblical *Deus dixit*.⁷⁵

Because the CD has its particular historicity and socio-economic context, it is necessary to appreciate the fact that it shall have to constantly ponder the manner in which God communicates with humanity and how God continues to communicate with humanity today. Barth acknowledges that the Word of God is never available in a straightforward way. He appreciates that it is neither a deposit of truth upon which the church can draw, nor a set of statements which can be consulted. He understands that the Word of God is an act which God undertook. Human commentary which is justified by God is necessary because the Word of God is a complex but unified event in which God has spoken, speaks and will speak; an event which encounters us through the human means of scripture and its promulgation in the church.⁷⁶

It is this one event, revealed in Jesus Christ, which gives stature to Barth's "until further notice". Therefore, although the revelation of God in Christ was a single event in history, the process of revelation is a continuous one, for God is still speaking today and will continue to speak in the future.

⁷³ K Barth, 1962: 112-113.

⁷⁴ K Barth, 1956a: 822.

⁷⁵ K Barth, 1956a: 822.

⁷⁶ J Webster, 2000: 55.

3.3.2 The church as subject of dogmatics

For Barth it seems impossible to speak about the essence of the Bible as the Word of God without making reference to the church. This is the case in the Church Dogmatics because he considers scripture as the Word of God for and to the church.⁷⁷ Barth's Church Dogmatics attempted to be nothing more than a mere contribution to the enhancement of the church's life. Jonker agrees with this. He maintains that Barth's theology was born in the heat of his ecclesiastical labour as a pastor who wanted to be nothing more than a theologian for the church.⁷⁸

Sykes reports that Barth had asked how theology, which he defined as "a technically ordered investigation into the truth about God as the object of ecclesial proclamation", was involved in the divide of "realism" and "idealism". Barth, says Sykes, remained adamant that theology was related to the church as its "sphere of life" in the way medicine was related to physiology.⁷⁹ The subject of theology for Barth was not just God, but God in His revelation, which is present only in the message which the church brings to humanity and therefore to the world. This is better stated by Sykes when he says that theology is the subject of the church, since "God is the content of the church's sphere of life, and theology is possible only to the extent that God makes himself accessible in it".⁸⁰

When it is maintained that the church is the subject of dogmatics, it is implied that dogmatics has a particular task. But added to this is also an ecumenical dimension.⁸¹ The particular task of the Church Dogmatics is to define the character of

⁷⁷ Cf. K Barth, 1956a: 479.

⁷⁸ The importance of the church as a subject in the theology of Karl Barth cannot be emphasised more strongly. A veteran anti-Apartheid theologian, W D Jonker, has devoted an entire chapter in one of his unpublished works on Barth and the Church (cf. W D Jonker, *Die Relevansie van die Kerk: Aktuele Teologiese reaksies op die vraag na die betekenis van die Kerk in die Wêreld*. HSRC Report: Stellenbosch. April 1987: 59).

⁷⁹ S Sykes cited in: M Rumscheidt (ed.), *The way of theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*. Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986: 1.

⁸⁰ S Sykes cited in: M Rumscheidt (ed.), 1986: 1.

⁸¹ Klappert is convinced that Karl Barth's theology is a legacy left for the ecumenical church. See the article 'Der messianische Mensch und die Verheißung der Befreiung' in: B Klappert, 1994: 53.

the Christian community to the outsiders.⁸² A good revised explication of dogmatics is given by Webster when he says that church dogmatics is simply the church standing beneath revelation, exemplifying that openness to correction which is the hallmark of the true hearer of God's Word.⁸³ Because the CD aims to correct and criticise, its initial task is directed towards itself. To look therefore at the CD primarily as a handbook for interfaith dialogue is not only a chimera but also nonsensical.

The CD is intended for the church and Barth should therefore be excused when it seems that he does not provide helpful hints on how to interpret the Christian faith in the light of the many other faiths that co-exist with it today. Although there is an appreciated dearth in terms of engaging other faiths or religious insights, such a dearth should not be taken to suggest that the revelation of God is only confined to the church.

After having made a wrong start by naming his initial work the Christian Dogmatics, Barth maintained that his substitution of the word "Christian" with church indicated that dogmatics from the start was never a free science. It was bound to the sphere of the church which was the only place where it would be meaningful and possible.⁸⁴ In addition to the particularity of the CD is the ecumenical dimension which is also described in Barth's response to the council of Cardiff.

Barth is aware that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is also made accessible to the whole world.⁸⁵ Similarly, in Barth's definition of what a Reformed creed is, the CD addresses itself to the widest possible public, demanding recognition and consideration, not for the individuals who accept it, but for the content of what they confess, which is universal.⁸⁶ For Barth this understanding is very much at home in the Reformed tradition and is illustrated by Calvin and Zwingli in their prefaces to their main theological works.⁸⁷

⁸² K Barth, 1962: 112ff.

⁸³ J Webster, 2000: 68. Emphasis added.

⁸⁴ E Busch, 1976: 211.

⁸⁵ K Barth, 1962: 112.

⁸⁶ Calvin and Zwingli cited in K Barth, 1962: 117.

⁸⁷ K Barth, 1962: 117.

Among the many issues the CD wished to address, it hoped to ensure that dogmatic theology would be understood as a discipline undertaken within the bounds of the church, “where the Word of God is heard in the preaching of the gospel, where we are face to face with the mystery of Christ as true God and true Man [sic], and where we are given, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to participate in Him, in his Life, death and resurrection”.⁸⁸ The CD touched on some fundamental aspects of the life of the church.⁸⁹

Although the primary audience of the CD was the church, it must not be forgotten that this work did not fall from the sky, but was also informed to a large extent by the context in which it originated. It is therefore imperative to understand what lies beyond some of the facets Barth deals with. For example, it is imperative to have some understanding of the events which prevailed in Barth’s time to be able to appreciate his rejection of certain stances adopted by his contemporaries.⁹⁰ Busch is therefore correct when he maintains that we really only begin to understand Barth’s work when we begin to understand what motivated it.⁹¹

Even though the subject of the CD is the church, and that it is therefore a confession of those whose allegiance is to Christ, the church must nonetheless be careful of the idea that a confession as a matter of the faith should only be heard in the “area of the church”. The area of the church stands in the world, as outwardly the

⁸⁸ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. II/2, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957a: x.

⁸⁹ Numerous books have appeared where theologians have investigated the many different aspects with which Barth deals in his theology: cf. W Anderson, *Aspects of the Theology of Karl Barth*. Washington D C: University Press of America, 1981; G Bromiley, *An introduction to the theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979; G C Berkouwer, *The triumph of grace in the theology of Karl Barth*. London: Paternoster, 1956; J Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: eternity and election in the theology of Karl Barth*. Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1989. The list of works which appeared with the intention of dealing with Barth’s work remains endless. It was the length of this very list which impelled Busch to look at Barth himself and to compile an account of his theology from his own, cf. E Busch, 2004.

⁹⁰ It has already been said that Barth was always involved in a dialogue. By noting this fact it becomes clear that Barth was engaging inclinations that sought to subordinate the independence of theology to other sciences, for example, issues such as Communism and the opposition to it are dealt with in Church Dogmatics IV/4.2: 139; secularisation is dealt with in Church Dogmatics IV/2: 667.

⁹¹ E Busch, 2004: 40.

church stands in the village or in the city, beside the school, the cinema and the railway station; thus the church exists for the sake of the world.⁹²

For this reason the church also has a particular responsibility of making itself relevant and accessible to the world. In disputing claims that Barth was opposed to modernity, Jonker has convincingly pointed out that Barth on the contrary remained a modern man. Indeed Barth was not impressed by some modernistic inclinations that tended to make theology subservient to them, yet he more than any other presented the church with a new sense of awakening, reminding it that it belonged to the world.⁹³ Barth was convinced that the church only existed because of its mission, and that the mission of the church was to be a church for the world. It is for this reason that the church can only be understood in view of its calling as well as its service to the world.⁹⁴

With *Der Römerbrief* Barth developed a serious critique of the church as a human construct which seeks a space for God in this world in contrast to the gospel which is displayed as undeserved free grace. Essentially *Der Römerbrief* attempted to chastise the human pretentiousness which had become characteristic of a church that entertained the liberal theology of its time. This critique is continued in Barth's later work. The *Church Dogmatics* endeavours to render the church as vibrant and not stationary. It is thus an important subject for the church, for it seeks to correct this error. Among the numerous issues with which Barth wrestled, the subject of the rejection of religion deserves concise mention here.

Barth charges modern Protestantism with having lost the object of revelation in all its uniqueness to the concept "religion". The result therefore has been that one could start from religion and therefore humanity, and in that way subordinate

⁹² K Barth, *Dogmatics in outline*. London: SCM Press. 1966a: 32.

⁹³ Cf. W D Jonker, 'Turning to the World (on Karl Barth's interpretation of the modern era)' in: J Mouton & B Lategan (eds.), *The Relevance of Theology for the 1990s*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council. 1994: 540.

⁹⁴ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/3.2, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961b: 762ff.

revelation to religion – and ultimately merge the two.⁹⁵ In this way religion becomes a human attempt at knowing God something which endangers Christianity.

Barth affirms the rightful place of his dogmatics in the church. He is nevertheless quick to point out that the church should be careful so as not to fall into a trap of arrogance. He admits that revelation singles out the church as the locus of the true church, but that this does not mean that the Christian religion as such is the fulfilled nature of human religion. It does not mean that the Christian religion is the true religion, fundamentally superior to all other religions.⁹⁶

3.3.3 The Church Dogmatics as a public witness to Jesus Christ

Dogmatics is bound to the church. In addition, it has to be stated that the church cannot give its own witness from its own sources. Barth maintains that in church proclamation and the special questions and concerns of the teaching church in every age, there can be no question of anything other than the repetition and confirmation of the biblical witness.⁹⁷

McCormack has rightly observed that the trademark of Barth's theology is the prayer, *Veni, Creator Spiritus* (Come, Creator Spirit).⁹⁸ Mangina continues to observe this pivotal trademark, arguing that with it Barth develops the doctrine of Christ's prophetic office in explicit eschatological terms. He argues that Jesus' personal presence is his *parousia*, a concept containing in it three forms corresponding to resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, and Christ's future.⁹⁹

To understand the significance of the church as a witnessing community begs us to appreciate that the confession of the church that Jesus Christ is Lord is not to be confined to the wall of the church, but that it should transcend those barriers that barricade the church from the world. The Church Dogmatics is simply a human

⁹⁵ K Barth, 1956a: 294.

⁹⁶ K Barth, 1956a: 298.

⁹⁷ K Barth, 1956a: 822.

⁹⁸ Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 31-32.

⁹⁹ J Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The practical knowledge of God*. Washington: Peter Lang, 2001: 78.

witness that Jesus Christ is Lord. It is an attempt at eradicating the fallacies that there exist other lords besides Jesus Christ as the head of the church.

This confession is nowhere more clearly exhibited than in the first volumes of the CD which are entitled the “Doctrine of the Word of God”. In addition, the witness of the church to the reality of Jesus Christ can also be construed as a response of the members of this community to the reality of Jesus Christ. It is consequently a response informed by an obedient thankfulness to a God who wills a contract between Himself and this community. The principal catalyst for this response is enveloped in the little word “Emmanuel” which is rendered “God with us”.

The Christian community is aware that “God with us” suggests its distinction from others who still lack this knowledge. Even so, in the witness of this community the Christian community ought to be wary of the fact that it as a community is not too quick to haughtily pretend that its knowledge of God is tangible. Barth counsels that “Emmanuel” which is translated “God with you, God with thee and thee”, is the very theme that Christians have hear again and again. For Barth as “recipients they are also bearers of the message. And to this extent it is not only them. They dare to make the statement that God is the One who is with them as God, amongst men [sic] who do not yet know this”.¹⁰⁰ This suggests that, as the witness of Christ to the public, the church should also continuously hear this same witness.

The witness to Jesus Christ has everything to do with the concealment and the revelation of God. Therefore the statement “God with us” clearly suggests that God is with us human beings, but this also distinguishes the Christian community from others as the community to whom God has revealed Himself. Yet in this revelation this community is always learning this knowledge of God afresh.¹⁰¹

The ambiguity around the possibility of knowing God poses a significant question. The question whether this God can be known apart from the power of His being in His life and of His life in His acts needs to be considered. For Barth this God

¹⁰⁰ K Barth, 1956b: 4.

¹⁰¹ K Barth, 1956b: 4-5.

can only be known if the Christian community is a community of witnesses.¹⁰² This witnessing is crystallised in the act of prayer. For Barth a significant example of prayer can only be found in the Lord's Prayer. He therefore deals with the numerous petitions which are raised in this prayer, particularly zeal of the one who prays this prayer.

The witnessing of the Christian community is influenced by the view that this community is a passionate one. It is therefore because of 'this passion that it can in no circumstances be a community which exudes cowardice, a community of blind worms, which is bored'.¹⁰³ Barth maintains that Christians are witnesses to Jesus Christ because they are people who know about the self-declaration of God, whose beginning has already taken place and whose consummation is still to come. As such they suffer because He is so well known and yet also so unknown to the world, the church and above all themselves. They pray that He will bring his self-declaration to its goal with the manifestation of His light that destroys all darkness. Meanwhile, in accordance with this prayer they have a zeal for the primacy of the validity of His Word in the world, in the church, and above all in their own lives.¹⁰⁴

The witness of the church to Jesus Christ is imperative simply because it acknowledges the concentric circles in which God is known and unknown in different ways, in which God's name is hallowed and honoured as it should be, but where God's name is also desecrated, disputed and slandered. The world is considered the outer circle; the church is the middle circle; while the inner and personal life of the Christian is the inner circle.¹⁰⁵

All these circles make sense when they are understood to be fused together into one whole. Christians therefore concede that they remain as much a part of the world as they remain a part of the church. Within the realm of the outer circle falls the reality of world history which to a certain extent is different from natural history. World

¹⁰² K Barth, 1956b: 6-7.

¹⁰³ K Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV*, 4. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1981a: 111.

¹⁰⁴ K Barth. 1981a: 111.

¹⁰⁵ K Barth, 1981a: 114.

history catalogues the aspirations, enterprises and accomplishments of humankind. Barth admits that it is this very history which includes aspects such as economics, culture, different worldviews as well as different kinds of powers.¹⁰⁶

However, it is not the obedient response which is made by the Christian community as displayed in the form of prayer which gives structure to the necessity of witness, but the reconciling work of God initiated by God for the world. Because this witnessing has to take place within the world, it therefore illustrates that atonement is made for the world. Barth celebrates the prestigious position which the church has in contrast to the world with its limited knowledge of God. However, he continues to emphasise that the church, which is constituted by human beings, is unable to make anyone a Christian. He acknowledges that the Christian community has leaders, but the reality is that they also are mere human beings and therefore do not possess the freedom and the power to make others Christians.¹⁰⁷ The act of making one a Christian is not instituted by a human being, but falls entirely within the realm of God.

Thus far this truth does not suggest that we are not to pay heed to the ministry of these leaders. Barth suggests that the witnesses can only trust and hope and pray that this *conversion* will happen, as they themselves have only been able to receive the fact that they are witnesses and may render this service.¹⁰⁸

3.3.4 The Church Dogmatics rooted in historic and contextual reality

Recently a number of testimonies appeared on the question of Barth theology and its relationship to its context. This testifies that Barth's theology seriously engages its context.¹⁰⁹ Contrary to the time where Barth was read in abstraction and his CD made

¹⁰⁶ K Barth, 1981a: 117.

¹⁰⁷ K Barth, 1958: 306.

¹⁰⁸ K Barth, 1958: 306. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁹ For a detailed discussion on the subject of Barth and his engagement of politics cf. G Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000; F Jehle, *Ever against the stream: the politics of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002; C Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of*

out to be so Biblicist that it was thought that it could not be used at all to give guidance on issues facing those on the fringes of society, this almost radical exposé of Barth's political theology has been conveniently used to brand Barth an anarchist.¹¹⁰

Given such diverse interpretations of Barth's theology, it is the contention of this dissertation that it is dangerous and careless to claim that Karl Barth, and therefore his theology as encapsulated in his CD, stands in opposition to hegemony without expounding this claim. The potential danger of this approach is put into perspective by Webster. He maintains that "ground clearing and construction went alongside each other all the time, of course, as Barth found himself having to say "no" in order to create a space for the affirmations which he wished to make. Yet it is crucial that the polemic should not be construed in such a way that Barth is made to appear a purely destructive thinker".¹¹¹

This study aligns itself with Gorringer's interpretation of Gramsci that it refers to a cultural reality which is bound up with the existence of ideologies.¹¹² Consequently it concurs with Gorringer that Barth was indeed opposed to hegemony. An attempt was made to point out that Barth had remained a devout campaigner against systems, meaning the deliberate or haphazard erection of barriers in which theology could be conducted. It must then be admitted that Barth was indeed opposed to hegemonies that justified the confinement of theological reflection. Moreover, Barth's insistence that theology could not be wedded to any ideology is clear enough.¹¹³

As much as Barth aspired to be a serious theologian and understood his existence on this earth to be temporal, it must nonetheless also be indicated that he

freedom. Glasgow: Collins, 1989; T Gorringer, *Karl Barth against Hegemony*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹¹⁰ An essay that deals with the anarchist inclinations in Barth's theology is contained in the volume edited by G Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and radical politics*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976. Eller uses the work of E Busch (1976) to challenge these anarchist tendencies. Cf. V Eller, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' primacy over the powers*. Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986.

¹¹¹ Cf. J Webster, 2000: 21.

¹¹² Cf. T Gorringer, 1999: 2.

¹¹³ T Gorringer, 1999: 5.

remained a man of this world and therefore a theologian of and for the world. Hence Barth's perpetual plea to the Christian community that it ought not to evade this reality but that it should appreciate it. This is very well articulated by Barth's statement that retreats behind Chinese walls never served theology well.¹¹⁴

A number of catalysts impelled Barth to become suspicious of hegemony, be that theological or political. A greater impulse was the situation in which theology found itself during the 19th century. Barth believed that during the 19th century theology had retreated to philosophy under the directive of Schleiermacher.

The theological leadership was thus dictated by the liberals who asked the questions and consequently provided the answers to those questions. However, although it was the liberal voice in theology which set the standard according to which theological questions should be asked, there remained nonetheless outsiders in the form of Christoff Blumhardt, Hermann Kohlbrügge, Franz Ovebeck, Søren Kierkegaard and others.¹¹⁵ It was theology's departure from its essence which annoyed Barth the most and instilled in him the inclination to oppose that hegemony. He maintains that with the advent of 19th century:

“theology was measured against the impressive achievements and personalities of the so-called classical era of German culture, philosophic and poetic; against the breathtaking political movements of war of liberation in 1813-15, followed by the years of revolution and restoration, the foundation-laying of the empires and the subsequent repercussions of all these events down to World War I. Above all, theology was measured against the all-embracing triumphs of the natural sciences, of philosophy, of history, of modern technology, as well as against Beethoven, Wagner, and Brahms, Gottfried Keller and Theodor Fontane, Ibsen and Sidermann”.¹¹⁶

As a response to liberal theology, Evangelical Theology¹¹⁷ (which is understood as the science and doctrine of the commerce and communion between God and humanity

¹¹⁴ K Barth, 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century' in: K Barth, *The Humanity of God*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982: 17.

¹¹⁵ K Barth, 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century': 11.

¹¹⁶ K Barth, 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century': 14.

¹¹⁷ K Barth, 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century': 9.

and is informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ as heard in Holy Scripture) would have had to prove its effectiveness against liberal theology. As a one-time supporter of liberal theology, Barth had already come to acknowledge the functioning of theological hegemony which had succeeded in imprisoning humanity and had contributed to the plunging of Europe into chaos. It is in light of the European situation and what prevailed then that Gorrings's claim is justified that Barth was against hegemony. Gorrings is furthermore also correct in placing both Barth and Gramsci on the same plane when it comes to the subject of hegemony.

At least from Barth's point of view, a number of examples could be cited to substantiate his opposition. Gorrings points out that these examples could be traced from his denial of the sovereignty of accepted scientific method in CD I/1, to his opposition to "natural theology", his refusal to condemn Communist regimes as he had condemned National Socialism, to his about-turn on baptism. All this was a refusal of hegemony, a refusal of what was self-evident to most of his contemporaries.¹¹⁸ Yet Barth understood very well that an aspect of hegemony will remain with us for quite some time to come. Barth was therefore more opposed to the incarcerating element inherent in hegemony.

This is demonstrated in a number of instances in his life after Barth became disgusted with liberal theology. His first commentary on the epistle of Paul to the Romans is a prime example of how Barth asserted his opposition to hegemony. In addition to this, his Tambach lecture of 1919 illustrates that Barth had moved further away from the dominant forces of his time. He was invited because of a particular view the organisers of the meeting held of him and his theology. But at Tambach we instead meet a Barth who deliberately deviates from those views. In doing so, he refuses to allow himself to be cocooned. He admits that the Christian could be, should be, a socialist, but not a religious socialist.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ T Gorrings, 1999: 4-5.

¹¹⁹ J Cort, *Christian Socialism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988: 209.

When theological hegemony insisted that man should be the centre around which everything secular and divine should be organised, as happened during the Nazi regime, Barth insisted that we had to obey God instead of human beings. He deliberately joined the Social Democratic Party in 1932 and vigorously supported Günther Dehn¹²⁰. Again, when he was invited to present the prestigious Gifford lectures where, in accordance with the testament of Lord Gifford, he had to speak on natural theology, he deliberately dealt with the Scottish Confession – Barth believed that this confession in itself contained definite political undertones.

The CD has its own socio-historic and political context. It is therefore not without reason that Barth warned his Japanese friends who wanted to celebrate his 70th birthday in a “strange world”. Acknowledging the beautiful task of theology, Barth maintained that his Japanese friends should allow themselves to be taken from one place to the other by their theological labour as he was taken from place to place by his work. He however warned that the discipline of theology demanded free people who did not feel bound to any school of thought and who nonetheless appreciated the socio-political realm in which theology was executed.¹²¹ All those who embarked on a crusade to apply Barth’s theology to their diverse contexts had to appreciate the fact that Barth’s theology was temporal and that it had its own context which gave shape to his theology.

The concept of politics is a broad concept in Barth’s theological thinking. If one searched the Church Dogmatics with the intention of finding a place where Barth deals with this as a subject that remained important to Barth till his death, one will be disappointed to realise that no such place exists. When Barth refers to ethics, in essence a mere branch of dogmatics, he simultaneously refers to politics as well, because with politics one is also confronted with human behaviour and its relation to the electing God. It can be argued that when Barth asserts that ethics is essentially also dogmatics, it can be asserted that politics is essentially also dogmatics, for does

¹²⁰ Günther Dehn was one of the first targets of Nazi persecution in Academe. He was a man who ironically had first been led to left-wing Christianity through the influence of the anti-Semitic Stöcker.

¹²¹ K Barth, *Offene Briefe* : 1945-1968. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag. 1984a: 551-556.

politics also not seek to investigate human conduct and the organisation of human relations to God?

The political service to which Barth refers here is informed by the acknowledgement that the political order is in essence a graceless order. Although it enforces law and order by the sword, it is nonetheless something that, with all its shortcomings, has been ordained by God. Barth argues that because Christians acknowledge the order of God in the order of the sword, they themselves can neither be anti-political nor a-political to this order, nor alien, indifferent and aloof.¹²² When one attempts to scrutinise the CD more cautiously, it becomes immediately clear that even when removed from direct political praxis, the CD has definite political undertones.

Already in the earlier volumes of his CD Barth deals with the subject of politics without affording it an extensive platform. Concerning political implications which are intrinsic to his CD, Barth maintained that:

“I am firmly convinced that, especially in the broad field of politics, we cannot reach the clarifications which are necessary today, and on which theology might have a word to say, as indeed it ought to have, without first reaching the comprehensive clarifications in and about theology which are our present concern. I believe that it is expected of the church and its theology – a world within the world no less than chemistry or the theatre – that it should keep precisely to the rhythm of its own relevant concerns, and thus consider well what are the real needs of the day by which its own programme should be directed”.¹²³

To be sure, no particular theological reflection which is enveloped in his CD can be construed to exclude the political realm in which this work existed. It is perhaps also helpful to maintain that Barth’s awareness of the complexity of the concept of politics had impelled him to grow in his understanding of the function of this subject. When dealing with the question of who Pontius Pilate was and how it came about that his name made it into the classical Christian creed, Barth insisted that the importance of

¹²² K Barth, 1957b: 722.

¹²³ K Barth, 1936: xvi.

mentioning this character was to manifest the existence of the Christian church in this world.¹²⁴

For Barth the importance of acknowledging Pilate in connection with the passion of Christ, suggested that the mercy of God and humanity's rebellion against this merciful God took place not in heaven but concretely here on earth, therefore the Christian church would do well not to escape from this reality and retreat to a "better land". To acknowledge this reality which was made manifest between God and Pilate and which was a historical and political reality, was to bid farewell to a pseudo-innocence¹²⁵ which tempted one to close one's eyes and ears to what one had seen and heard. Barth deals extensively with this pseudo-innocence when he insists that it is not necessary *and possible* to close our eyes to this, for God had not closed His either.¹²⁶

The incident between Christ and Pilate is also interesting in that it displays the state order of the Roman Empire as a bad order and exposes an evil element in politics. Yet Christ's recognition of Pilate's authority suggests that he also subscribed to it and understood Pilate's authority to be coming from God. It is this recognition of Pilate's authority as human authority which renounces all non-political Christianity and recognises the Christian's responsibility for the maintenance of the state.¹²⁷

Barth's call for the renunciation of a non-political Christianity ostracised him from the dominant pattern in which the church had only to proclaim the simple gospel while the law was externally enforced by the state. Barth replaced the concept

¹²⁴ K Barth, 1966a: 108-113.

¹²⁵ Allan Boesak in his dissertation employs the psychologist Rollo May's usage of the concept 'innocence'. May makes a distinction between innocence and pseudo-innocence. While he admits that the former is well known, he argues that pseudo-innocence as it is stated refers to a form of innocence that is not genuine. This comes to the fore because it is believed that once someone has experienced something by witnessing it, the individual cannot depart from that which he/she has experience and denies that he/she has not seen or witnessed it. Boesak then applies this in the context of apartheid South Africa. He challenged white liberals who were favoured by the system because of their whiteness and purported to be aligned with the plight of black people while pretending that they were not seeing the injustices which were being perpetrated against black people in fear of being deprived of the incentives that they enjoyed from the state. It is to this type of innocence that the people of South Africa have to bid farewell to. For more details on this argument see A Boesak. *Farewell to Innocence: A social-ethical study on Black theology and Black power*. D.Th dissertation. Kok: Kampen University, 1976: 11ff.

¹²⁶ K Barth, 1966a: 109. Emphasis added.

¹²⁷ K Barth, 1966a: 112.

of state or authority by the concept of civil community in 1946.¹²⁸ We are only able to fully understand the concept of civil community, which Barth juxtaposes with the concept of the Christian community, if we look at them from the backdrop of what is understood by the church's involvement in politics. Both these concepts furthermore presuppose that each has a unique, coded language. Both have their own language, for both are informed by particular histories. Thus Barth asserts that, since the latter also exists within the realm of the former, it is necessary and relevant that the latter translates its language so that it becomes intelligible to the former.¹²⁹

The importance of understanding the language of theology is something which had helped Barth to move beyond the surface of theology and therefore politics. In Barth's lecture fragments which were published posthumously, he attempts to deal more readily with the subject of politics. Barth remains aware that the subject itself remains problematic. He is aware that there is both good as well as bad politics, i.e. political absolutism.¹³⁰

Barth engages political absolutism from an eschatological point of view, acknowledging the Lordless powers, but negating that they stand in equal sovereignty to the Lordship of Christ.¹³¹ It is at this point that the recent work of Timothy Gorringer is called to mind. Gorringer has recently aspired to argue that Barth's theology is chiefly against hegemony.¹³² He makes a fascinating comparison with Antonio Gramsci who also dealt with the subject of hegemony in his own way. Although it can be argued that the approach of both these individuals to the Lordless powers differ on several levels, Barth's being eschatological and therefore theological,

¹²⁸ E Busch, 2004: 170.

¹²⁹ In reference to the language of the church, Barth here thinks of the language of the Bible, particularly the languages of Hebrew and Greek and therefore the translations thereof. He is however also thinking particularly of the Christian tradition which informs this language. It is a language which is not spoken by angels but is spoken by a community which is called forth from the world and yet remains very much part of this world. Because of this the 'language of Canaan' should be translated into everyday language, a language which the average person on the street can hear and understand. Cf. K Barth, 1966a: 31f.

¹³⁰ K Barth, 1981a: 219ff.

¹³¹ K Barth, 1981a: 215.

¹³² Cf. T Gorringer, 1999.

while Gramsci's was political and therefore mythical, both these individuals had managed to percolate the concept politics and had begun to see beyond it.

It is in the light of this that we agree with Gorringe when he claims that from first to last Barth's work was against hegemony and that this above all distinguishes his work as a contextual theologian. The concept hegemony begs clarification and in an attempt to do so, Gorringe starts by looking at the context from which his hypothesis that Barth's work is against hegemony stems.¹³³

What was fundamental for Barth was not to merely see and understand the concept politics, but to be able to see beyond it and to grasp the manner in which it operated. The impressive example which Barth employed to illuminate the intricacies of politics and its functioning was the work by Thomas Hobbes entitled *Leviathan* which appeared in 1651. (See footnote in chapter 1. section. 1.5)

Barth's work on the Lordless powers illustrates that politics is best understood as an all-encompassing phenomenon. These Lordless powers to which Barth refers are politics, economics and ideology, which are by nature closely related. Therefore, while speaking about *Leviathan*, Barth simultaneously also speaks about Mammon (the embodiment of economics), who is closely related to *Leviathan* and equally devastating and enslaving.

Ideology is another Lordless power which warrants our brief attention here. Barth does not deny the indispensability of ideas to display what is felt, but nonetheless wrestles with this concept. He admits the reality of ideologies, but asserts that chaos ensues when the ideology possesses the individual instead of the other way round he individual the ideology.¹³⁴

The ability to look beyond politics and to detect the forces that underpin politics had let Barth to compliment people such as Karl Marx and the social theoreticians who have seen *Leviathan* from various angles. In re-enacting *Leviathan*

¹³³ Cf. T Gorringe, 1999: 6f.

¹³⁴ K Barth, 1981a: 225.

in his century, Barth concluded that it had been made manifest in totalitarian states or dictatorships such as in Fascism, National Socialism and Stalinism.¹³⁵

To Barth, the Lordless power remains a reality which cannot be ignored, but this reality is not independent of God. Hence he argues that:

“these forces derive power and lordship over him [sic] because of the disintegration of his relationship to God. He cannot deny their power or shake it off. Nevertheless, it is not ruled out that he can be liberated from them and protect and defend himself against their dominion. Troublesome though they are, they are only contingent and relative determinations. Related to this relativity of their relationship to both God and man is the obscurity, ambivalence, and unintelligibility of their efficacy. Also related to it is the wraithlike transitoriness with which they manifest themselves, one appearing here and another there, then disappearing or retreating to give place to another, then appearing again”.¹³⁶

Barth's refusal to affirm the invincibility of these powers helps him to rid these forces of their independent powers. Had he failed to do so, it would have implied the existence of two types of forces which are in constant conflict with each other for monopoly over the human spirit. Barth is quite aware that these Lordless forces use human beings to achieve their ends.

3.3.5 The Church Dogmatics as ethics

Webster has pointed out that Barth's work has always suffered due to partial readings which expound or criticise his thought on the basis of only a selection from his corpus. He cites an example to substantiate this point. First, he refers to Barth's exegetical writings (both early biblical lectures as well as the amount of expository material in the Church Dogmatics) which have still not been studied thoroughly.¹³⁷ Secondly, he maintains that the same can be said with regard to Barth's work on ethics. Webster holds that although since the 1990s a number of studies of Barth's moral thought have

¹³⁵ K Barth, 1981a: 221.

¹³⁶ K Barth, 1981a: 215.

¹³⁷ Cf. J Webster, 2000: 141.

sought to redress the imbalance, much of the work on Barth goes about its business as if his writings on ethics do not exist.¹³⁸

Admitting that Barth has been a subject of criticism by many who failed to see his engagement with the subject of ethics, Webster believes that there are ways of dealing with this criticism. He asserts that Barth was a moral theologian, not in the sense that he was a professional Christian ethicist, but in the sense that questions of the ground, nature and goals of human moral action were never far from the surface of his work, and often formed a major feature of its intellectual landscape.¹³⁹

It is difficult to see this immediately because Barth's approach to moral theology engages him in a radical recasting of the forms it had taken in Protestant thought since Kant, and the unfamiliar usage of its central concepts and terms. The result, maintains Webster, is that what Barth proposes by way of theological ethics is hard to recognise as such, especially for those who give greater authority to the conventions of modernity.¹⁴⁰

Barth's understanding of ethics is that ethics is an attempt to answer theoretically the question of what may be referred to as good human action.¹⁴¹ Moreover, theological ethics can only be understood to be an integral element of dogmatics.¹⁴² It should be self-evident that dogmatics and therefore the Church Dogmatics is not to be construed as a law and norm, since scripture remains the only law and norm; yet Barth holds that dogmatics is used as a commentary on this law and norm.¹⁴³

Ethics as a subject that remained at the heart of Barth's theology has been misunderstood by many of Barth's critics. In 1928-1929 Barth rendered a complete

¹³⁸ Cf. J Webster, 2000: 141.

¹³⁹ Cf. J Webster, 2000: 142.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. J Webster, 2000: 142.

¹⁴¹ K Barth, 1981a: 4.

¹⁴² In an earlier study Webster illustrated that attempts to read the Church Dogmatics without understanding that ethics is always implied has to be aborted since they routinely disregard tracts of Barth's argument which he considered an inherent part of his dogmatic work. Cf. J Webster (ed.) *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995: 2.

¹⁴³ K Barth, 1962: 118.

cycle on this subject. In 1928, a year after the publication of his so-called “false start” – the Christian Dogmatics – Barth started to repeat his lectures on ethics in a slightly enhanced manner when he moved to Bonn in 1930. They lay characteristic emphasis on the inseparability of ethics and dogmatics, as well as the importance of moral action as the locus of human response to the divine initiative. Webster argues that this work remained unpublished during his lifetime because Barth still appeared to be advocating the idea of the “orders of creation” (that is, relative autonomous moral patterns in created reality) which he felt were abused by many Nazi theologians during the 1930s. Barth vigorously rejected this in the 1930s.¹⁴⁴

Barth’s work referred to here appeared in two volumes in 1972 and 1978 only. One negative aspect of this late publication is the fact that many of Barth’s opponents both in the English-¹⁴⁵ and the German-speaking world have continued to interpret his theological oeuvre in such a way that his ethical thought is considered to be secondary. The positive aspect of the late publication of this work was that Barth’s ethics served as a justification for the orders of creation, which was especially abused in some Protestant circles during the Nazi regime.

Another reason why Barth’s ethics went unnoticed is located in the idea that it is anti-modern. Webster maintains that in its own way, Barth’s ethics is as subversive of some of the axioms of modernity as is the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein.¹⁴⁶

Smit has rightly observed that each volume of the CD ends with a section on ethics.¹⁴⁷ It is however our view that ethics occupies an important position in each section of the CD. Yet this very subject remained incompletely explored, as illustrated by the part on “Ethics and Reconciliation” which Barth was working on when he was

¹⁴⁴ J Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998: 41.

¹⁴⁵ While the work by McCormack is undoubtedly one of the best recent investigations on the theological development of Barth’s theology, McCormack nonetheless fails to offer any insights with regard to the subject of ethics in Barth’s thought. Cf. B McCormack, 1997.

¹⁴⁶ J Webster, 1998: 42.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. D J Smit, ‘ “... The doing of the little righteousness”: On justice in Barth’s view of the Christian life’ in: M Welker and C A Jarvis (eds.), *Loving God with our minds: the Pastor as theologian*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 120f.

suddenly interrupted by other theological obligations and then finally death.¹⁴⁸ When Barth is read as a unit, it soon becomes evident that the subject of ethics had undergone a tremendous metamorphosis from the first volume of the CD where he deals with it to the succeeding ones; nevertheless the basic tenets of theological ethics which are displayed in dogmatics have stayed the same.

The subject of ethics was important for Barth because he believed the church had a particular responsibility towards the concrete life of human beings. Because of this particular task, the church therefore has a pronouncement that it ought to make. This pronouncement is not made in private, but has to be heard and seen by the outside world.¹⁴⁹ For Barth, if the point that the church has something to say to the world is not fully grasped, the church then becomes a “dump dog” and does not fulfil its watchman’s task; its dogmatics *ipso facto* becomes useless.¹⁵⁰

(a) General ethics

Barth deals with the subject of ethics on two levels, thus distinguishing between general ethics and special ethics. General ethics is displayed in the CD as the general doctrine of the command of God and therefore as the doctrine of the function in whose fulfilment it has and manifests its essence: the claim, decision and judgment of God which in his Word became evident as the command confronting human action. Therefore, like the doctrine of election, ethics belongs to the doctrine of God.¹⁵¹

Barth’s treatment of the subject of ethics differs tremendously from the traditional treatment of ethics, although Barth tenaciously maintains that his approach to ethics is in line with that of the Reformers. His understanding of the place of ethics in dogmatics has much to do with what he says in his foreword to CD I/2. He asserts that “it is not we who can sustain the church, nor was it our forefathers, nor will it be our descendants. It was and is and will be the one who says: ‘I am with you always,

¹⁴⁸ K Barth, 1981a: vii.

¹⁴⁹ K Barth, 1962: 132.

¹⁵⁰ K Barth, 1962: 132.

¹⁵¹ K Barth, 1981a: 4.

even unto the end of the world.’”¹⁵² It is this very statement which informs Barth’s vocal rejection of an independent treatment of ethics which might render ethics as mere moral philosophy. The point which Barth hoped to make in his CD and succeeded to spell out more specifically in CD I/2 was to indicate that dogmatics was *ipso facto* ethics.

The church as a subject remains fundamental to Barth’s theological metamorphosis. When dealing with the subject of the church, Barth thought it necessary to refer to his forerunners and how they dealt with the question of ethics in the church and how it was bound with dogmatics. Some of the church fathers to whom he refers understood the intrinsic place of ethics in dogmatics more than the others; therefore the interpretation of these phenomena also differs from one theological tradition to the other. Thomas Aquinas is of particular importance to Barth concerning the subject of ethics and its relationship to dogmatics.

Barth argued that although Aquinas in an essay *De actibus humanis universali et in particularis*, referred to an independent basis for ethics, he maintained that this was not presented independently of Aquinas’ dogmatics but in a subordinate position within it.¹⁵³ Conceding this in Aquinas, Barth held that the theology of the Reformers, particularly that of Luther and Calvin, represents an outlook which makes independent ethics inherently impossible.¹⁵⁴ Barth came to this conclusion because he was not convinced that within the Reformed faith, passages could be found where faith or the object thereof was treated without regard to the conduct of the believer. Dogmatics was therefore ethics as well.

He criticised the latter Phillip Melancton whom he believed deviated from Luther on the subject of ethics. Barth asserted that it was this deviation which enabled Malancton to construct an ethics which was independent of dogmatics. The results of such independence made way for what Barth held to be a moral philosophy

¹⁵² K Barth, 1956: xi.

¹⁵³ K Barth, 1956a: 783.

¹⁵⁴ K Barth, 1956a: 783.

(*philosophia moralis*) which substituted ethics.¹⁵⁵ This moral philosophy of Malanchton therefore envisaged a proof of the existence of God, in essence constituting a return to a general anthropology and the knowledge of God. It consequently left the impression that faith was to be understood as virtue, as the power of love and life in its “possessor”.¹⁵⁶

Barth lamented the many attempts by Reformed theologians of insisting on the independence of ethics. He complemented Schleiermacher for he thought that Schleiermacher could impart to dogmatics a new relevance and value and that from his own point of view, Schleiermacher had a pleasant grasp of the inner connection and ultimate unity of dogmatics and ethics.¹⁵⁷ Barth was particularly impressed with the following statement by Schleiermacher:

“The doctrine of Christian ethics is also the doctrine of faith. For membership of the Christian church to which Christian morals always go back, is entirely a matter of faith and the exposition of the Christian way of life is nothing but the faith and development of what lies originally in the faith of Christians. And is not also Christian doctrine ethical doctrine? Of course, for how could the Christian faith be presented apart from the idea of the kingdom of God on earth? The kingdom of God on earth is nothing but the Christian way of life itself in action”.¹⁵⁸

Despite Barth’s delight with this statement, he remains suspicious of Schleiermacher’s motives. It should first be noted that for Schleiermacher the common element in doctrinal and moral teaching consisted in the fact that both were only a developed presentation of Christian piety. Both were therefore subordinated not only to apologetics (that deals with the distinctive characteristics of Christianity which are distinct from other religions) but in the last analysis to a “science of historical principles” in which it was previously decided what constituted piety in general – a

¹⁵⁵ K Barth, 1956a: 784.

¹⁵⁶ K Barth, 1956a: 784.

¹⁵⁷ K Barth, 1956a: 785.

¹⁵⁸ K Barth, 1956a: 785.

science which he again entitled “ethics” and advanced as a “philosophical doctrine of ethics”.¹⁵⁹

Barth’s usage of the concepts ethics and dogmatics renders ethics perpetually present in every aspect of his theological toil. Already in Chapter 16-18 of the CD I/2, where he deals specifically with the subject of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Barth felt obligated to deal with dogmatics as ethics. Again in Chapter 21 of the very same volume concerning the freedom in the church, he once again turned to the problem of ethics, although he located this within the realm of freedom in the church and how that freedom was related to obedience.¹⁶⁰ Even later in his theological thinking, after he had exhausted the subject of election and had demonstrated why it was to be located within the ambit of the doctrine of God, Barth concluded that it was even better to maintain that ethics not only belonged to dogmatics in general, but to the doctrine of God as well.¹⁶¹ It is his understanding of freedom in the church which led Barth to deal with the subject of the Christian preaching and how it remained intertwined with ethics.

There are a number of convincing reasons why the location of ethics in the ambit of the doctrine of God is worth pondering. In the first instance Barth defends this claim as follows: If it is agreed that it is impossible to see what is meant by knowledge of God, His divine being, His divine perfection, the election of his grace, without awareness at every point of the demand which is put to humanity by the fact that this God is his God, the God of humanity, how can God be understood as the Lord if that does not involve the problem of human obedience?¹⁶² Ethics therefore suggests that what is implicit must now through Jesus Christ become explicit. This is also then intertwined with the subject of Christian preaching which Barth dealt with extensively in CD I/2.

¹⁵⁹ F Schleiermacher cited in: K Barth, 1956a: 785.

¹⁶⁰ K Barth, 1956a: 662ff.

¹⁶¹ K Barth, 1957b: 512; 543f.

¹⁶² K Barth, 1957b: 512.

Barth is adamant that Christian preaching is speaking about God in the name of Jesus Christ.¹⁶³ Because this speaking is undertaken by fallible human beings, Christian speaking remains in essence a human activity like any other. Given this, however, there are a number of problems which arise from such an understanding. The fact that it is the fallible human being who is being called forward to the ministry of the Word, is problematised by the fact that this speaking then becomes more than mere human talk and is transformed into the self-proclamation of the Word of God.¹⁶⁴

Among the questions that may arise from this could be whether Christian preaching could be considered to be a specific form of the moral education of the human race. For Barth it had become clear since the 18th century that Christian preaching declared itself to be superfluous when it allowed itself to be used in such a way.¹⁶⁵ The acknowledgement of the independence of ethics justifies a comparison of that independent ethics with other independent disciplines. It is therefore because of the imminent danger of comparisons that Barth warns against the justification of independent ethics.

For Barth “a Minister in the *Ministerium Verbi Divini* is not in the least comparable, for example, with a subordinate officer in the army, or a civil servant or the head of a business department, who in the measures he takes and method by which he proceeds, has to bear a part of the responsibility and to that extent take independent action and decision”.¹⁶⁶ It should therefore not be the business of the preacher of God’s Word to utilise independent measures when it appears that the usual measures are insufficient.

In contrast to the comparison of Christian ethics to moral philosophy, Barth holds that the independent human decisions in their rightness or wrongness depend on the fact that, not only as a whole but also in detail, not only in content but also in form, they are the decisions of an obedience in which the only will of man [sic] is to

¹⁶³ K Barth, 1956a: 758.

¹⁶⁴ K Barth, 1956a: 759.

¹⁶⁵ K Barth, 1956a: 759.

¹⁶⁶ K Barth, 1956a: 760.

co-operate in the realisation of God's work as He Himself has determined it down to its details and form.¹⁶⁷

The service of proclamation, which is demanded of the church and is bound up in the manifestation of the supremacy of God's free grace, operates towards it and through it. An all-encompassing concept which denotes the content of all service of God is understood by Barth to be that of pure doctrine.¹⁶⁸ When Barth speaks about the pure doctrine as the problem for Christian preaching, he distinguishes doctrine (*doctrina*) from theory. The reason for this distinction is simple: According to Barth theory always presupposes a human individual, observing and thinking in his own power and responsibility, forming his own interpretation of a specific object in the whole freedom of reciprocity between man and object in which man will always be the stronger partner, and then giving expression to this interpretation in the form of distinct sequences of ideas.¹⁶⁹ Independent ethics is susceptible to entertain human opinions at the expense of the command of God. It is because of this that Barth held that ethics which insisted on its independence from dogmatics would be inclined to entertain human questions which in return would replace the command of God as the proper theme, and the framework of thinking on the subject.¹⁷⁰

Doctrine according to Barth is directly connected with the idea of an object transcending the scope of human observation and thought.¹⁷¹ Therefore, doctrine is not the expression of opinions, but of insights to state the whole truth. This understanding of doctrine allows Barth to maintain that "doctrinal instruction means always the interpretation of something just as we have received it and in such a relation, both to right reception and right communication, the one who instructs is responsible not only to himself and the object, but also to all those who have received this same thing and impart it".¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ K Barth, 1956a: 760.

¹⁶⁸ K Barth, 1956a: 761.

¹⁶⁹ K Barth, 1956a: 761.

¹⁷⁰ K Barth, 1956a: 544.

¹⁷¹ K Barth, 1956a: 761.

¹⁷² K Barth, 1956a: 761.

Doctrine therefore wants to be nothing more than mere instruction, but it consistently looks for a type of instruction that is able to encourage obedience to those who hear it. Barth concludes the prolegomenon to dogmatics by dealing with the subject of ethics. It almost immediately becomes clear that he deliberately makes the subject of ethics an appendix to dogmatics, because he is opposed to a strict separation between dogmatics and ethics.

The problem of ethics remains a theological problem for Barth for a number of reasons. In the first place Barth has to consider the traditional question of whether alongside church dogmatics there is a special and independent church ethics.¹⁷³ Furthermore, Barth reminds us that the history of theological ethics as an independent discipline reveals that the presuppositions of such an ethics have always been the opinion of goodness, i.e. the holiness of the Christian character. The Christian proclamation is not hidden with Christ in God, but can be directly perceived and therefore demonstrated, described and set up as a norm.¹⁷⁴ It is fundamental that Barth's objection to an independent ethics is understood from his objection to anthropology which poses as Christian theology. Here Barth once again wants to demonstrate how vulnerable an independent ethics is and how it remains a breeding ground for disaster.

When Barth argues that where ethics has therefore been able to secure independence, an independent ethics has always shown at once a tendency to reverse the roles, replacing dogmatics with it as the basic theological discipline, absorbing dogmatics into itself, transforming it into an ethical system with a Christian foundation, and then penetrating and controlling biblical exegesis and pastoral theology in the same way.¹⁷⁵ Another issue which identifies the problem of ethics as a theological problem is the misunderstanding that ethics is on the same plane as dogmatics.

¹⁷³ K Barth, 1956a: 782.

¹⁷⁴ K Barth, 1956a: 782.

¹⁷⁵ K Barth, 1956a: 782.

It is possible to maintain that to a certain degree both these subjects (ethics and dogmatics) are on the same plane, but it is imperative to establish to what degree exactly. When two subjects such as the ones that we are currently dealing with are placed on the same plane, one cannot deny the fact that some kind of co-ordination and interchangeability between them is possible. On the one hand we have the Word of God while on the other we have the human being who hears this Word. This way of looking at ethics and dogmatics raises the question of the encounter between the supernatural and the natural. This question is alien to Christian theology, since within this discipline we are confronted with the encounter between nature and grace.¹⁷⁶

It can be said that Barth was persistently engaged with the subject of ethics in his *Church Dogmatics*. Furthermore, it appears that he dealt with the subject of ethics in a more convincing and innovative manner in his CD II/2. The subject of ethics was especially important for Barth at the time of writing CD II/2, for immediately after he had penned the first half of the first volume, he was confronted with the rise of the Third Reich and the German church conflict.¹⁷⁷ Even then Barth insisted that ethics was intrinsically bound with dogmatics and that a sound dogmatics could not and should not allow ethics to be conducted in isolation to it.

The doctrine of God which reveals God as the elector and therefore the initiator of the covenant between God and humanity is a doctrine that insists on having Christ as the centre, and also the doctrine which deems the gospel necessary in our comprehension of this covenant. Barth asserts that when God becomes his partner as the Lord of the covenant who determines its meaning, content and fulfilment, He necessarily becomes the judge of humanity, the law of his existence.¹⁷⁸

It remains imperative to probe this law, because the ethical question according to Barth is a question about the basis and possibility of the fact that in the multitude and multiplicity of human actions there are certain laws, rules, usages or continuities. Given this, the law to which Barth refers which stands in contradistinction to laws that

¹⁷⁶ K Barth, 1956a: 791.

¹⁷⁷ K. Barth, 1957b: ix.

¹⁷⁸ K. Barth, 1957b: 511.

are not essentially informed by the law of God, is a law which is not imposed on humanity but is conferred upon them in freedom.¹⁷⁹

Although Barth does not dispute the fact that ethics can also be located elsewhere, e.g. within the realms of politics or anthropology, he remains determined that if we are to equate the ethical question unequivocally and consistently with the psychological or historico-morphological, or politico-juridical, or philosophico-historical question – to which the actuality of human behaviour may also be subject – this means that we have not yet put to ourselves the ethical question, or have ceased to do so.¹⁸⁰

The ethical question, Barth believes, transcends all those other questions. Because ethics is always conversing with other subjects, it seems obvious that the ethical question cannot be understood as existing separately from its context. Barth holds that the ethical question cannot be posed in a vacuum as if it is a question in and of itself; in addition, the ethical question is posed conceding that it is already answered by the grace of God.¹⁸¹

(b) Special ethics

This understanding makes room to discuss the second part of ethics which is special ethics. If Barth agrees that ethics is simply an inquiry into what is good human action, he is impelled to explore this claim further. Special ethics in Barth's view comes into play when a shift is emphasised following a command from God, with particular references to the human being and to whom the human being turns when confronted with this command.¹⁸²

Ethics has everything to do with the obedient act of humanity towards God who is the initiator of the covenant between God and mankind. It is within the realm of special ethics that the standard by which human action is measured is brought into

¹⁷⁹ K. Barth, 1957b: 513.

¹⁸⁰ K. Barth, 1957b: 515.

¹⁸¹ K Barth, 1957b: 516.

¹⁸² K Barth, 1981a: 4.

question. Yet Barth warns that special ethics must resist the temptation to become legalistic but that it should confine itself to its task of pointing to the event between God and human beings.¹⁸³

That which describes the moral character of the church is located in the ethics of hope. What the church can and must do for its relevance is to foster the command of hope. Webster asserts that what the Christian community has to say theologically about hope is inseparable from that community's renewed attention to, and inhabitation of, its distinctive linguistic, intellectual and ethical practices as the community brought into being by, sustained by, and wholly referred to Jesus Christ, its origin and goal.¹⁸⁴ Barth's consistent refusal to detach hope from human action is because for him hope in Jesus Christ is not an inactive hope.¹⁸⁵

This active hope is necessitated by the fact that God moves towards humanity through His establishment of a contract between Him and His creatures. God is in actual fact only God in this movement.¹⁸⁶ It is because of this movement that Webster concludes that dogmatics therefore acquired a double theme which is announced by Barth at the start of a lecture in the late 1950s, when he said:

“ ‘Theology’, in the literal sense, means the science and doctrine of God. A very precise definition of the Christian endeavour in this respect would really require the more complex term ‘The-anthropology’. For an abstract doctrine of God has no place in the Christian realm, only a ‘doctrine of God and humanity,’ a doctrine of the commerce and communion between God and man”.¹⁸⁷

The understanding of hope as illustrated by Webster is encouraging. Webster maintains that, “to hope is not simply to wait, but to be impelled in a very definite direction, stemming from and looking towards the great consummation of Jesus’ perfect work. Thus language about Christian hope does not mean some eschatological

¹⁸³ K Barth, 1981a: 5.

¹⁸⁴ J Webster, 1998: 78.

¹⁸⁵ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969: 209.

¹⁸⁶ K Barth, 1957b: 5.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. J Webster, 1998: 80; K Barth, ‘Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century’. in: K Barth, 1982: 11.

suppression of the ethical; rather it involves a description of the world as a reality whose situation has been so transfigured by God's act in Jesus Christ that hopeful human action is both possible and necessary".¹⁸⁸

3.4 The significance of interpreting Barth's Church Dogmatics as confessional

The significance of reading the Church Dogmatics as confessional theology raises a number of questions. Suffice it to say that what motivates this chapter to argue that the CD can be interpreted as confessional, is because Barth was seeking to speak about the God of the gospel in contexts where other theological reflections about this God existed.

This yearning to speak about God is best articulated when he delivered some of his lectures to American institutions. He had already prepared these lectures in Basel. Barth preferred the term Evangelical Theology, which is essentially a theology that is radically anchored in the Bible. As such, this theology seeks a way of speaking about the God of the gospel in the midst of the variety of theologies.¹⁸⁹

It is this God of the gospel that Barth confesses. With the CD, Barth does not merely confess that Christ is Lord because there are other theological reflections that teach other revelations alongside this revelation, but also because he is challenged to be obedient to this Lord. Dogmatics remains for him the subject of the church. Therefore, in an attempt to defy ecclesiastical monopoly on this science, Barth prefers the concept "evangelical" to other concepts. It must be remembered that the concept of confession is also used to denote a denomination (especially in the United States of America); however, a careful reading of what Barth means by Evangelical Theology also falls within the realm of what is called confessional theology here.

The subject of confessional theology has already been explored (see Section 1.5). The suggestion of reading the CD as confessional theology is informed by the fact that Reformed Christians have always documented that which they believed in the

¹⁸⁸ Cf. J Webster, 1998: 81.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. K Barth, 1963: 5.

wake of a something that threatened to make a caricature of the gospel. A confessional reading is aware that in the serious act of reflecting theologically about God, such reflection is to be continually examined because it is undertaken by fallible human beings. This awareness of the fallibility of human conception of God reached its climax in an expression made popular by Barth when dealing with dialectical theology. He argued that “as theologians we ought to talk of God. But we are human, and so we cannot talk of God. We ought therefore to recognise both our obligation and our inability, and so doing give God the glory”.¹⁹⁰ To look at the CD in a confessional manner explains this quandary of being caught between a command and a failure to respond to this command.

As much as Barth was opposed to confessionalism, he nonetheless knew that Reformed theology possessed enough potential to aspire to talk about God in the world. According to the CD, dogmatics is the subject of the church and therefore not of a Reformed or a Roman Catholic denomination. However, it cannot be denied that that the CD displays tendencies that favours Reformed theology.

The Reformed understanding of the Lordship of Christ – which challenged the two-kingdom doctrine – and the centrality of the Word of God are a few indicators that underpin Reformed theology. His high regard for Reformed theology (especially after his induction into academic theology) did not inhibit Barth from conversing with other ecclesiastical traditions.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, his fear of an ecclesiastical monopoly on

¹⁹⁰ Extract from Barth’s lecture entitled “The Word of God as the task of theology” cited in: E Busch, 1976: 140.

¹⁹¹ Barth’s interaction with Roman Catholicism cannot be ignored. Michael Welker remembers the young man who, as a theological professor in the 1920s at Göttingen and Münster, sought to establish a relationship with Roman Catholicism. He recalls Barth’s lecture about ‘Roman Catholicism as a question to the Protestant Church’, Barth’s engagement with Aquina’ *Summa Theologiae* as well as his lively relationship with the Jesuit Erich Przywara at Münster (cf. M Welker, ‘Karl Barth: from fighter against ‘Roman heresy’ to leading thinker for the ecumenical movement’ in: *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Vol. 57. No. 4 (2004), 434-450). Barth’s relationship and engagement with Roman Catholicism came to the fore again recently when the question of ecclesial authority and its relationship to confessions was discussed (cf. R S Tshaka, ‘The essence of ecclesial authority in our treatment of Reformed confessions’. Article forthcoming in the *NGTT*, September 2005). With regard to the Lutheran tradition, Barth engaged in a pivotal discussion on the relationship of Gospel to Law (cf. K Barth, 1961a: 370-371). It was this attitude of going beyond his predecessors which angered his former teacher Adolf von Harnack. According to Rumscheidt, Harnack admitted that ‘he feared that the generation of younger theologians

dogmatics resulted in his compromise that saw the concept “confession” being replaced with “declaration”.¹⁹²

A Reformed confession always presupposes a confessing act. There can be no confessing (embodiment) when it has not been made clear what is being confessed. The misunderstanding that exists in the interpretation of these concepts recently resurfaced again. At the helm of this debate is Barth’s trusted and last assistant, Eberhard Busch, as well as John De Gruchy. Busch distinguishes “confession” from “confessing” by arguing that the former is inclined to merely repeat that which is being confessed and that it never really boils down to implementing that which is being confessed.¹⁹³ The latter is one that precipitates action. Admitting the influence that the confessing church had on South African theology, De Gruchy makes a similar observation. He writes that:

“the theology of the *Message to the people of South Africa* was a ‘confessing theology’. ‘Confessing’ indicates a theology that arises out of a commitment to confess Jesus Christ within the public sphere. This implies both the prophetic critique of idolatry and the liberatory thrust of struggling against oppression, but it anchors them in what is an unambiguous Christian confession: ‘Jesus is Lord’. Confessing theology, as distinct from ‘confessional theology’, was the first theology that really engaged apartheid on a basis other than a liberal social platform”.¹⁹⁴

Confessional theology here is used both by Busch and De Gruchy in a manner that renders it confessionality. The Confessing Church in Germany became a Confessing Church because it was in a position to declare a state of confession. Clearly without a state of confession there would have been no confessing theology. Put differently, without a confession there would have been no calls for the embodiment of that which was being confessed – which is what confessing theology purports to be doing.

was moving in a dangerous direction’ (cf. M Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: an analysis of the Barth-Harnack correspondence of 1923*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972: 15.

¹⁹² Reference to the proceedings of the Barmen Theological Declaration was already made in Chapter 2.

¹⁹³ See Busch’s interview with the Presbyterian Outlook at: www.pres-outlook.com/HTML/busch.html

¹⁹⁴ J W De Gruchy, ‘From Political to Public theologies: The role of theology in public life in South Africa’ in: W F Storrar and A R Morton (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*. London: T&T Clark, 2004: 49-50.

What is the significance therefore of interpreting the Church Dogmatics in a confessional manner? The church and therefore preaching plays a pivotal role in Reformed theology – it is strongly influenced by the conviction that one is no longer innocent once one has heard. This illustrates the essence of preaching. During preaching, the church that “has not arrived yet” comes to new insights. Therefore it looks zealously forward to a time when it can speak about the fact that it has arrived. The CD is occupied with the idea of the Word of God and its relationship to the word of human beings. If it has to do with humanity, the relationship to the world is also implied. Barth had on numerous occasions demonstrated that he understood the pivotal relationship between these two aspects.

In the essays published in honour of John De Gruchy, Dirkie Smit reminds us of the importance of seeing within the Reformed Christian tradition. He writes: “[L]ike several well-known Christian ethicists today, De Gruchy seems convinced that Christian ethics depends fundamentally on seeing – on perception ... Bonhoeffer already claimed that “seeing the world *sub specie Christi* is the paramount theological activity for Christians”.¹⁹⁵ It is not by mere chance that Smit detected this within the theology of De Gruchy, since De Gruchy himself had devoted his life to contemplating ways in which the Christian community could understand its vocation better as resident aliens.¹⁹⁶

What happens during the meetings of this community has many implications for its conduct towards the civil community. What this community hears and sees during Christian worship robs it of its so-called innocence. This means that after this community has heard and seen that which affects the creation of God, it forfeits the claim of not having heard or seen. They are in the words of Boesak “not innocent” any longer,¹⁹⁷ which means it has to translate its response into praxis. It is in turn this

¹⁹⁵ D J Smit, ‘Seeing things differently: On Prayer and Politics’ in: L. Holness and R. Wüstenberg (eds.), 2002: 271-272.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. J W De Gruchy, *The Dynamic Structure of the Church*. D. Div dissertation. University of South Africa, 1972.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. A Boesak, 1976.

praxis that finds its stature in the Christian confession. It is in this regard that Godsey has echoed his agreement with Torrance in saying: “all that which Karl Barth has desired was to be a witness. Like John the Baptist in Grunewald’s ‘Crucifixion’, he has pointed to that One who dies on the cross: *Illum oportet crescere, me minui*”.¹⁹⁸

If Jüngel was correct in his opinion that the theology of Karl Barth was an avowed enemy of systems,¹⁹⁹ a point in case is made here that a Christian confession when dealing with its inevitable socio-economic and political context which remains an avowed enemy of any system. In the midst of injustice and where the gospel is contorted to serve individual selfish purposes, a Christian confession is compelled to become critical. When we interpret the Church Dogmatics from a confessional point of view, it becomes easy to realise that ideologies remain inevitable, yet we remain determined to avoid the possibility that theology should be dictated by ideologies.

Such an interpretation helps us to understand that, since we are fallible, and since human forms of governance are fallible, we are to remain wary of not embracing them uncritically. This also assists us in understanding that ideologies have the inclination of blurring our vision to the need of renewed interpretations. There are definite reasons why Barth cautioned his students that they should not become too intelligent in the affairs of thinking and speaking about God. He maintained that “all at once they might become “far too positive” in their enthusiasm over the rediscovery of the ‘great concepts of God, Word, Spirit, revelation, faith, church, sacrament and so on’, and think that we speak of them because we know to speak about them with such relative freedom”.²⁰⁰

3.5 Conclusion

As long as theology is practised by human beings who have been charged with the divine command to execute this task, this discipline should be perpetually monitored to ensure its independence from ideologies. Theology is therefore never exempt from

¹⁹⁸ Cf. K Barth, 1966: 14.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. E Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A theological legacy*. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1986: 27.

²⁰⁰ E Busch, 1976: 214.

the snares of the Lordless powers. Because of the manner in which the Lordless powers work, as well as the manner in which they utilise human beings to arrive at their objections, Christian theology is then confronted with a question that requires its purity from ideologies.

It has been argued that Barth was wary of the possibility of being possessed by ideologies. This however does not imply that Barth was not biased in favour of certain ideals. His theological metamorphosis illustrated that his theology was at times dictated by liberal theological tendencies. The most important issue here is that he became aware of these forces and henceforth cultivated some vigilance against this. A verdict on this question hangs on our understanding of Barth's entire theology, as well as on the confessional manner that we read his theology.

In dealing with this concept, Barth used as a synonym the phrase "intellectual constructs".²⁰¹ With this Barth tries to indicate that he is aware of the fact that the human being has the remarkable potential to grasp in the form of concepts its conscious perceptions of its own inner life, that of its fellow human beings, and finally that of the whole of the outside world, and that these can be put together in definite pictures.²⁰²

It is these definite pictures which Barth understands to be ideologies. He is not opposed to this. The problem starts when these ideologies seem so wonderfully glorious and exert on the human being such a fascination that it starts to think it should move and think and act more and more within its framework and under the direction of these ideologies. The humanity assumes that it is in control of it, but in truth it is being controlled by these ideologies. The human being is no longer a free agent, but now ventures to ask and answer only within the ideological schema.²⁰³

²⁰¹ K Barth, 1981a: 224.

²⁰² K Barth, 1981a: 224.

²⁰³ K. Barth, 1981a: 225.

De Gruchy has observed that theology is invariably bound up to some degree with the service of popular interests, whether private, social or ecclesiastical.²⁰⁴ This study agrees that the strength of theology lies in its ability to transcend the boundaries of egotistic interests and ideological confinement. Consonant to this claim is the critical task of theology to evaluate all truths and interest claims, including its own. If it is agreed that theology since it happens within a context, is contextual in the sense that it deals with the reflection of the Word of God to those who are within its midst, it must then also be agreed that theology does not exist unaffected by its context. Such an avowal begs our consideration for a revision of theology after some time. When this is achieved confessional theology proves itself to be flexible in guarding against the snares of absolutism.

The confessional theology of the CD continues to exude its richness in insisting on the supremacy of the Word of God, and for this reason it should not be discounted at the behest of current theological interpretations that seek to place the human being in the centre of its theological deliberations. Although Barth continuously sought ways of confessing the Lordship of Christ, he remained perpetually aware of the essence of the context in which such a confession was made. Church was one important context in which this confession ought to take place, but the world in which this confession needs to be heard was just as important. This caution of witnessing Christ to the world did not deter Barth from insisting on the ethical actions that emanate from this confession.

Some remarks were made to justify why it is important to read the Church Dogmatics in a confessional manner. During this process it became clear why it would be impossible to look at this important work as Barth's complete work. One of the reasons is supported by Barth's understanding of a confession and therefore of theology. If a confession or theology was understood as a complete statement about

²⁰⁴ Cf. J W De Gruchy, 'Theologies in conflict: the South African theological dialogue' in: C Villa-Vicencio and J De Gruchy (eds.), *Resistance and Hope: South African essays in honour of Beyers Naudé*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985: 86.

God, there would be no need to assume that God still continues to speak to humanity today.

With Barth's emphasis that the Word of God ought to be theology's point of departure, this chapter investigated the question whether Barth saw his theology as being pure theology. It was discovered that such a theology does not exist in the Church Dogmatics and therefore in Barth's theological reflection. Fundamentally it was noted that Barth's confessional theology did not cease with the formation of the Barmen Theological Declaration, but continued through the Church Dogmatics. It was realised that Barth had wanted to deal with this document as a very human document which was not resistant to mistakes.

To assert that the Church Dogmatics was a continuation of confessional theology that had started elsewhere in Barth's metamorphosis meant that this chapter had to locate the characteristics of confessional theology in the Church Dogmatics. In the process Barth's Christocentric approach to his theology did not go unnoticed. Although the tag "Christological theology" given to Barth's theology is sometimes used to derogate his theology as a theology that fails to contribute to the issues that concern humanity, this chapter sees Barth's insistence on the supremacy of the Word of God as a means of avoiding the ideological incarceration of God.

Barth's confessional theology had a great impact through the Barmen Theological Declaration on theology in South Africa. The theological legitimacy that the theologised politics of the Nazi regime enjoyed was seen by some as being so similar to the situation in South Africa that the contexts were sometimes compared.²⁰⁵ The next chapter will be used to explore the contribution that Barth's confessional theology made to the Belhar confession. The different settings between Nazi Germany and South Africa under apartheid will be set out so as to indicate the difference in contexts. It will also become clear why South African theology, which was greatly

²⁰⁵ Brian Burting wrote a book in 1964 in which he traced the rise of the Nationalist Party during the 1930s and 1940s. He was probing an ideology which was closely related to that of Nazism. Cf. B Burting, *The Rise of the South African Reich*. London: Penguin Books, 1964.

influenced by the Confessing Church in Germany, did not succeed in seeing a confessing church materialise in South Africa until the Belhar Confession.

CHAPTER 4

Confessional theology in action: The Belhar Confession in a changed and changing context

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

M Opocenský¹

4.1 Introduction

Confessional theology in a changed and changing South African context prefaces the point which this chapter wishes to make, that is, confessional theology is the most likely theological pattern that can best serve the South African theological and political community.²

Confessional theology is a theology which stresses the centrality of the Word of God and acknowledges the essence of the church, its public witness of

¹ Cf. M Opocenský, (ed.), *Proceedings of the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)*. Debrecen, Geneva: WARC, 1997: 198.

² The need to preface Barth in this way stems from numerous casual deliberations with colleagues both in theological faculties as well as political spheres. The challenges posed were underpinned by convictions that theology has to follow in the path of African awakening as set out mostly by politicians and (South) African leaders. For one of the most informative works on the subject of the African Renaissance Cf. T M Mbeki, *Africa: The time has come*. Johannesburg: Mafube, 1998.

Jesus Christ to the world, the significance of the context in which this theology is done, as well as the ethics which is always implied in it. In realising all these characteristics, confessional theology insists on the fallibility of those involved with it. The flexibility of confessional theology insists upon the idea that theology cannot be conducted in ways that ignore the humanness of those involved with it. By having this in view confessional theology is prevented from succumbing to ideology.

This chapter will attempt to look critically at the South African political and theological history. Furthermore it will be revealed how this history had incarcerated theology into ideological prisons by selectively using the Bible to justify other ends. It will also be shown that reactionary theologies committed mistakes similar to those they were reacting against.

This chapter will briefly deal with the notion of *status confessionis* as it was introduced in South Africa. During this process, the confessional theology detected in Barth and the Barmen Theological Declaration will be used as yardsticks to illustrate the characteristics of confessional theology in the Belhar Confession³.

With regard to the Belhar Confession, it will be argued that although this confession stands firmly in the tradition of the Barmen Theological Declaration and therefore of the Reformers, the changed theological situation in South Africa challenges it to devise new ways to illustrate its significance. The Belhar confession, it is believed, can make an invaluable contribution in this regard.

The issues which are regarded as being of paramount importance for the Belhar Confession viz. reconciliation, justice and unity, will be dealt with in an

³ In 1982 a *status confessionis* was declared by the then DRMC in the suburb of Belhar which is located in the Cape Town vicinity. The DRMC realised that apartheid in South Africa was more than a political situation imposed on the South African society. Apartheid was exposed as a comprehensive ideology and view of life involving the organisation and control of humanity and society with the pretence of a pseudo-gospel. This confession rejected this as a heresy, as indicated in its three articles. Cf. J Durand, 'A Confession – Was it really necessary?' In: D J Smit and G Cloete (eds.), *A moment of truth: The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984: 36.

attempt to illustrate that the Belhar Confession is still relevant in a changed and changing South African context. The church order of the Uniting Reformed Churches of South Africa (URCSA)⁴ which was adopted subsequent to the Belhar Confession provides helpful pointers of how the issues discussed in Belhar may be embodied. Ultimately it will be asserted that this confession contains the very confessional theological characteristics which are found both in Barth's Church Dogmatics, the Barmen Declaration as well as other post-Barmen writings by Barth, such as Church and State.

Because this confession is primarily a product of the URCSA, this chapter will maintain that the challenges raised are primarily aimed at this church. Therefore, when the issues that are dealt with in the Belhar confession are considered, it is fair that this very body be held accountable with regard to the progress made thus far in attaining the goals set up in this confession.

4.2 Confessional theology in a changed and changing context

The fact that the (South) African situation has changed and is continuing to change begs the Christian church to define a clear and responsible role of engaging its current theological and political context.⁵ In doing this, the church

⁴ The Uniting Reformed Churches of South Africa came into existence in 1994. This church is comprised of the amalgamation of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRCM) as well as a huge portion of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). The unification process occurred after the DRMC produced the Belhar Confession, which essentially bemoaned the theological justification of Apartheid.

⁵ The changed and changing contexts here refer primarily to the South African democratic dispensation after 1994. Next to the changed democratic context stands the changing context. Changing context refers to the work which is still needed in the reconstructive processes which this country has embarked upon. More importantly, 'changing context' refers to the ways in which theology in South Africa is redefining itself in the different spheres. Cf. J Durand, *Ontluisterde Wêreld: Die Afrikaner en sy Kerk in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika*. Kaapstad: Lux Verbi, 2002; N Ndungane, *A World with a Human face: A voice from Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip, 2003; D J Smit, 'On adventures and Misfortunes: More stories about Reformed Theology in South Africa' in: G Harinck and D van Keulen (eds.), *Studies in Reformed Theology*, 9. Meinema: Zoetermeer, 2004, 208-235; D J Smit, 'Can we still be Reformed? Questions from a South African perspective' in: W A Alston Jr and M Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003; D J Smit, 'The impact of the Church in South Africa after the collapse of Apartheid' in: K Bediako et al (eds.), *A new day dawning: African Christian living the*

has to remain mindful of and draw significant insights from its past. Being mindful of its past does not imply that it ought to deify its history.⁶ By being attentive of its history, it is suggested that the church should appreciate where it came from, and with this gratefulness continue to yearn to be the vanguard of combating the possibility of the re-emergence of past atrocities. As a faithful community that is aware of the intricacies of the Lordless powers, this community ought to understand more than any other community that victory over one Lordless power does not imply victory over all. It therefore ought to comprehend the perspicacity with which these powers function, which is especially illustrated in their metamorphosis.

Democracy is generally accepted as one of the most humane forms of government. The new dispensation in South Africa however expects those who once led the struggle against apartheid to contribute towards the reconstruction

Gospel. Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004, 128-149; JW De Gruchy and S De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. 25th anniversary edition. London: SCM Press, 2004. The changed and changing context to which this chapter refers also poses challenges with regard to how the church can contribute towards the moral regeneration of this country. Goba's article which was written almost immediately after 1994 raises this concern. Cf. B Goba, 'Choosing who we are, a Christian perspective on the moral crisis confronting the South African society' in: M Guma and L Milton (eds.), *An African Challenge to the Church in the 21st century*. Cape Town: Salty Print, 1997, 65-71. In the same collection, Botman makes a strong case of the church's need to participate in the policy-making processes of the democratic government, arguing that an attempt to forsake such a opportunity is to contradict the discipleship of the church. See R Botman, 'Towards a World-formative Christianity in South Africa' in: M Guma and L Milton (eds.), 1997: 72-79. With a more critical tone, Boesak questions the 'critical solidarity' stance which had become characteristic of the church in a post-apartheid South Africa (cf. A Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience: African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005: 133-169.

⁶ The history of South African politics has become an unpalatable and a very sensitive subject today, especially among young black and white people. On the one hand some young black people feel that they have been betrayed by a system for which many have laid down their lives. The lack of employment especially for young people has brought with it its own problems and contributes to the unhappiness that they continue to feel. Concerning the young white people, the history of apartheid has become something shameful for them. It has to do with the negativity that accompanied apartheid South Africa. This uneasiness is mostly prevalent amongst the white generation which was not directly involved with apartheid but had benefited from it. Furthermore this sensitivity compromises a number of candid deliberations which are aimed at the reconstruction of South African society. Issues such as affirmative action, etc. are seen as controversial, since most members of this white generation see themselves as victims. It can however not be denied that it is imperative that the South African history should always be borne in mind when dealing also with the role that the church has to play today, yet one has to guard against the deliberate reference to the history of South Africa to justify the evils of today.

without being assimilated into the system. The need for the church and theology in South Africa “to continue not as if nothing had happened” suggests that the context in which theology exists today has to be dealt with critically.

Context has always been a fundamental aspect for Karl Barth’s theology. By emphasising the essence of the context of any theological enterprise, Barth positions his theology as a means to an end.⁷ However, it is not enough to pay heed to the significance of context without acknowledging the fact that the contexts between Barth and his time and ours have changed and are changing. An invitation to debate with Barth about the human condition and its fragility towards these Lordless powers is an invitation which begs those who participate in it to do so critically.

Although the extended work which Barth produced on the subject of politics and its relationship to theology can assist the South African theological community to navigate from one pole to the other (theology to politics), it nonetheless does not imply that Barth was speaking with the South African

⁷ In the summer of 1968 Barth received a letter from a writer from Singapore who was unknown to him. The writer was Kosuke Koyama who had translated the Christian Dogmatics into Japanese. Koyama was a Japanese Missionary and had been involved for some years with the Theological Seminary of Thailand, becoming dean of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology. He later took over the position of editor of the South East Asia Journal of Theology. Koyama wrote to Barth with a request that he writes something about his theology for this journal. At the time Barth was ailing and permitted his assistant Eberhard Busch to see to this request. Busch compiled some of the issues that Barth was thinking about at the time and Barth endorsed them. However, there are a number of important issues that Barth thought he had to communicate to these Christians. Within the letter Barth made it clear that ‘boring theology’ was unacceptable and that it had become time for these Christians to understand that it was now the time that they spoke and that he listened. He continued to make it clear that theology had to be conducted with a degree of humour, and more importantly that they had to understand that the God that they were talking about was also his God. Barth made it clear that they should not repeat what he said in a different context, but should appropriate that which will be relevant in their context. For the details of the letter see, K Barth, *Offene Briefe: 1945-1968*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984: 555. The intention of this thesis is to demonstrate the essence of not merely repeating what Barth said. It is to indicate that South African churches and theology will have to pay heed to this warning. It endeavours to illustrate that confessional theology is a best option in this regard in that it steers away from the repetition of theologies and insists that the context is essential, yet it deliberately discounts the context as the point of departure of theology.

context in mind.⁸ We thus have to be responsible both to Karl Barth who had noted the significance of context when dealing with theology as well as to ourselves. This suggests that the difference between the theological context which necessitated the theology of Barth as well as (later) the Belhar Confession and the context post-Belhar cannot be ignored.

Although Barth was naturally not aware of the Belhar Confession or of a number of issues that South Africa is currently facing, that does not disqualify his theology from being applied to our context. The Belhar Confession remains related to Barth because it was his theology that informed the formation of this confession. It has been demonstrated frequently that the Belhar Confession is a counterpart of the Barmen Theological Declaration,⁹ which could also be construed as a summary of Barth's theology.

Numerous instances can be cited to illustrate the similarities between the Barmen Theological Declaration and the Belhar Confession.¹⁰ Like the Belhar Confession, the Barmen Theological Declaration was very careful not to sound too political. It has to be noted that Barth criticised the Barmen Declaration at a later stage because he was not convinced that it spelled out its solidarity with the Jews satisfactorily. To this effect he wrote in 1935:

“[T]he confessing church had fought hard to a certain extent for the freedom and purity of its proclamation, but that it had remained silent on the action against the Jews, on the amazing treatment of political opponents, on the suppression of

⁸ Although Durand addresses himself primarily to a white audience, he speaks about the need for the church to adapt to the new situation. However Durand insists that the church should remain faithful to the guidelines provided by Holy Scripture and in that way remain of service to the world. Cf. J Durand, 2002: 9.

⁹ Cf. N J Horn. *'n Vergelykende studie van die Barmenverklaring en die konsepbelydenis van die NG Sendingkerk'*. MTh thesis. University of Port Elizabeth, 1984.

¹⁰ A few examples are cited. The Barmen Theological Declaration was opposing the Nazification of the church. Similarly, the Belhar Confession was opposing the theologised politics of the apartheid regime. The Barmen Theological Declaration stressed the Word of God which is the only Word that must be heard and obeyed. Similarly, the Belhar Confession emphasised the primacy of the Word of God. The Barmen Theological Declaration was economical with the usage of political language, likewise the Belhar Confession opted for stronger theological language in contrast to political language.

the press in the New Germany and on so much else against which Old Testament prophets would have spoken out”.¹¹

The fondness of the churches in those days to shrink from political discourse needs to be understood in light of what was perceived to be the affairs of the church and those of the state. Jonker believes that the Barmen Declaration was the first real act of confession after ages of confessional sterility in Western churches. He continues to assert that although it was called into existence by political events, the Barmen declaration strictly kept to the ecclesiastical debate and refrained from directly addressing the political situation. This, he argues, indicated that it still belonged to an era in which the European churches refrained from making direct political statements.¹²

The tendency to shrink from political talk as a church is also evident in the Belhar Confession. The best example to substantiate the church’s discomfort with political talk is the accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession (see Appendix II).

It is contended that it was amongst others Barth who reminded the Reformed tradition that it was inherent in its nature to test its confessions in the light of the situation in which it found itself. Barth has been invaluable in guiding the church towards an understanding of Reformed confessions. A Reformed confession is however a concerted effort on the part of a local congregation and has always been a controversial issue.¹³

The adoption of Reformed confessions has become an intense subject in the 20th century. During the 1930s in Germany as well as during the 1980s in South Africa Christians were debating whether it was necessary to resort to it. In most cases it was made clear that a state of confession was only evoked when there was certainty that the gospel was at stake. A state of confession in South

¹¹ K Barth, *The German Church Conflict*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965: 45.

¹² W D Jonker, 'The Gospel and Political Freedom' in: A van Egmond and D van Keulen (eds.), *Studies in Reformed Theology 1: Freedom*. Baarn: Callenbach, 1996: 250-251.

¹³ K Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*. London: SCM Press, 1966a: 13.

Africa was evoked by a “theologised politics”¹⁴ aimed at the systematic subjugation of one race by another.

4.3 Theologised politics: the evolution

What is “theologised politics”? In this section the concept theologised politics will be pursued with the intention of illustrating that theology was only added later to the politics that governed South Africa. The notion of nation, it will be indicated, was designed with the view of consolidating and affirming a group that felt marginalised.

Apartheid as an ideal did not have an inherent theological underpinning until a later stage in its development. Jonker maintains that we should assume that there were historical and social reasons that favoured the adoption of apartheid as a policy by the white Afrikaners, who only subsequently appealed to scripture and Calvinistic views to strengthen their case.¹⁵

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) made its formal appearance on South African soil in 1652. It convened its first synod in 1857. It was this synod which made the decision that churches formed among the indigenous nations should celebrate the Eucharist in separation from the so-called Europeans. Kinghorn characterises the era following 1857 and lasting until 1927 as the non-doctrinal era.¹⁶ The segregated churches were understood during this period to be nothing more than a practical solution which would accommodate the “weakness of some” that were not comfortable with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper with those whose social and economic status they did not share. This took effect

¹⁴ The concept ‘theologised politics’ is a helpful concept also used by De Klerk in explicating how theology was misappropriated for selfish reasons. It is his opinion that ‘apartheid’ or ‘separate development’ was the first sustained statement of ‘theologised politics’ to come from the Afrikaner. Cf. WA De Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa: A Story of Afrikanerdom*. England: Penguin Books. 1975: 204.

¹⁵ W D Jonker, ‘The Gospel and Political Freedom’, 244.

¹⁶ J Kinghorn, ‘Die teologie van apartheid: Vormende faktore’. In: J Kinghorn (ed.), *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1986: 57-69.

because of a deliberate move within Afrikaner Reformed circles to read the Bible with socio-economic purposes.¹⁷

For this reason it is contended that an examination of the evolution of apartheid¹⁸ needs to take into account not only the discomfort that some whites had with blacks, but also the socio-economic and political issues which precipitated the theological underpinnings to apartheid. To some degree it can then be concluded that the socio-economic, cultural and political aspects are to be sought in the Afrikaner people's search for an identity. Kinghorn has characterised their usage of the Bible as "in search of an exegesis".¹⁹

The evolution of the idea of nationhood amongst the Afrikaner people of South Africa was strengthened after the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the subsequent challenges which confronted these people in their search for a place to call their own. It is perhaps fair to maintain that the *Afrikaner* nationalist ideology developed historically as a response to social change.²⁰ The Anglo-Boer War is of particular importance, for it illustrates the tension among white people themselves and each group's ambitions to have a monopoly over the political realm of South Africa.²¹ Giliomee reminds us how Cecil John Rhodes was disturbed by the so-called conflict between the Afrikaners and the British when

¹⁷ Cf. D J Smit, 'The ethics of interpretation – and South Africa'. In: *Scriptura* 33 (1990), 29-43.

¹⁸ Apartheid refers to the idea of separate development. There are numerous authors of this concept, but it is important to note that this concept met its pivotal significance under H F Verwoerd. Although it claimed that its chief objective was to assist all groups to develop to the best of their own potential, it was not as innocuous as it sounded given the fact that the white group always retained its superiority over the other groups. It was this very group which in essence determined the lives and degree of development of the subordinate groups. For detailed exploration of this cf. R S Tshaka, *The URCSA and a renewed public responsibility*. Unpublished MTh thesis. Free University of Amsterdam, 2004.

¹⁹ J Kinghorn cited in: D J Smit, 'The ethics of interpretation – and South Africa', 30.

²⁰ No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation: The National question in South Africa*. London: Zed Press, 1979: 25.

²¹ No Sizwe describes the then conventional ruling class wisdom concerning South African politics and its relationship to economy as follows: After the defeat of the Boer Republics in 1902 and the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 politics in South Africa referred essentially to the struggle for parliamentary hegemony between predominantly English-speaking and predominantly Afrikaans-speaking groups of whites, irrespective of the classes to which they belonged or aspired to belong. Cf. No Sizwe, 1979: 11.

he held that he could not understand the Afrikaner-English dispute over the African franchise in the Parliament of the Cape colony.²² But the tension between these groups manifested clearly during the Anglo-Boer War as well as World War II.

The conventional wisdom of the ruling class concerning South African politics can be summarised as follows: After the defeat of the Boer Republics in 1902 and the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, politics was confined to the predominantly English-speaking and predominantly Afrikaans-speaking groups of whites, irrespective of the classes to which they belonged or aspired to belong.²³ In the struggle between the Afrikaners and the English the position of the black peoples of South Africa was analogous to that of a factor of production – labour.

It is not an understatement to say that apartheid as an ideology was cemented by socio-economic, political and cultural issues. It is therefore necessary that the issues which precipitated this ideology need to be taken into account. It has been argued that although the Afrikaans-speaking sector comprised approximately three quarters of the white population of the Cape Province, they did not assert themselves politically until after the granting of responsible government to the colony in 1872.²⁴

No Sizwe refers to some fundamental events which took place around that period, events which in essence changed the South African context. First he refers to the discovery of diamonds in 1886 and the subsequent dispute with the British over the diamond fields. The second important event has to do with the language consciousness which began to surface among some Afrikaners. No

²² H Giliomee, *Rediscovering and Re-imagining the Afrikaners in a new South Africa: Autobiographical notes on writing an uncommon biography*. Leiden: Grafaria, 2004: 9.

²³ No Sizwe, 1979: 11.

²⁴ No Sizwe, 1979: 14.

Sizwe reminds us that the first language movement emerged in the Western Cape in 1876.²⁵

He reminds us that for many decades a gap of virtual unintelligibility had widened between Afrikaans as spoken by the majority of “Dutch-speaking” people in South Africa, and Dutch, which remained the written language and therefore the language of the Bible, as well as the language of the courts. It was therefore thought by some that since the direct connection between the Cape and Holland had been severed already in 1806, there was no reason in 1875 to maintain the essence of this language above Afrikaans. A clique of Afrikaans intellectuals under the auspices of Rev. S J du Toit, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, began to advocate the substitution of Dutch for Afrikaans in all spheres of life. No Sizwe holds that the linguistic and historical researchers and the activities of this movement under du Toit had a profound impact on the cultural and sectional consciousness of the Afrikaner people.²⁶

Consequently this consciousness became an instrument in the hands of the agrarian capitalists of the Western Cape and thereby a means by which they would gain the allegiance of the Afrikaners as a language group in order to bargain for a share of power and wealth controlled by the British imperialist.²⁷ De Klerk maintains that although it is true that the Afrikaner Bond (AB) formed in 1882 grew out of the Afrikaans Language Movement, as it grew older it moved strangely nearer to Rhodes.²⁸

²⁵ No Sizwe, 1979: 15.

²⁶ No Sizwe, 1979: 14-15.

²⁷ This movement which was spearheaded by Du Toit had established itself as the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (the Association of True Afrikaners).

²⁸ When de Klerk maintains that the AB moved closely to Rhodes’s ideals it refers to the following, intimating primarily that Rhodes was a man of many parts: 1. He was a dreamer who had directed his gaze from the eastern slopes of Table Mountain to the far north beyond the Limpopo and the Zambezi. 2. Rhodes was also an apostle of Anglo-Saxonism who saw in his race God’s ideal type, serving God’s purpose. 3. He had a profound love of the Cape and displayed this love by buying a decaying but yet splendid Cape Dutch manor which was then renovated. He also had a very good relationship with both Du Toit as well as Hofmeyer. Cf. WA De Klerk, 1975: 71.

The AB was in principle a political source of “Afrikaner Nationalism”, being a political association of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois white (predominantly Afrikaans-speaking) farmers across the entire South Africa. Its founders were S J du Toit and J H Hofmeyr, both of whom were part of the intellectual elite of the Afrikaans-speaking whites at the Cape. It is furthermore also worth noting that both these gentlemen were sons of large-scale wine farmers who had begun to see the need and the possibility of capturing parliamentary power in order to control the economic levers.

It was however the relationship of these men with the British, especially Rhodes, that caused a lack of trust in his movement’s capacity to further the cause of the Afrikaner people. No Sizwe maintains that many Afrikaners became disgruntled with this movement because at a time when most Afrikaners owned land or had a profession, the bond, which was their political voice, was concerned primarily with obtaining for the elite a share of power, i.e. the possibility of being integrated into the ruling class.²⁹

The Afrikaner Broederbond was formed in 1918 and differed from the Afrikaner Bond where emphasis was concerned. The original AB was the class representative of the agrarian bourgeoisie, which had the role of tying Afrikaner sectionalism firmly to the imperialist master for the benefit of agrarian capital. The new Afrikaner Broederbond was the petty-bourgeois’ vanguard of this sectionalism until approximately 1948. This organisation had to reckon with the repercussions of the post-Anglo-Boer War era.

The question of the majority of the landless proletarians who congregated in cities was something that could not be avoided by this organisation. There was serious concern about possible competition for jobs between the black masses and the white proletariat. The Broederbond was to prevent its working class from responding in all matters as a class; it had to abort any class-consciousness

²⁹ No Sizwe, 1979: 16.

from its ranks.³⁰ Nationalism was to become an important aspect which needed further to be promoted.³¹

The ideological legitimacy which was awarded to the political and organisational mobilisation of the Afrikaans-speaking workers was provided by some of the most noted Broederbond intellectuals. Amongst these may be included the likes of N Diederichs, P J Meyer and G Cronjé. These men toiled zealously to present a theoretical framework of what apartheid was to look like and frequently addressed the white youth at Afrikaans universities.

Obsessed with the idea of nationhood, each one presented a view of how the *volk* was to take shape. It has been suggested that one of the most influential of all these men was N Diederichs. De Klerk argues that Diederichs, who was professor of political philosophy at Grey University College in the Free State, wrote what was to become the most influential study on nationalism as a worldview in 1936.³² Diederichs' most important work on the subject of nationhood was enveloped in his book entitled: *Nasionalisme as Lewensbeskouing en sy Verhouding tot Internationalisme*.

De Klerk is of the view that Diederichs' treatise on nationalism as a worldview formed the basis of what was soon to be known as the concept of "apartheid" or "separate development", and this, declared De Klerk, was the first sustained statement of theologised politics to come from an Afrikaner.³³ For our interest it has to be noted that although Diederichs had been trained at various European universities, and was obviously influenced by German

³⁰ T Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and Afrikaner Civil Religion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975: 159-160.

³¹ Following D O' Meara, despite sustained attempts at cultural mobilisation, Afrikaans-speaking workers displayed a dangerous tendency to act in terms of class rather than cultural interests, i.e. to respond as workers rather than as Afrikaners. The basis of this tendency was the trade union organisation, led by English-speaking artisans and dominated by the craft unions which clearly had no interest in cultural mobilisation. Afrikaans workers thus belonged to class organisations, had their interests articulated in these terms and voted for the Labour Party. They thus had to be weaned from both. Cf. D. O' Meara, 'White Trade Unionism, Political Power and Afrikaner Nationalism', *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 10, April 1975, p. 44.

³² WA De Klerk, 1975: 203f.

³³ WA De Klerk, 1975: 204.

philosophies, his work mentioned above formed the core of the Afrikaner's new politics which was aligned not to Calvinism as contained in the Institutes, but to its puritan mutations, with later neo-Calvinist accretions.³⁴ Diederichs' idea of nationhood was that a nation both is, and at the same time is coming into being.³⁵

Based on this understanding, Diederichs concluded that the notion of universal humanity was an impossibility. Self-evidently, Diederichs rejected equality and suggested that the only equality that could be accepted was the equality of opportunity for each to bring that which was within him to full expression. This could only be achieved when the individual perceived himself as a member of the nation.³⁶

Moodie surmised that this work was of a latter neo-Fichteian variety.³⁷ What is most problematic was of course Diederichs' usage of the concept "nation". His idolisation of this concept had elicited some strong responses from some of Kuyperians, especially J du Plessis. Moodie quotes an excerpt of an exchange between Diederichs and du Plessis which appeared in *Die Volksblad* of 25 April 1936. In that excerpt du Plessis admitted that "although Diederichs rightly placed God above nation, he had gone too far with the manner in which he did this. Because above me as an individual is not my nation but God and God alone".³⁸

Another major work concerning the concept "nation" appeared through the pen of P Meyer and was entitled *Die Afrikaner*. It was written and published

³⁴ Cf. WA De Klerk, 1975 : 204.

³⁵ Diederichs posited the nation as the essential and necessary unit of social analysis. Individuals have their existence only in so far as they are taken up into the national whole. Cf. T D Moodie, 1975: 158.

³⁶ No Sizwe, 1979:23.

³⁷ Moodie bases Diederichs' neo-Fichteian nationalism on Johann Fichte's addresses to the German Nation. He uses the term in a slightly broader context to refer to 'nationalism' as described by Kedourie (cf. E Kedourie, *Nationalism*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1961). Moodie nonetheless differs slightly from the view of nationalism as presented by Kedourie: what he understands by neo-Fichteism includes the views of the German romantics such as Herder and Schleiermacher, as well as Fichte himself. He differs from Kedourie's assertion that all nationalism fits the Fichteian mold (cf. T D Moodie, 1975: 152-160).

³⁸ L J du Plessis quoted in T. Moodie, 1975: 159-160.

in 1941 by a man who was once the head of the *Broederbond*³⁹ as a summary of the central calling of the Afrikaner nation.⁴⁰ The work of G Cronjé is relatively closely related to that of Diederichs and perhaps to an extent to that of Meyer. In its own standing, it was also a significant piece of work, which was to be used by the system that came into place later. For all intents and purposes, it contained everything that was to have consequence to the unravelling of the apartheid ideology. He called his book *'n Tuiste vir die Nageslag*.⁴¹ It is inevitable that the question of superiority which was manifested in their perception of white culture and civilisation, also contributed to the manner and way in which they interpreted reality. Here Cronjé is clearly not leaving the ideal that the Afrikaner

³⁹Moodie explains the purpose for the founding of this society in the following manner: Founded in 1918, the *Broederbond* (or as Moodie calls it in English, the Afrikaner “Brothers’ League”, or as De Klerk prefers to call it, the “Afrikaner Band of Brothers”) was founded with the explicit purpose of assembling “serious-minded young Afrikaner in Johannesburg and along the Reef in order: a. To accomplish a healthy and progressive unity amongst all Afrikaners who actively seek the welfare of the Afrikaner. b. To arouse Afrikaner national self-consciousness and to inspire love of the Afrikaans language, religion, traditions, country and people. c. To further every concern of the Afrikaner nation”. He maintains that membership was restricted to “Afrikaans-speaking Protestants who accepted South Africa as their fatherland, were of sound moral character and stood firm in the defence of their Afrikaner identity”. Cf. T D Moodie, 1975: 50; Giliomee seems to be concurring with the restrictedness of the membership to this organisation. He maintains however that the secrecy of this organisation only developed later. While Moodie asserts that this organisation became a clandestine organisation three years after its establishment, Giliomee disputes this and argues that it went underground only after 1929. In an attempt to substantiate this claim, Giliomee refers to a number of branches which existed in 1928. Giliomee also refers to a conference held by this movement in Bloemfontein in 1929. Cf. H Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2004: 352-354.

⁴⁰ “The person as a faith-unit fulfils its own calling on the one hand by realising the value-whole and on the other the life-order ordained by its faith ... The People is at the same time a social and a cultural community. In the realisation of its unique life-form the People creates its culture and in the creation of its culture it realises its own life-form. These are the two sides of the fulfilment of its unique calling as given in its faith ... The ethnic calling which is contained in the ethnic faith is the most important and primary community forming and culture-creating factor in the coming-into-being of the People. The realisation of the sense and being of Peoplehood [sic] is the fulfilment of the ethnic calling, which finds its most precipitation in the ethnic language. The fulfilment of a People’s calling is a dual process, namely community formation and cultural creation out of the spiritual constitution of the People over against its actuality” Meyer quoted in: T D Moodie, 1975: 163.

⁴¹ In this work he maintained that, ‘the racial policy which we as Afrikaners should promote must be directed to the preservation of racial and cultural variety. This is because it is according to the will of God, and because with the knowledge at our disposal it can be justified on practical grounds’. Cf. G Cronjé, *'n Tuiste vir ons nageslag: Die Blywende oplossing van Suid-Afrika se Rassevraagstukke*, 1945: 168 et seq.

will prosper to the "will of God", but continues to argue that this will be feasible because of the obvious fact that the knowledge that they have justifies the means instituted by them to achieve this end.

The ideas concerning apartheid which already had their frame in the works of these intellectuals indicated were legally tested when the National Party (NP) became the official governing party in 1948. It is careless to assume that apartheid was only implemented after the 1948 NP victory. De Gruchy argues that although racial discrimination was entrenched in the Union constitution and determined much of the legislation between 1910 and 1948, it did not have the rigid, ideological character that it began to assume under the apartheid slogan.⁴²

It must then be conceded that the legislation devised by the NP was not necessitated by the irritation which some whites might have had with blacks. Instead, this legislation ought to be looked at as a mechanism put into place to systematically mute and prune the development of black people in South Africa.⁴³ Already in Cronjé do we see him at work developing the justification of the Bantustans, of cheap black labour that was imperative for the prosperity of the white economy, and the control of the movement of blacks in urban areas.⁴⁴

⁴² J W De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979: 53-54.

⁴³ The legislation which we have minded here refer to the numerous acts passed by Parliament. The main accomplishment of these acts facilitated the classification of South African people into racial categories, hence the four racial groups in South Africa viz. Black, Coloured, Indian and White. Among the acts which were made law by parliament can be included the Immorality Act which inhibited whites to have relations with blacks, the Group Areas Act, Influx Control Act which restricted the movement of black people in urban areas, press censorship, etc. As a means of avoiding opposition from black radicals the Communism Act of 1950 was enacted. Another piece of notorious law was encapsulated in the Bantu Education Act. Cf. Z Mbali. *The Churches and Racism*. Great Britain: SCM Press, 1987: 11f.

⁴⁴ Cronjé maintained that we should remember that the black man [sic] and in general cheap black labour, are part of our current economic structure. The latter is based to a great extent on that cheap labour which is easily available. The total racial segregation will suggest that the black labour power will be excluded from the economic life of the white man. It will only be feasible [for whites to maintain economic power while still commanding the cheap black labour] if an economic structure was designed that addressed this issue; a structure that would be able to confirm the number of blacks in white communities and to which branches they affiliated for

All these statements were not only viewed from a socio-economic and political perspective, but contained an intrinsic divine element which ostensibly enlightened the views of these advocates. Cronjé later wrote another book, this time in collaboration with two prominent theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church, *Regverdige Rasse-Apartheid*. One of the two prominent theologians was Dr W Nicol who was moderator of the DRC, the other was Prof Dr E P Groenewald.⁴⁵ Nicol argued that “whites could be good Christians, and at the same time watch over the survival of their race with holy gravity”.⁴⁶ Groenewald declared that he wished this separation to be complete. He maintained that the fact that God had given the various nations their separate existences, implied that they should remain separate. Israel itself was the proof of how God had willed national separateness.⁴⁷

Apart from all these devious contortions, some black theologians believed that it was even more important to look at the issue of land and how the seizure of land acted as an impulse to cripple the black race in South Africa. Tlhagale traces the white obsession for monopoly over black land and labour to the infamous 1913 Natives Land Act, which sought to lay down “permanent lines of territorial segregation” between blacks and whites. In his opinion, this was one of the factors coupled with the growing demand for labour by the mining, industrial and agricultural sectors, which sped up the process of proletarianisation.⁴⁸

labour. All those blacks who are not useful and have no business being in white communities will then be repatriated to their reserves”. Cf. G Cronjé, 1945 : 128.

⁴⁵ Cf. G Cronjé (red.), *Regverdige Rasse-Apartheid*. Stellenbosch: CSV maatskappy van Suid-Afrika. 1947, 147.

⁴⁶ “*Ons kan goeie Christene wees en tog met ‘n heilige erns vir die voortbestaan van ons ras waak*”. W Nicol, ‘ ‘n Grootse roeping’ in G Cronjé (ed.), 1947: 21-22.

⁴⁷ In order to substantiate his claim that what they were doing with apartheid had divine sanction, Groenewald pointed to scripture. The texts to which he made particular reference to substantiate his viewpoint were among others the building of the tower of Babel which is found in Gen. 11. Cf. E P Groenewald, ‘Apartheid en Voogdyskap in die lig van die heilige skrif’ in: G Cronjé (red.), 1947: 43ff.

⁴⁸ B Tlhagale, ‘Towards a Black theology of Labour’ in: J Cochrane and G West (eds.) *The Three-Fold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour*. Cape Town: Cluster Publishers, 1991: 145.

In essence one can detect some sort of pseudo-concern in most of the “liberties” which were afforded to the black population of South Africa. This pseudo-concern remains evident in the speeches of Hendrik Verwoerd. When he was still Minister of Education, Verwoerd remarked that “education must train and teach in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live ... Education should have roots entirely in the Native areas and in the Native environment and Native community in all aspects. There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour”.⁴⁹ It can furthermore be argued that this pseudo-concern had its roots deeply vested in the paternalism that was evident already in missionaries to Africa.⁵⁰ It was therefore necessary to alert white people to the potential danger of allowing black people to develop fully. It is known that once someone becomes fearful, he or she tends to fall back on his or her stereotypical assumptions.

This fear cannot be confined to Afrikaners alone. Some black consciousness leaders believe that the white Afrikaner regime was quite successful in establishing fear of black people even among liberals. By dexterously instilling into the consciousness of the country the notion of the “*swart gevaar*”⁵¹ they managed to convince even some of the most familiar liberal voices that “perhaps apartheid is worth a try”.⁵²

⁴⁹ Cf. C Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: a socio-theological history of the English-speaking churches*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988: 95.

⁵⁰ Cf. the Three-self policy of the missionaries Venn and Anderson adopted by the DRC synodical commission in 1935, quoted in: J W Hofmeyr and G J Pillay (eds.) *A history of Christianity in South Africa. Vol 1*. Pretoria: Haum Tertiary Publishers, 1994: 253.

⁵¹ *Swart gevaar* – Black danger. This is a notion developed by the apartheid regime to instill fear of black people into white people. It served the purpose of calling on all whites to unite against blacks ostensibly because there was something to be feared in the event that black people assumed their rightful places in South Africa.

⁵² The most familiar liberal white voice that is referred to here is that of Dr Alan Paton who made this statement in an interview in London. See S Biko, ‘Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity’, in: M Motlhabi (ed.), *Essays on Black theology*. Johannesburg: The Black Theology Project, 1972: 18.

At one of the synods where the DRC discussed separate development, it was admitted that the traditional fear of the Afrikaner of equality of treatment between black and white had its origin in his antipathy to the idea of racial fusion.⁵³ This view is further crystallised by Kinghorn.⁵⁴ He refers to a publication by the Broederbond on racial studies which is fundamental for a comprehension of the deliberate fear which was instilled in the moral fibre of the general Afrikaner populace.⁵⁵ Suffice it to say that this view still has implications for the way black and white as well as black and coloured perceive each other today.

It was this stereotype which would later substantiate the DRC's stance concerning mixed marriages. Consequently, it would be easy for the church to underpin government legislation, which prohibited these types of marriages. This purported superiority forced many blacks to accept their status as being inferior to whites.

To compound the chaotic political situation of theology in South Africa, biblical hermeneutics were designed with the specific purpose of justifying the then South African politics. Biblical texts read selectively and in a fundamentalist way acted as intermediaries in justifying apartheid.

A great deal of consideration was given to Old Testament texts; however some New Testament passages which insisted on the distinctions between

⁵³ J W Hofmeyr *et al.* (eds.), 1994: 253.

⁵⁴ Kinghorn maintained that “... veral in die dertigerjare, in Suid-Afrika goedgesinde ore sou vind is te verstane, veral aangesien die gepopulariseerde weergawe daarvan in Duitsland die blanke Germaan (en dus min of meer die Afrikaner) as die kanon van rassuiwerheid verklaar het. ...rassuiwerheid, die sonde van bloedvermenging, ens., was grootliks in die lug. Cf. J. Kinghorn, ‘Vormende Faktore’ in: J Kinghorn (ed.), 1986: 54.

⁵⁵ Parts of that study reads: “Nou as ons aanneem dat die eienskappe van die blanke in die algemeen te verkies is bo die van die kaffer (intellektueel, esteties en moreel) dan sal dus in al die gevalle waar die eienskap van die kaffer dominant is, agteruitgang plaasvind. In plaas van ‘n suiwer blanke tipe kry ons ‘n individu met swart of donker vel, verlies van liggaamlike skoonheid mag nie so swaar weeg as die intellektuele en morele agteruitgang nie, ofskoon geen blanke wat sy raseienskappe op prys stel graag soos ‘n kaffer sal lyk nie”. Cf. J. Kinghorn, ‘Vormende Faktore’, 54.

nations were also consulted.⁵⁶ The debate was expanded – from history to creation – to new creation. The unity in Christ was a spiritual unity and not a challenge to the elemental truth of racial discrimination. Because it was believed that re-creation was based on creation, the church as sign of the Kingdom was also marked in its identity by these divisions and had a calling to maintain the orders between nations.

The conclusion was that, not only was Christian society called upon to honour racial segregation, but the church as instrument of God's design had to especially obey apartheid and had therefore to fiercely oppose the occurrence of racially mixed congregations. Many Afrikaner theologians found an ally in the theology of the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). The result was that the Neo-Calvinism of Kuyper was used to provide the impetus for theologised politics in South Africa.

4.4 The abuse of Neo-Calvinism and its consequences for South Africa

The Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper is particularly important if we want to understand the origin of theologised politics in South Africa. The Calvinist revivals of Kuyper as well as Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1976) had made a considerable impact on the South Africans who went to study in the Netherlands. Dutch Neo-Calvinism was an attempt to unite and strengthen the scattered Calvinist communities in order to rebuild the Calvinism of the 17th century which, they claimed, was the force behind Dutch power during Holland's "Golden Century".

For Kuyper the ideal was to spread Calvinism. He even once stated that he had no particular problem with the "mixing of blood" in the process – the aim was the "development of *mankind* (sic) taken as a whole".⁵⁷ In South Africa the call to unite the Calvinist forces was translated into a call to unite Afrikaners.

⁵⁶ C J S Lombaard, 'The Bible in the Apartheid debate' in: J W Hofmeyr *et al.* (eds.), *1948 Plus 50 years. Theology, apartheid and church: past, present and future*. Pretoria, 2001: 72-3

⁵⁷ Cf. J Bratt (ed.), *Abraham Kuyper: A centennial reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998: 450.

Where Neo-Calvinism sought a type of Christian nationalism which encompassed all nations, Christian nationalism in South Africa meant Afrikaner nationalism that precisely sought a segregation of nations.

Kuyper had become famous for his concept of autonomous spheres of existence. The title *Soevereiniteit in eigen kring* was the very title of his address at the inauguration of the Vrije Universiteit (VU) of Amsterdam. The guiding principle of his address was that he would find a university which, under the legal guardianship of the state, would be free of both state and church.⁵⁸ When he later delivered a lecture to the student body at the VU, Kuyper uttered the phrase for which he was to become most famous with: “There is not a single inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine”.⁵⁹ Although the idea of autonomous spheres of sovereignty is somewhat related to *Ordnungstheologie* which was particularly famous in the time of the Third Reich in Germany, many apartheid theologians did not use this idea as such but instead found an ally in Kuyper and his views with regard to the spheres of sovereignty.

De Klerk refers to the work of J Stellingwerf who posed the question whether the idea of sovereignty in a particular sphere could be used to validate the idea of separate development, and concluded that it could not.⁶⁰ The ostensible ambiguity around the question of how Kuyper was interpreted and used to justify the apartheid ideology, therefore makes it impossible to speak about apartheid ideology without referring to Kuyper’s Neo-Calvinism. It is for this reason that a number of theologians blame the apartheid ideology on the Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Cf. WA de Klerk, 1975: 257.

⁵⁹ Cf. J Bratt (ed.), 1998: 488.

⁶⁰ Cf. J Stellingwerf, *Gezag en Vrijheid in het licht van Gods Woord*. Johannesburg, 1971: 83.

⁶¹ Cf. J W De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984: 107ff.

Although De Gruchy is aware that Kuyper must to an extent have been misused in South Africa, he appears to be affirming the view that some parts of Kuyper's theology does leave a number of loopholes which enable such misuse. This is most probably the more conservative side of Kuyper which was particularly illustrated in his lectures on Calvinism that was delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898. Kuyper's conservatism is encapsulated in the lecture on Calvinism as a life system. He had the following to say with regard to the relationship of man to man [sic]:

"... the second condition, with which, for the sake of creating a life system every profound movement has to comply viz., a fundamental interpretation of its own touching the relation of man to man ... there is no uniformity among men, but endless multiformity. In creation itself the difference has been established between woman and man. Physical and spiritual gifts and talents cause one person to differ from the other ... The social position of the rich and poor differs widely. Now these differences are in a special way weakened or accentuated by every consistent life system, and paganism, Islamism, Romanism as well as Modernism, and so also Calvinism have accordance with their primordial principle. If Paganism contends God dwells in the creature, a divine superiority is exhibited in whatever is high among men [sic] ... On the other hand whatever is lower is considered as godless, and therefore give rise to systems of caste in India and Egypt, and to slavery everywhere else, thereby placing one man under a base subjection of his fellowman.."⁶²

Although Kuyper recognised the differences between human beings, his distinctions are so simplistic that they are susceptible to misappropriation. In congruence with De Gruchy, Moodie holds that Kuyper's Neo-Calvinism has been distorted by the South African interpretation to such a degree that the positive contribution he could have made (perhaps in avoiding the realization of the theological justification of apartheid) was overshadowed.⁶³ Thus not only

⁶² Cf. A Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six stone-lectures*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931: 51-52.

⁶³ Cf. T D Moodie's (1975: 55) comment on Kuyper's independent sphere of social life.

was a critical contribution that Kuyper could have made lost, but it had become necessary for some to distinguish between Calvinism and *Afrikaner* Calvinism.⁶⁴

When looking at Afrikaner nationalism, De Gruchy concludes that the reason for this misuse of Kuyper was ideological. He comes to this conclusion because of the fact that Neo-Calvinism in South Africa was wedded to the German Romantic view of history and the German organic view of the state.⁶⁵

As far as Moodie is concerned, according to Kuyper, because family, business, science, art, etc. are all social spheres which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but “obey a high authority within their own bosom”, the State cannot dictate to either of these for they are subject only to God.⁶⁶ Given this, Moodie argues that a case could therefore be made against a number of laws which encroached on this independence, i.e. the state can have no right in determining who should get married to whom.

De Gruchy is correct in asserting that the idea of national sovereignty and the sovereignty of each nation that has its particular historical calling, destiny and cultural mandate, suited not only the Germans and the Dutch national character, but also a number of nations outside Europe, including the Afrikaner nation at the end of the 19th century.⁶⁷

He believes that within the South African context, the main exponent of Kuyper along this nationalistic line was the philosopher H G Stoker, for whom “the People” (*volk*) was a separate sphere with its own structure and purpose, grounded in the ordinances of God’s creation.⁶⁸ The fundamental point that De Gruchy is trying to make here was that Kuyper’s Neo-Calvinism provided one point of departure for this development, but the end product was not only a

⁶⁴ J W De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology. A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991: 11ff.

⁶⁵ J W De Gruchy, 1984: 110.

⁶⁶ T D Moodie, 1975: 55.

⁶⁷ J W De Gruchy, 1984: 110.

⁶⁸ Cf. J W De Gruchy, 1984: 110; T D Moodie, 1975: 66.

contradiction of Kuyper's doctrine of the spheres, but the creation of an Afrikaner civil religion that had too often been mistaken for Calvinism.

This religion fulfilled a central role both in the Afrikaner's struggle for identity, and would subsequently provide a theological base upon which nationalism could flourish. Moodie asserts that Stoker's Neo-Calvinism was able to accommodate the Afrikaner civil religion and could sustain it, because in his view, the Afrikaner people were sovereign in their own circle, acknowledging no other Lord than God, and their purpose was seen in their structures and calling, as well as their historical destiny.⁶⁹ Even their usage and interpretation of scripture illustrated their sovereignty. Jonker argues that in the interpretation of their own history, they equated the Great Trek from the Cape Colony to the northern parts of the country with the delivery of the Israelites from Egypt, and their military clashes with the people of Africa with the wars of Israel against the Canaanites and the Philistines.⁷⁰

Essentially the Afrikaner *volk* religion that emerged with the South African Neo-Calvinism had succeeded in instilling in its adherents a contorted view that the differences between human beings justified the different treatment of the different races. The theological justification of apartheid had plunged theology in South Africa into a quagmire. This theological quagmire elicited a number of theological responses, among them black theology.

4.5 South African theology in a state of emergency

It is important to ponder what was meant by black theology in South Africa and, fundamentally, it has to be considered whether this black theological response was indeed a proper and sufficient response to the theologised politics of Neo-Calvinism. When South Africa went into a state of national emergency

⁶⁹ T D Moodie, 1975: 66.

⁷⁰ W D Jonker, 'The Gospel and Political Freedom' in: A van Egmond and D van Keulen (eds.), *Studies in Reformed Theology 1*: Baarn: Callenbach, 1996: 248.

(especially during the 1960s with the Sharpeville Massacre), theology both from the left as well as the right side of the regime also went into a state of emergency.

It became a point of concern for those on the right to ponder the question of whether their theological hermeneutics could sustain the mounting national and international criticism. Those on the left had to consider whether a theology wrapped in a Eurocentric culture that was suppressing black people should continue as if nothing had happened.

These states of emergency were highlighted by the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960.⁷¹ With some of the most prominent black political organisations prohibited from South Africa, some churches that could not align themselves with the legitimacy of apartheid and its theological underpinnings had to find ways of registering their disagreement with the justification of apartheid.

Although, as has been indicated, the DRC had aided the state on numerous occasions to provide the spiritual and theological basis for the sustainability of apartheid, it needs to be pointed out from the onset that members of this church were never a monolithic group.⁷² There are numerous examples to illustrate the role that white revolutionaries played in ensuring the demise of apartheid.

Different voices against apartheid, both black and white, organised themselves under a number of institutions.⁷³ Black theology was appropriated by

⁷¹ The Sharpeville massacre occurred when police opened fire on approximately 10 000 peaceful protesters led by the Pan-African Congress. The protest was aimed at opposing white domination and the emancipation of Black people in South Africa. About 68 people were killed, among them 40 women and eight children and a number of casualties were noted. Cf. J Millard, 'Christianity in South Africa since 1948' in: J W Hofmeyr and G J Pillay (eds.), 1994: 273.

⁷² A critical response to apartheid and the theological justification thereof cannot be confined to the birth of Black theology as a critical response. A number of other individuals, some of them white, also contributed towards the critical response to the theological legitimacy of apartheid. For a detailed exploration in this regard Cf. R S Tshaka, 2004.

⁷³ The voices to which we refer here were the voices that organised the Christian organisations such as the Christian Institute which was faithfully spearheaded by the late Dr Beyers Naudé, the South African Council of Churches and many others.

some South African theologians with the intention of challenging a theology that was sanctioning the political situation during the apartheid era.

4.6 Black theology as a response to the theological justification of apartheid

Black theology is defined as a conscious and systematic theological reflection on black experience which is characterised by oppression and suffering in white racist societies in North America and South Africa.⁷⁴ Maimela maintained that Black theology was therefore an aspect of a worldwide theological movement known as liberation theology and owed its origin to the unique experience of the people of colour, especially of African descent, in white dominated societies where the people's blackness was taken and rationalised by white people as giving them enough reason to subject black people to a life of domination, exploitation, oppression and humiliation.⁷⁵

Black theology was born out of the context of black oppression and dehumanisation and was therefore deliberately aimed at the foremost social evils

⁷⁴ Black theology emerged in South Africa during the late 1960s. As a project, it was inspired by the civil rights movement in the USA, the prophetic voice of Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the pioneering work of James Cone. It was transported from the shores of the United States of America to South Africa as an intellectual project which was made possible by the University Christian Movement (UCM) in 1971. All this occurred under the directorship of Basil Moore and was first spearheaded in South Africa by Sabelo Ntwasa. Black theology was expressed under the banner of the Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa which owes its being students such as Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, Harry Nengwenkulu and others who were galvanized by the then political situation into organising themselves into being a vanguard for the black peoples' total emancipation from the political pangs into which they were plunged by white racism in South Africa. Although Black theology propagated itself chiefly by means of seminars and ministers' caucuses, it produced some significant publications and continued into the *Kairos* period. A number of the first-generation black theologians endeavoured to develop Black theology in relation to their confessional traditions. Among these theologians were Manas Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak. This project was carried on by theologians such as Buti Tlhagale, Takatso Mofokeng, Bongajalo Goba and Itumeleng Mosala, to mention but a few. Cf. J W De Gruchy, 'African Theologies: South Africa' in: D Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*. 2nd edition. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1997: 447. Some of the fundamental collections that this theology produced included B Moore, (ed.), *The challenge of Black theology in South Africa*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976; I Mosala and B Tlhagale (eds.), *The unquestionable Right to be Free*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

⁷⁵ S Maimela, 'Black theological response to racism as a theological problem'. In: *Journal of Black theology in South Africa*. Vol. 7. (2). November 1993, 100-113.

that the dominant white groups were perpetrating against black people.⁷⁶ In addition to this, it must be said that black theology, at least in South Africa, was called into existence with its chief objective being to rebuff the monopoly enjoyed by white (Afrikaner) theology. This exercise was aimed at critically re-examining the theology which black people had imbibed in the light of the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic theological traditions.

It should then be understood why Tlhagale said that the images of God as a just, loving and merciful Father did not correspond with the harsh reality of racism, landlessness, economic exploitation and political powerlessness. Nothing but apartheid was to be blamed for the fact that Christianity (at least to the black populace) had become increasingly questionable.⁷⁷ With the apparent ambiguous interpretation of how socio-economic and political issues had to be dealt with from a theological point of view, black theology refused to be dictated to by a dominant theology which remained in cahoots with the state and yet professed that political issues should be left in the care of the state.

By taking its point of departure from black people's concrete experiences of oppression and suffering in a white dominated society where the Christian faith was being used as an oppressive instrument to legitimise the socio-

⁷⁶ Tlhagale has indicated the criticism that accompanied the persistent usage of the word 'black' to qualify this theology. He maintains that the usage of the word 'black' necessitated the condemnation that it perpetuates racism, distorts theological reflection and promotes a provincial mentality. In noting these charges, Tlhagale joins the chorus of those who insist that Black theology is a direct, aggressive response to a situation where blacks experience alienation on political, economic and cultural levels. For this reason, he continues, the symbolic value of the word 'black' is that it captures the broken existence of black people, summons them collectively to burst the chains of oppression and engage themselves creatively in the construction of a new society. Thus black theology is primarily aimed at the liberation of black people [Tlhagale adds, and hopefully to the liberation of whites as well]. In insisting on the word black, Tlhagale contrasts it with the concept contextual theology which was a theology designed in South Africa to evade the exclusiveness of theologies such as black theology which was primarily aimed at black people. It is Tlhagale's view that the term 'contextual theology' remains an evasive expression in so far as it accommodates the self-justification of the oppressing group. He argues that 'black' in black theology underlines the unique experience of the underdog. More importantly, he says, black theology resists the 'ossification' of Christian values couched in the idiom of the dominant group. Cf. B Tlhagale, 'Towards a Black Theology of Labour' in: J Cochrane and G West (eds.), 1991: 142.

⁷⁷ B Tlhagale, 'Towards a Black theology of labour' in: J Cochrane and G West (eds.), 1991: 143.

economic and political interests of white people, black theology could not resist becoming suspicious not only of the situation of injustice and oppression, but also of the colonial theologies which gave tacit support to the privileged status of white people. It should therefore be understood why this theology was opposed to white advocacy of a colour-blind approach to theology.⁷⁸ The need for black people to assert themselves is to be sought in another dimension – the dimension of Black Consciousness which is in essence simply a political counterpart of black theology, and as important to black theology as black theology is to it.

It is urged that in discussing the implications of Black Consciousness as a means towards the emancipation of black people in South Africa, a distinction has to be made between the broad ideology derived from the pan-Africanist and the American black consciousness movement and the practical political activities and propaganda of organisations which had conceded their allegiance to the ideology of Black Consciousness.⁷⁹ No Sizwe is right in maintaining that ideologically Black Consciousness postulates that “people of colour” (in the South African context Africans, Coloureds and Indians), should liberate themselves psychologically by shedding the slave mentality. This implied essentially that they must cease measuring themselves in Eurocentric terms, and embrace themselves for the human beings that they are.⁸⁰ Seen in this light there can be no doubt that Black Consciousness is an inevitable and historically progressive by-product of anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles of the 20th century.

By taking its theological point of departure from the oppressive situations of black people, black theology was susceptible to danger. It faced the same hermeneutical temptations as the dormant hermeneutics it was reacting against. It is for this reason that Vorster could claim that black theology had committed

⁷⁸ J Segundo, *The Liberation of theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1976: 28.

⁷⁹ No Sizwe, 1979: 122.

⁸⁰ No Sizwe, 1979: 122.

the same mistakes as Afrikaner theology.⁸¹ Vorster noted that the Bible played a fundamental role in South African society.

One of Vorster's conclusions was that it had become fundamental and relevant to ponder the question of the interrelationship between the Bible and politics anew. His chief criticism was directed towards the following three issues: the use of scripture, the Bible and history, as well as the Bible as a book of norms.⁸² His conclusion concerning the first point was that the Dutch Reformed Church had indeed changed – a comparison between this church's earlier documents on race relations and later ones illustrated some progress. However, with regard to some that looked at the Bible as a book which contained guidelines for all times, problems concerning hermeneutics would abound. Thus reading apartheid into the Bible was also possible.

The relationship between these views and approaches to the Bible are not only conspicuous within Afrikaner theology, but also occurred in black theology. Vorster's thesis is of particular importance here. He asserts that:

“one needs to be open to the possibility that theology of apartheid might in principle be based on theological bias and foundations which need not differ, theologically spoken, much from anti-apartheid theology or black theology. To put it another way, it is possible in the end that anti-apartheid and apartheid theology have, for example, the same view of Scripture, but that in each case a different political grid of interpretation is used to justify ‘theological’ views”.⁸³

The problem with these types of theologies is that the particular contexts from which they originate can easily find solace in an uncritical appropriation of the social context. More importantly, such an uncritical appropriation then calls for an uncritical usage of biblical hermeneutics. The Bible is then used selectively to justify that uncritical contextual theology which is essentially ideological.

⁸¹ W Vorster, ‘The use of Scripture and the NG Kerk: a shift of paradigm or of values?’ In: J W Hofmeyr and W S Vorster, *New faces of Africa: essays in honour of Ben Marais*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1984: 204ff.

⁸² W Vorster, ‘The use of Scripture and the NG Kerk: a shift of paradigm or of values?’, 204.

⁸³ W Vorster, *The use of Scripture and the NG Kerk: a shift of paradigm or of values?*, 207.

It is perhaps also because of the temptation of using the Bible for ideological reasons that confessional theology insists on the essence of its characteristics. Taking its point of departure not from the situation of the individual or of a group, but from the Word of God as it is revealed to us in scripture, confessional theology remains consistently perturbed by any attempt to uncritically associate itself either with Afrikaner theology, black theology or for that matter, contextual theology.

It has to be asked whether black theology as a critical theological response to a Neo-Calvinist theologised politics was enough and, whether in its attempts to challenge the then dominant theology, it had not committed similar mistakes to that of the dominant theology. Bosch was helpful in summing up the exclusiveness of black theology. He reflected on the similarity between Afrikaner religion and black theology:

“Theology must be contextual, that is true, but may it ever be exclusive? We have to ask in all seriousness whether the category ‘people’ or ‘nation’ may be the object of the church’s concern for liberation. ‘People’ as a cultural and ethnic entity is not a theological category and wherever it is made into such a category (as an ‘ordinance of creation’ or God-given distinctive entity) it cannot but lead to mutual exclusiveness which endangers the life of the church as the new community”.⁸⁴

It cannot be ignored that black theology played a pivotal role in devising a biblical hermeneutics which called into question the dominant Afrikaner hermeneutics. It must however be pointed out that black theology was also not without its shortcomings and that it was particularly susceptible to becoming ideological. It can also not be denied that it has been exclusive. Confessional theology, it seems, would have been a better option because it takes as its point of departure not the situation of the human being – although this is an important characteristic of confessional theology – but the Word of God.

⁸⁴ Cf. D J Bosch, ‘The Church and the Liberation of Peoples’, in: *Missionalia*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (August 1977), 334.

4.7 *Status confessionis* – controversial but unavoidable

Black theology as a critical theological response to theologised politics in South Africa was not sufficient, hence the *status confessionis* in South Africa. A state of confession is evoked only when a group of Christians becomes convinced that, without disregarding the fundamental nature of politics, the gospel of Christ is at stake. This section shall confine itself to a brief exploration of this concept, focusing to an extent to the controversial nature of a state of confession as well as the unavoidability thereof.

The inclination of practising a theology which takes as its point of departure the situation in which human beings find themselves, has proven to be a dangerous one. Although context is pivotal to theological reflection, it can be said to a certain extent that contextual theology, at least in Germany during the Hitler regime as well in South Africa during the apartheid regime, has been a reason for the misappropriation of the gospel. Reactions to this type of theology have been frequent.

In South Africa this form of theology was questioned and challenged by ecclesiastical organisations such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Christian Institute (CI) which were organisations that accommodated a number of individual churches and individual Christians respectively. It was under the auspices of some of these organisations that united declarations against the evil of apartheid were formulated.⁸⁵

The Christian Institute is of particular importance here. Although profoundly influenced by the German Church struggle, it was nonetheless unable to precipitate a confessing church in South Africa. In a recent study by John De Gruchy on Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's biographer, De Gruchy refers

⁸⁵ Several documents which questioned the then state theology were published; among them the message of the people and the *Kairos* document are of particular importance. From the Pentecostal point of view, see *The Relevant Pentecostal Witness*. Chatsglen: Durban, 1988. *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: Evangelicals' critique their own theology and practice*. Dobsonville: Published by the concerned Pentecostals, 1986.

to some of the reasons given by Bethge as to why a confessing church did not materialise in time in South Africa. Bethge maintains the Christian Institute was unable to precipitate a confessing church in South Africa because of the difference in ethos and tradition in South African churches.⁸⁶

Bethge may be correct in this regard; however, the reason(s) for the Christian Institute's inability to produce a confessing church movement in South Africa ought to be located elsewhere. It must be remembered that the "Confessing Church" in Germany was also not without its differences. It has been argued elsewhere in this study that fear of disregard for ecclesial traditions was one of the reasons that saw the meeting at Barmen agree on the word "declaration" instead of "confession".

Black theology was one of the reasons that inhibited the Christian Institute's ambitions of producing a confessing church in South Africa. Let it firstly be said that black theology consisted of numerous factions in itself. One faction employed Marxist tools of social analysis as a means of coercing the dominant theology to scrutinise the material condition of those who were traditionally located at the periphery of society.⁸⁷

Those who criticise this faction maintain that black theology has done well to address the depressing socio-political conditions of black people, but had failed dismally in exfoliating the European shells from theology. This criticism is justified, given the fact that not much has been done in that regard. It is for this reason that theologians such as Mokgethi Motlhabi chastises black theology for not having done enough to identify it with African theology, hence his option for the replacement of black theology with African theology.⁸⁸

Another faction of black theology attempted to engage apartheid and its theological legitimacy along ecclesiastical lines. Among these church traditions can

⁸⁶ E Bethge cited in: JW De Gruchy & S De Gruchy, 2004: 105.

⁸⁷ Cf. T Mofokeng, 'The evolution of the Black struggle' in: I Mosala and B Tlhagale (eds.), 1989: 125.

⁸⁸ Cf. M Motlhabi, 'Black theology: A personal view' in: B. Moore (ed.), 1976: 78.

be singled out the Lutheran church as well as a Reformed church in South Africa. When Allan Boesak wrote his book entitled *Black and Reformed* he was seeking to engage the theological legitimacy of apartheid and racism within the realm of the Reformed tradition.⁸⁹ Both Lutheran and Reformed theological traditions contemplated a theological answer to the state in which South African theology found itself.

It was especially the Reformed theological tradition (specifically the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church) that enabled a *status confessionis* in South Africa and essentially made it a confessing church. In line with the histories of their hermeneutical traditions, the concept of *status confessionis* set the theological pace of dealing with the theological legitimacy of apartheid in South Africa. The history of the concept in question has been controversial from its inception and had much to do with the ostensible Interims.⁹⁰

Taking their cues from what happened particularly in Germany where National Socialist (NS) tendencies were combined with theological hermeneutics, some South African churches contemplated a response to its own socio-economic theological and political context. This situation was examined first within the confines of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Smit reports that in 1977 in Dar es Salaam the LWF announced a *status confessionis* concerning racism and apartheid and declared that once again the situation did not involve merely *adiophora* but the essence of the church itself. Under the theme “Christ, a new community” Manas Buthelezi delivered an address on “In Christ a community in the Holy Spirit”. Eventually, the meeting adopted a concise threefold resolution with the title “Declaration on confessional integrity” (*status confessionis* in South Africa).

This assembly maintained that under normal circumstances the church might have differences of opinion on political issues. This assembly admitted

⁸⁹ Cf. A Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, liberation and the Calvinist tradition*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 2.

that political and social structures could become perverted and oppressive and that it was in agreement with the confession to reject the apartheid system publicly and unambiguously. The statement vividly involved the question of what constitutes an *adiophora* but did not spell out what “in agreement with confession” meant. It became increasingly clear that many of the assembled were confused by the jargon of *status confessionis* and for that reason it was even suggested by the study commission of experts, which gathered to advise the LWF, that the term *status confessionis* should be abandoned although the designation of an abnormal confessional situation could still be retained.

Next, the situation in which the church found itself in South Africa was examined by a member of the family of Dutch Reformed churches, i.e. the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) that had adopted a number of strong resolutions concerning the ideology of apartheid and rejected it as being in conflict with the teaching of the gospel on church unity and reconciliation. Smit remains however of the view that this took place totally independently of the sixth plenary assembly of the LWF's on the issue in question.⁹¹

In August 1980 the central conference of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva released a declaration on South Africa in which an appeal was made to the World Council and its member churches together with other churches to witness that apartheid was a sin which was to be rejected.

Two years later, in August 1982, the World Alliance Reformed Churches (WARC) met in Ottawa on the *status confessionis* for the South African context. During this period Allan Boesak played a pivotal role in inducing the verdict by the WARC on South Africa. Boesak vigorously argued that apartheid was not merely an evil ideology, but a pseudo-religious ideology inculcated, perpetuated and justified out of the bosom of Reformed churches. Finally he requested the WARC to identify itself with the resolution of the 1978 Synod that apartheid was irreconcilable with the gospel of Christ and to declare it a heresy.

⁹¹ Cf. D J Smit, 'What does *Status Confessionis* mean?' in: D J Smit and G Cloete (eds.), 1984: 13.

The WARC issued a detailed declaration on racism and South Africa in August, which consisted of several sections. The initial section expressed some basic truths about the gospel. It argued that the theology of apartheid which has been designed by South African Reform theologians was fallacious, and that apartheid was therefore a pseudo-religious ideology as well as a political policy.

A second section reminded the Alliance that it had already adopted several resolutions on that matter. Thus the exclusion on any person(s) on grounds of race, colour or nationality from any congregation and part of the life of the church contradicted the very nature of the church. The last section urged the General Council to declare that this situation constituted a *status confessionis* for their member churches; it asserted that an *adiophora* could not be tolerated and that the church was being called to take the stance by Bonhoeffer and others to defend the essence of the Christian gospel.

When the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church debated for a resolution on this matter on 1 October 1982 in Belhar, the synod took note of the proposal by its delegates to Ottawa that the synod should accept the resolution of the WARC on racism, thus the DRMC declared that it constituted a *status confessionis*. The *status confessionis* which was declared on Apartheid South Africa came into being primarily because Christians felt that the gospel was at stake.

A state of confession is declared when injustices are committed under the pretext of the gospel. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches provides its own helpful description of what a *status confessionis* is. This description is derived from its earlier deliberations on subjects relating to racism and nuclear war. It maintains that:

“Any declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error into truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching or practice as heretical. The declaration of a *status confessionis* refers to the practice of the church as well as to its teaching. The

church's practice in the relevant case must conform to the confession of the gospel demanded by the declaration of the *status confessionis*. The declaration of a *status confessionis* addresses a particular situation. It brings to light an error which threatens a specific church. Nevertheless, the danger inherent in that error also calls into question the integrity of proclamation of all churches. The declaration of a *status confessionis* within one particular situation is, at the same time, addressed to all churches, calling them to concur in the act of confessing".⁹²

A *status confessionis* is theological because it has to do with the state in which the truth of the gospel is placed. Therefore, although the political situation can be horrible, a *status confessionis* is only declared when a group of Christians congregate to lament the horrible political situation in which the gospel is being contorted to sustain the horrendous nature of that political situation.

4.8 The Belhar Confession as confessional theology?

The Belhar Confession, like Barth's Church Dogmatics, stands in the very same tradition as the Barmen Theological Declaration and therefore the Reformed ecclesiastical tradition. Although it has to be added that the occasion which precipitated this confession remains fundamentally different to the events that necessitated the Barmen Theological Declaration in Germany in 1934. It is incorrect to claim that the Belhar Confession would have been nonexistent had it not been for the Barmen Theological Declaration.⁹³ Smit admits this but hastens to add "the Belhar Confession in its present form". By adding the phrase in question, he clearly illustrates the fact that the contexts in which these confessions originated are different and should be viewed as such.

The Barmen Theological Declaration as well as the theology of Barth played a pivotal role in the formation of the Belhar Confession. This Confession

⁹² Cf. M Opocenský, (ed.), 1997: 198.

⁹³ Cf. D J Smit, Barmen and Belhar in conversation – A South African perspective. Unpublished paper delivered at the Barmen-Belhar Conference. At the University of Stellenbosch. 19 October 2004, 1-8.

was however not the only theological document to be influenced by the Barmen Theological Declaration. This claim is supported by a number of other ecclesiastical documents that were designed with the aim of refuting the theological justification of apartheid. Barmen therefore also provided the impetus for a number of other confessions. Among the most important theological statements which deserves succinct mention here are: *The Message of the People of South Africa* (1968), *the Declaration of Faith for the Church in South Africa of the Presbyterian Church* (1973), *the Koinonia-Declaration* (1970), *the Theological Declaration of the Broederkring of the Dutch Reformed Church* (1979), *the Five Articles of the Theological Basis of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa* (ABRECSA) (1981), *the open letter of 123 ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church* (1982), etc.

It is imperative to note that all these theological statements are not the same in nature and purpose. Jonker maintains that in the strict sense of the word it is only the Belhar Confession among these confessions which has the official status of an ecclesiastical confession.⁹⁴ This view is maintained by the many

⁹⁴ W D Jonker, 'Die moderne belydenisbeweging in Suid-Afrika – en Calvin' in: *In Die Skriflig*. Vol. 27, No. 4 (December) 1993, 443-462. The Presbyterian Church of the USA provides helpful pointers concerning the nature of Reformed confessions. Under numerous rubrics the nature and purpose of confessions are explicated. Under the rubric of the nature and the purpose of Reformed confessions, the document concedes that many people are confused by talk relating to confessions or confessing. This confusion is informed by the fact that only people who have done wrong, confess their wrong doing. The document continues to maintain that in the Christian tradition, the concept has a positive meaning. Positively it means to openly affirm, declare, acknowledge or take a stand for what one believes to be true. Admittedly the truth that is confessed may include the admission of sin and guilt, but it is essentially more than merely this. The document explains that when Christians make a confession, they say, "This is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand". According to this document it is imperative that a distinction is made between confession as an act of Christian faith and a confession as a document of Christian faith. Concerning the former, all Christians are by definition people who confess their faith – people who make their own earliest Christian confession: "Jesus Christ is Lord". With regard to the latter distinction, a confession of faith is an officially adopted statement that spells out a church's understanding of the meaning and implications of the one basic confession of the lordship of Christ. Such statements have not always been called confessions. They have also been called creeds, symbols, formulas, and definitions, declarations of faith, statements of belief, articles of faith, and other similar names. These were all different ways of speaking about the same thing. Furthermore the document

formal similarities between the Barmen Theological Declaration and the Belhar Confession, i.e. the structural elements, positive claims and negative rejections, appeals to scripture, the direct allusions particularly in the foreword, the epilogue of the Belhar Confession, as well as the shared dependence on the Heidelberg Catechism.⁹⁵

Others have described the similarities between these two confessions in a more systematic fashion. The study by Horn is of particular importance in this regard. Horn argued that the Belhar Confession stands in appreciation of the Barmen Theological Declaration.⁹⁶ The Belhar Confession consists of an introduction, three articles, as well as an epilogue (see Appendix I). The confession does not designate these clearly. It can easily be taken for granted that this confession consist of five articles, ignoring both the introduction and the

asserts that although the primary meaning of confession as an act of faith must always be kept in mind, this document seeks to concentrate on a confession as an officially adopted church document. It points out that the Reformed ecclesial tradition is not the only tradition that possesses confessional standards. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, and to a lesser extent the Anglicans, Episcopal, and the Methodist churches are also confessional bodies. It notes that most of the churches share the faith of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Under the rubric, the three directions of confessions of faith, the document states that a confession of faith may be defined more precisely as a public declaration before God and the world of what the church believes. It holds that a confession is a public declaration of what a church believes. Admitting that individual Christians may and should confess their own personal faith, but a confession of faith is more than a personal affirmation of faith. It is an officially adopted statement of what a community of Christians believes. This communal character of confessions of faith is made explicitly clear in confessions such as the Scots and Second Helvetic Confessions and the Barmen Declaration, which speak of what "we" believe. Finally, Christians confess their common faith not only to praise and serve God and not only to establish their self-identity but to speak to the world a unified word that declares who they are and what they stand for and against. Confessions thus have a social and political as well as theological and ecclesiological significance. Under the rubric 'the time for confession', the document asserts that throughout the history of the Christian movement, churches have written confessions of faith because they felt they must do so, not just because they thought that it would be a good idea. Confessions of faith may result from a sense of urgent need to correct some distortion of truth and claim of gospel that threatens the integrity of the Church's faith and life from within the church. The document discusses under the rubric 'the content of confessions of faith' the heart of all confessions 'Jesus is Lord'. Fundamentally Christians confess not what but in whom they believe. More importantly confessors had become aware of the imminent misunderstandings of that which is confessed. It was for this reason that the earliest Christological confession became a Trinitarian confession. Cf. Presbyterian Church USA. 198th General Assembly (1986), in: D McKim (ed.), *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 19f.

⁹⁵ Cf. D J Smit, 'Barmen and Belhar in conversation – A South African perspective', 1.

⁹⁶ Cf. N J Horn, 1984.

epilogue (see Appendix I). The introduction confesses the triune God who gathers, protects and preserves the church through his Word and spirit. By means of a number of biblical quotations, the first article of the Belhar Confession confesses the unity of the church. It stresses that this unity has to be visible and concrete in the community of the faithful.

The second article confesses the reconciliation of the Christian community. It continues to claim that such reconciliation is made impossible because it is preached in a land where divisions are created between human beings on racial grounds. The third article confesses justice. It confesses that God is in “a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged”. This article continues to confess that God calls His church to follow Him in this way. The epilogue of the Belhar Confession reminds the church that when the church is obedient to its head, it is mandated to confess and to embody all these things even though the authorities and the human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequences.

From the very confession as it stands it is not impossible to locate the characteristics of confessional theology. The Belhar Confession is emphatic in maintaining that it anchors itself on the Word of God as He is revealed to us through Holy Scripture. Anyone who seriously considers this confession cannot deny the fact that this is a confession of the church and primarily for the church. The last article is particularly helpful in demonstrating the point that this confession aspires to witness the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. It is quite aware that there are always consequences that are bound to ensue when such a witness is espoused.

The Belhar Confession is contextual. The contextual claim is buttressed by the fact that it challenged a theology that justified the separation of races. Because this confession is contextual, it means that it is also temporal. The ethics which this confession exudes cannot go unnoticed. The Belhar Confession does

not simply repudiate the evils that had made themselves at home in the church of Christ, but goes beyond this repudiation and calls the church to conversion.

The Belhar Confession like its predecessor and so many other Reformed confessions was welcomed with both glee and suspicion. Some have hailed it as a gift from heaven,⁹⁷ a description which is not befitting a Reformed confession since it is not without its shortcomings, but nonetheless a fair description for a confession that dared to oppose the endeavours of those who were making a caricature of the gospel. It was this audacity that impelled many sceptical readers of the Confession to conclude that some sinister motives had percolated into this Confession.

When members of a church sees the Belhar confession only as a confession and not as a confession which is primarily based on the Word of God, as a confession that is chiefly a function of the church, as a confession that has an ethical imperative, as a confession which is a public witness of Jesus Christ or as a confession that takes its socio-political situation seriously, then they do not see and understand this Confession correctly at all. Since Calvin and more explicitly with Barth, a confession has become something that takes these issues seriously. This chapter shall now turn to consider the characteristics of confessional theology which were also prevalent in the Belhar Confession, bearing in mind the various feelings with which this confession was received.

4.8.1 The Belhar Confession as a confession based on the Word of God

The Confession of Belhar of 1986, like the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934, is a confession that insists on the supremacy of the Word of God. Although, like its counterpart, it does not explicitly name the target against which it is revolting, this confession remains a tangible refutation of a particular means of

⁹⁷ Cf. P Naudé, "A gift from heaven" – the reception of the Belhar Confession in the period 1982-2000 and its ecumenical significance today. In: *Ned. Geref. Teologiese Tydskrif. (NGTT)*, Part 44 (3&4) Sept and Dec 2003, 407-420.

suggesting that God can be known apart from the knowledge that we have of Him according to the teachings of the Holy Scripture.

From the commentaries on and about this confession one cannot ignore its conspicuous emphasis on the idea that the gospel is the only Word of God and therefore cannot be possessed by humanity. Smit has convincingly pointed out that this Confession asserts that the Word of God is the only word the church should hear and obey; this confession stands in the Reformed tradition, particularly the one championed by the likes of Calvin and Barth after him.⁹⁸

By insisting on the centrality of the Word of God, the Confession nonetheless does not suggest an orthodox inclination which tends to leave room for confessionalism. Smit gives a helpful explanation of how the Reformed confessions through the ages have understood their significance to help us appreciate Belhar's emphasis on the centrality of the Word of God. He writes that the "Reformed faith is based on the claim that there is indeed a gospel, coming to us through the Word, the Holy Scriptures, but at the same time that we never fully have this gospel, we never possess it, but continuously listen to hear it anew, in every new context".⁹⁹

From what has been said about a Reformed confession, it cannot be denied that the Belhar Confession, with its audacity to challenge the theological underpinnings of apartheid falls holistically into Barth's description of what a confession is. The fact that a confession is simply a comment on the Word of God and not the Word of God as such clearly answers the question concerning the temporary nature of a Reformed confession.

⁹⁸ D J Smit, 'No other motives would give us the right – Reflections on Contextuality from a Reformed experience'. In: M E Brinkman and D van Keulen (eds.), *Christian Identity in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Studies in Reformed Theology 8, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003: 130-159.

⁹⁹ D J Smit, 'No other motives would give us the right'. In: ME Brinkman and D van Keulen (eds.), 2003: 130-159.

The Belhar Confession's introduction thoroughly illustrates the point that it aspires to be a confession that is under the judgment of the Word of God.¹⁰⁰ The numerous textual references are not cited arbitrarily, but affirm the point that this Confession sees itself as being underpinned by the Holy Scripture. It is also worth noting that its acknowledgement of Holy Scripture is not cited with arrogance, but that it understands that its "no" is only possible because of the "yes" of the Holy Scripture. In this sense this Confession is not oblivious of the fact that times may arise when the emphasis on the "no" has to be shifted elsewhere.

4.8.2 The Belhar Confession as confession of the church, for the church

The Belhar Confession, like the Barmen Theological Declaration, is a confession of and primarily for the church. It looks at the church as the only sphere in which the merits of its theological reflection about what is being confessed can be evaluated. As such, this Confession is a deliberate attempt at the church's self-criticism. Although such ecclesiastical self-criticism does not imply that the church has nothing to say to the world, it must be stressed that the immediate audience this Confession wishes to address is the church. It remains aware of the fact that it might not be taken seriously by some that do not understand the essence of confession, but is not alarmed by the possibility of an adverse reaction.

The Belhar Confession, in characteristic confessional style, speaks in the first place to the speakers themselves, to the church who utters these words. Inevitably this Confession is a product of one church's deliberations and hermeneutics of what it was taught by the gospel in a particular time and place.

¹⁰⁰ The introduction to the Belhar Confession reads as follows: We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end. Cf. Appendix 1.

However, it cannot be denied that recent readings of this Confession have not ignored its ecumenical potential.¹⁰¹

The concept “church” is not explained in this Confession. It is taken for granted that when it refers to “church”, it denotes the body of Christ (the invisible church) as well as the institutional church. By maintaining this, this Confession defies any interpretation which seeks to remove the church from its earthly reality. The second article of this confession insists that one of the responsibilities of the church is to work towards the reconciliation between human beings on earth. By adhering to this command, the church retains its status as a peacemaker.¹⁰² It is imperative that the church recognises this status. For this reason this Confession teaches that Christ has already given unity as a gift, therefore the church should pursue it.

Although it is evident that the Belhar Confession has been influenced to a great extent by the Barmen Declaration, it must not be forgotten that the issue of unity differs for the respective contexts. In apartheid South Africa, the target of unity was the black people; in Nazi Germany it was the Jews. The question of why Jews were not construed as genuine members of the body of Christ simply because they were Jews is fundamental when speaking about an understanding of unity in the church. Nevertheless, the difference between Barmen and Belhar was that those who advocated the expulsion of Jews from the church went to the extent of calling for the rejection of the Old Testament from the Bible. Similarly in South Africa it was argued that the celebration of the Eucharist should be celebrated in division from black people.

This Confession understands unity to be both a gift and an obligation entrusted to the church of Christ.¹⁰³ Implicitly unity refers to a unity between

¹⁰¹ For a detailed summary of the ecumenical reception of this confession, cf. D J Smit, ‘Reformed confession and ecumenical reception? – On the confession of Belhar and Reconciliation’. Unpublished paper; P Naudé, ‘Die Belharstryd in ekumeniese perspektief’. *Ned. Geref. Teologiese Tydskrif*. xxxviii/3. (1997), 226-243.

¹⁰² Cf. 2nd article in Appendix I.

¹⁰³ Cf. the introduction of the Belhar Confession in Appendix I.

human beings as informed by the gospel. Because the Belhar Confession is guided by scriptural principles, its understanding of unity has to be measured by scripture alone. Smit has correctly noted that those philosophies and cultural discourses that have recently grown in popularity both as heuristic descriptions and as moral and ideological prescriptions are those that emphasise difference and otherness and that are critical of the language of unity and grand narratives.¹⁰⁴ The Belhar Confession wishes to make a point that antagonism and hatred have no place in the church of Christ.

What is equally important is the subject of reconciliation which this Confession addresses firstly to its own adherents. The Belhar Confession understands that reconciliation has already been given by God through his Word and Spirit. During the time when the DRMC proclaimed this message, reconciliation between state and church was something unthinkable.

The different races (who also constituted the church) had come to accept the engineering of apartheid as normative; separate development was accordingly seen as being in the best interest of everyone because cultural and natural differences were inevitable and any means of uniting these differences would lead to chaos. Botha contends that: “Belhar stresses in this important article reconciliation as the calling of the church of our Lord. God has entrusted his reconciling message in Christ to us - *RT*.¹⁰⁵ Smit reminds us that the Belhar Confession was both born (1982) and officially accepted as confessional writing (1986) at a time when reconciliation was an extremely controversial topic in South Africa. Even within Christian circles it elicited heated debates.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ D J Smit, ‘Unity in Church and Society? Theological reflections on an ongoing challenge in South Africa today’ in: *Scriptura*, 2003, (83), 305-314.

¹⁰⁵ J Botha and P Naudé (eds.), *Op pad met Belhar: Goeie nuus vir gister, vandag en more*. Pretoria: J L van Schaik, 1998: 50. The original in Afrikaans reads thus: Belhar beklemtoon in dié belangrike artikel oor versoening ons roeping as die Kerk van die Here. God vertrou sy versoeningsboodskap in Christus juis aan ons toe.

¹⁰⁶ D J Smit, ‘Reformed Confession and Ecumenical Reception?’.

4.8.3 The Belhar Confession as public witness to Jesus Christ

The issues that precipitated the birth of the Belhar Confession, i.e. apartheid and the theological sanctioning thereof and the justification of the disunity of the church, among others, were public issues. It would therefore be unrealistic to assume that the response, which was the Belhar Confession, should have been private. The accompanying letter to this Confession is particularly informative of the public statement which it wished to make. The public character of this confession nonetheless warrants explanation.

As mentioned in the previous section, the claim that the Belhar Confession was a confession of the church for the church should not be taken to imply that this Confession had nothing to say to the world. Barth had warned against such an attitude when he maintained that we had to be fully on our guard against the idea that confession was a matter of the faith which should be heard only in the “area of the church” and that all that had to be done was to make this area visible and perhaps extend it a little into the world. Barth was correct when he asserts that “the area of the church stands in the world, as outwardly the church stands in the village or in a city, besides the school, the cinema and the railway station. The church’s language cannot aim at being an end in itself. It must be made clear that the church exists for the sake of the world”.¹⁰⁷

Although this Confession can be praised for not suggesting a political alternative to apartheid it must also be asked what type of solidarity it is contemplating with those on the periphery of society. When the church decides to open its mouth and say something that is probably against what is considered to be the norm in a particular situation, it takes up a position which (albeit only temporarily) it believes to be the truth. A confession thus takes not only a theological position informed by the Holy Scriptures, but it *ipso facto* takes a political position because those who utter it also belong in the world. However, it is scripture which informs our insights of the latter and not the other way

¹⁰⁷ K Barth, 1966a: 32.

around. Here we shall do well in recalling a maxim made popular by Barth: having the Bible in the one hand and the newspaper in the other.¹⁰⁸

Barth deals with the issues of the church's identification with those on the margins of society in his *Church Dogmatics*. He argues that the political task of the "Christian community both can and should espouse the cause of this or that branch of social progress or even socialism in the form most helpful at a specific time and place and in a specific situation. But its decisive word cannot consist in the proclamation of social progress or socialism".¹⁰⁹ Barth comes to this conclusion because he is aware that the church's involvement in the state is secular. The Belhar Confession is well aware of this, as it is of the fact that the church as a Christian community is neither a trade union nor a political party, but does not deny the fact that the church has to be involved in the issues that concern the lives of its members.

In admitting that the Christian community is called to witness Jesus Christ to the world, the Belhar Confession is not unconscious of the fact that those who subscribe to it (i.e. the church) are also not without shortcomings. When the this Confession saw the need to challenge the ills of apartheid which were legitimated by certain versions of natural theology, it also understood that it wasn't taking the moral high ground to try and replace an inhumane system under which fallible humanity existed.

The message of the Belhar Confession is clear: unity, reconciliation and justice. These are issues that should initially become apparent in the midst of the church, but the message is also directed to the world in which the church has to set the example by making these issues a reality. Implicitly this confession asserts that these issues are also political and have to be dealt with as such. Concerning justice, the third article confesses that God reveals Himself as the one who brings about justice and peace among humanity; furthermore, it holds that in a world of

¹⁰⁸ K Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. 6th edition. Trans. E C Hoskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1977: 489.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. K Barth. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. III/4. Edinburgh: T& T Clark. 1961c, 545.

injustice and utter avarice, God is in a very special way the God of the poor and the wronged.

This has been a thorny issue when it comes to debates pertaining to issues of justice in the church, and has also been a stumbling block for unity. Barth makes it clear that there can be no negation when it comes to this point. In his 1946 essay, “The Christian community and the Civil community” Barth draws the political conclusion from Christ’s coming to seek and save the lost, that the church must concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society. The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of the church’s primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the state’s special responsibility for these weaker members of society.¹¹⁰ Therefore, because this Confession wished to witness Christ to the public, it is also political.

Smit rightly argues that reading, interpreting and proclaiming the gospel is always a political question. It is political because it depends on the polis, on the readers, on the public, on the community of interpretation.¹¹¹ The third article of this confession includes the word “witness” which Naudé believes to be a witness *of the church* to the state, a word which according to him is couched in strictly theological language.¹¹² Naudé believes that it is the Belhar Confession’s judgment that the “credibility” of the message is seriously affected “in a land which professes to be Christian”, but is built on enforced separation.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ K Barth, ‘The Christian Community and the Civil Community’ in: C Green (ed.), *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*. Glasgow: Collins, 1989: 284.

¹¹¹ D J Smit, ‘No other motives would give us the right’, 130-159.

¹¹² P Naudé, ‘The theological coherence between the Belhar Confession and some antecedent church witness in the period 1948-1982’ in: *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Vol 24/1, (2003), 156-179. Emphasis added.

¹¹³ P Naudé, ‘The theological coherence between the Belhar Confession and some antecedent church witness in the period 1948-1982’, 171.

4.8.4 The Belhar Confession as a confession rooted in its context

The Belhar Confession is not an abstract confession, something which conveniently fell from the sky. In bemoaning the theologised politics of South African Neo-Calvinism, this Confession also makes it clear that it has no intention of being used as a tool for furthering party political ideals.¹¹⁴ Grasping this, it must be said that this Confession, like its predecessors, is a confession that was precipitated by specific socio-economic, political, cultural and theological factors.

Naudé is correct when he says that “the voice of Belhar was influential and powerful, because it was not a voice calling from the wilderness, but from the very heart of the ecumenical church”.¹¹⁵ By maintaining this, Naudé goes beyond Belhar and registers the point that the Confession was not only a Reformed reflection, but has to be understood in the light of the many other ecclesiastical traditions that consolidated its voice.

It is impossible to disregard its socio-political and economic context when interpreting the Belhar Confession. One of the mistakes made in some theological circles was precisely to knowingly ignore the socio-economic, political and theological factors which precipitated this confession. To assert that God aligns Himself in a special way with the poor and the downtrodden was conveniently interpreted as negative liberation theology.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ The accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession is of particular importance when one wants to understand the context of Belhar. It serves the purpose of explaining that which this confession was calling heretical. Furthermore, this letter explains the fact that this church never wanted to be a political party nor a trade union. By maintaining this, the Confession placed itself in a strategic position to judge any political system since it had not suggested one. It however does not merely want to judge, but expects to more than this. It is for this reason that the Church Order of the URCSA is an important tool that helps to illuminate the quintessence of this Confession. It is placed squarely in the political realm of its history and ways of embodying that which is confessed are suggested. By asserting its intention as being primarily theological, this Confession does not deny its political nature.

¹¹⁵ P Naudé, ‘Confessing the One Faith: Theological Resonance between the Creed of Nicea (325 AD) and the Confession of Belhar (1982 AD)’ in: *Scriptura* (85), (2004), 35-53.

¹¹⁶ The adjective ‘negative’ is here used wittingly because we understand that liberation theology was not generally perceived by all theologians as bad. Thus negative liberation theology here

The Belhar Confession is a statement of faith by a particular community of faith, and is therefore contextual. It is a confession by those who were convinced that an hour had dawned for this community to break their silence. It is not only a bold statement, but one that remains well aware of the fact that it might not be accepted by some and that persecution of those who make this statement cannot be ruled out. For a community to come to a point where it is convinced that a *status confessionis* is inevitable, means that it had to make a conscious and human choice to stand by its confession. It is thus a choice impelled by faith.

This is what Barth refers to when he says that Christian faith is a decision. He writes that it is an event in the mystery between God and man [sic] and of the freedom which God gives this human.¹¹⁷ Barth tenaciously defends the view that God is not suprahistorical but historical and that this historical God has made in Himself an eternal decree upon which everything rests and that the confessions of faith speak about. For him, faith is the human being's answer to the historical existence both of God and of humanity, thus faith has to do with the God who is in Himself historical and has fashioned a decree whose goal is history.¹¹⁸

The confessional nature of the Belhar Confession assisted it in its deliberate steering away from overt political language. Given the tumultuous period in which it was conceived, it was better for a theological statement such as this not to fight politics with politics. This decision is reminiscent of Barth's famous statement "doing theology as if nothing had happened". The decision by this church not to use overt political language should however not be interpreted as suggesting that the Belhar Confession remained ignorant of its political context. On the contrary, this should be interpreted as suggesting that the Confession had found much courage in Holy Scripture to deal with the theologised politics of the apartheid dispensation.

refers to a view held by some that opted to see liberation theology as primarily a political theology.

¹¹⁷ K Barth, 1966a: 28.

¹¹⁸ K Barth, 1966a: 28ff.

Comparing the Belhar Confession to the Barmen Theological Declaration on the issue of its insistence on politics, Huber laments the direct political inclination which is lacking in Barmen.¹¹⁹ Huber argues that a distinction ought to be made between the Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church in Germany. Only then does it become clear that the Barmen Declaration was not shy of its political implications and that it spoke directly to the political situation from which it emanated. The Confessing Church, on the other hand, was destabilised when it came to the question of the church's involvement in politics. Recently a number of studies have appeared aimed at augmenting the claim that Barth had indeed done enough to register his solidarity with the persecuted Jews.¹²⁰ Yet Hunsinger has bemoaned the inefficacy of the Barmen Theological Declaration with regard to its lack of association with the Jews. This shortcoming was detected by Barth himself, particularly when he urged the Confessing Church not to shrink from the political consequences which he considered to be flowing from the Barmen Declaration.¹²¹

When considering the Belhar Confession's insistence on politics, Botman maintains that Belhar was formulated not only hermeneutically with a "view from below", but existentially in accordance with the experience of oppression and by oppressed and marginalised people themselves. It is for this reason that this Confession speaks of racism without explicit reference to apartheid as a political system.¹²²

¹¹⁹ W Huber in: R Botman, 'Barmen to Belhar: A contemporary confessing journey'. Publication forthcoming in the September edition of *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif*.

¹²⁰ In the collection of essays edited by George Hunsinger, a number of essays can be found in which theologians like Eberhard Busch and others defend the claims made by the likes of Klaus Scholder that Barth's insistence on the centrality of the Word of God inhibited him to devise a workable strategy of identifying himself with the suffering of the Jews. The passionate defence of Busch is particularly worth noting; equally important is the response by Katherine Sonderegger. Cf. G Hunsinger (ed.), *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

¹²¹ Cf. G Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

¹²² Cf. R Botman, 'Barmen to Belhar: A contemporary confessing journey'. Publication forthcoming in the *NGTT*.

Hunsinger reminds us that the Stuttgart Confession of 1945, in which church leaders confessed their guilt, criticised the Barmen Theological Declaration for its peculiar mixture of the clear and the vague, the theologically explicit and the politically all-too-implicit.¹²³ The Stuttgart Confession suggests that an explicit theology without an equally explicit corresponding politics will ill serve any future confessing church.¹²⁴ The Belhar Confession is however an exception to this, chiefly because it realised that theology was a better arsenal than politics.

4.8.5 The significance of ethics in the Belhar Confession

The accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession emphasises the point that this confession does not intend to be an alternative to the very regime which has committed evils under pretext of the gospel. However, this Confession recognises the ethical responsibility that it owes to those who find themselves on the margins of society.

When this Confession maintains that “God is in a special manner the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, and that he calls his church to follow Him in this”,¹²⁵ it clearly displays the ethical task of the church to align itself with those with whom God identifies in times of tribulation and suffering. This is however complicated by an understanding of the relationship between gospel and law. The relationship of these entities had taken a different form in Reformed circles. The Barmen Theological Declaration was criticised by some

¹²³ Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 77.

¹²⁴ The Stuttgart confession is a confession of guilt, which was penned in October 1945. In it the confessing church leaders at Stuttgart accused themselves of not witnessing more courageously, praying more faithfully, believing more joyously and loving more ardently. It is interesting to note that although this confession criticised the Barmen Declaration, Barth was also very critical of it and thought that this confession of guilt was too vague for it lacked specific enumeration of crucial matters (such as anti-Semitism and unchecked militarism). For more on this confession see G Hunsinger, 2000: 78.

¹²⁵ 3rd article of the Belhar Confession, see Appendix I.

Lutherans because they felt that it was compromised by a misunderstanding of the relation between gospel and law.¹²⁶

Barth's lectures in Scotland indicate his political sharpness. It is not by chance that those very lectures coined the phrase "political service of God".¹²⁷ This idea is further developed in his work entitled *Church and State*, where he argues that a legal democratic state is compatible with the gospel and therefore any threat to such a government may be justified by resistance.¹²⁸

Barth remained sceptical of all human forms of governance, as adequately demonstrated by Gorringer¹²⁹. He also had his reservations about democracy, a form of governance which is highly favoured by many Christians, as demonstrated by Dolamo.¹³⁰ However, Barth was fully aware that Christians were part of this world and therefore fallible. He also realised that they were impelled by Holy Scripture to acknowledge their ethical responsibility in the world. He felt at one time that becoming a member of a political party was a way of being faithful to this ethical command. It was for this reason that he criticised his contemporaries for not participating in politics while setting high standards and providing only criticisms.

Although he was sceptical of human governments, Barth nonetheless hesitated to associate himself with Swiss democracy, as a covenant of free cantons, with concepts usually reserved for the gospel.¹³¹ Van der Kooi maintains that according to Barth the state of Switzerland is an example of an entity or

¹²⁶ One of the most informative studies done on this subject is the one by Busch. Cf. E Busch, 'The Barmen declaration: Its theology, Background and Reception'. In: E van der Borgh et al. (eds.), *Faith and Ethnicity, Vol. 2. Studies in Reformed theology*. Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002: 64-82.

¹²⁷ Cf. K Barth, *The knowledge of God and the Service of God*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955: 222ff

¹²⁸ Cf. K Barth, *Church and State*. London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1939: 78ff.

¹²⁹ Cf. T Gorringer, *Karl Barth against Hegemony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹³⁰ Cf. R T H Dolamo, *The relevance of Karl Barth's theology of Church and State in South Africa*. DTh dissertation. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1993.

¹³¹ Cf. C van der Kooi, 'Universality and Particularity: Karl Barth on the *munus propheticum*' in: E van der Borgh et al. (eds.), 2002: 83-92.

reality on which the light of the gospel had fallen.¹³² By holding this, Barth could then proceed to claim that the Swiss-styled democracy represented a way of ordering life that could not be traded for any other system; hence he termed it the Swiss *Eidgenossenschaft* – “a covenant of honest free communities”.¹³³

Ethics remains essential in confessional theology and cannot be dealt with independently of theology. If by ethics one expects a clear moral advocacy that stems from the individual Christian, or a clear political programme which is adopted by the church in its confrontation of ill governments, then the Belhar Confession is in no way a blueprint. However, those wanting to understand the ethical implications of the Belhar Confession should look not only at the Confession itself, but also at the new church order which emanated from it. This new church order tackled the ways in which ethics needed to be dealt with.

Church orders are not unique to the Uniting Reformed Churches in South Africa, but remain an integral part of the Reformed confessional tradition, the reason being that confessions also call for embodiment both in ecclesiology and in ethics, both in the church order and in church life.¹³⁴ The ethics emanating from the Belhar Confession is nothing less than the embodiment of its confession.¹³⁵ The Belhar Confession understands its ethical significance as its aspiration for a church with a tangible visible unity, real reconciliation, compassion and justice. Some have criticised this confession for not doing enough to highlight its practical proclivity.¹³⁶

¹³² Cf. C van der Kooi, ‘Universality and Particularity’, 88.

¹³³ Cf. C van der Kooi, ‘Universality and Particularity’, 88.

¹³⁴ Cf. L Vischer, *Reformed Witness Today: A collection of confessions and statements of faith issued by Reformed Churches*. Bern: Evangelische Arbeitstelle, 1982; B Hefte, *Bekennen und Bekenntnis*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998; M Büning, *Bekenntnis und Kirchenverfassung*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2002; G Gerlach, “*Bekenntnis und Bekennen der Kirche*” bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Entscheidungen für sein Leitbild von Kirche in den Jahren 1935-36*. Hamburg: Lit-Verlag, 2002; G Plasger & M Freudenberg. *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften: Eine Auswahl von Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005.

¹³⁵ Cf. D J Smit, ‘Bely en beliggaam’ in: P Coertzen (ed.), *350 years of Reformed*. Bloemfontein: CLF. 2002: 367.

¹³⁶ By looking simply at the content of the Belhar Confession with no regard for the new Church order of the URCSA which was designed subsequent to the Belhar Confession, some have

Smit has pointed out at least two illustrations of the Reformed tendency to link worship with justice and ethics. The one originates from the South African context and is buttressed by the new church order of the URCSA, while the other emanates from the ecumenical movement. We shall concern ourselves only with the initial illustration for the purpose of this study. Regarding the first example, Smit holds that the responsibility of the local congregation is of paramount importance.

Article 4 of the church order in question reads: “The congregation forms the community of believers in a particular place to serve God, each other and the world. Service of God has a bearing on the whole life of the congregation and therefore includes service to each other and to the world”.¹³⁷ What flows from such an understanding is that believers are to accept responsibility for each other both in terms of their spiritual and their material needs. This article of the church order is related to the third article of the Belhar Confession, which in essence calls upon the authorities to serve justice to their subjects and consequently also calls upon its ecclesiastical fellowship to struggle with those on the margins and identify with them.

4.9 The changed and changing context: unity, reconciliation and justice in the URCSA

Although the Uniting Reformed Churches of South Africa (URCSA) remains zealous about unity, essentially because it is convinced that this is one of its cardinal goals, the history of this church and South Africa makes it increasingly

criticised the Belhar Confession for not being practical enough (cf. R S Tshaka, 2004). A church order is something which is aimed at realising that which is confessed. It does not have the same status as a confession, but contains the practical guidelines with regard to achieving that which is confessed. In this thesis, the author deals critically with the articles of this Confession. Unfairly it expects this Confession to spell out what issues such as unity, reconciliation and justice should look like. It is evident that the author has looked to the political situation of South Africa after apartheid and questioned the slow progress that the church has been making to achieve this end.

¹³⁷ The church order of the URCSA cited in: D J Smit, ‘The importance of worship for Christian ethics’. In: *Scriptura* 62 (1997), 259-280.

difficult to easily attain this goal. Let it firstly be stated that the unified approach against the struggle by some churches in the past had left an impression that black people (Blacks, Coloureds and Indians) were a homogeneous group. The result was that the issues (cultures, languages, etc.) that differentiate one group from the other were sometimes overlooked.

The fact that so little fuss was made about these issues is to be welcomed, and falls within the ambit of that which this church was disputing, viz. that other issues besides our baptism and confirmation in the Lordship of Christ ought to be considered to justify our membership in the body of Christ.

Another point of concern when it comes to the issue of unity is the assumption that unity equals conformity. This view stands diagonally opposed to the Reformation, which insists that the church is always reforming. A clear understanding of the context from which the Belhar confession originated illustrates the point that the search for unity was not a search for conformity.

The Belhar Confession impels the church to cultivate its unity. It understands that unity has already been given in Christ. More significantly, the church order stands in a strategic position to deal with the end result of how this unity will be attained among members of the church of Christ. By looking at ways of instilling true unity, the church order has to take cognisance of the socio-economic and political situation which the URCSA has inherited from the apartheid regime. Unity therefore is not merely something that is thought of abstractly, but concretely.

This understanding of unity falls into Hunsinger's advocacy of a Chalcedonian approach (see footnote in chapter 1, section 1.5.3). This involves the invisible and the visible – divine and human. For this reason, Smit is correct in arguing that: “‘Church unity’ is not simply a well-sounding slogan that can be easily bandied about. On the way to effective unity the pain of unrighteousness

will be exposed in a thousand ways".¹³⁸ Here Smit is quite aware of the fact that church unity will have to take into account the discrepancies in the socio-economic and political facets that were brought about by the apartheid system. He continues to substantiate his position by maintaining that it should not be trivialised, as is suggested by some members of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), that reconciliation which is intrinsic to unity means merely having good relationships with people across the political boundaries.¹³⁹

Church unity is a thorny issue not only between the DRC and the URCSA, but within the URCSA itself, due to the division created by the past system in question. Just like a distinction was necessary between the Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church, so a distinction ought to be made here between the Belhar Confession that spells out unity, and the URCSA and what it does to be faithful to its confession in this regard.

What are the challenges that face the URCSA in South Africa in its current changed and changing context? Is the URCSA doing enough to deal with the realisation of issues such as unity, reconciliation and justice? Does this church use its church order which has the explicit intention of consolidating the relations that it has with its church family? In this section we shall briefly deal with these questions.

The divisions between black and white are self-evident in the South African context, but not very much has been done to address the divisions which were brought about amongst black people themselves.¹⁴⁰ It would be frivolous to deny that the establishment of racial divisions within the black populace has

¹³⁸ D J Smit, 'In a special way the God', in D J Smit et al (eds.), *A Moment of truth: the confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 55.

¹³⁹ D J Smit, 'Versoening en Belhar?' in: *Gereformeerde Theologiese Tijdschrift*. November 2000, 162.

¹⁴⁰ In his doctoral dissertation Chris Loff looked at the differences that loomed among black people themselves especially during the process of unification. Cf. C Loff, *'Bevryding tot Eenwording: Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881-1994'*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Kampen, The Netherlands, 1998: 273

brought with it distorted perceptions of the other and has managed in some instances to instil in the more favoured group a feeling of superiority over others.

The accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession is important because it warns against the deliberate abuse of this Confession. There are obvious positive intentions to this warning, yet some might see it as a hindrance to action. Such a hindrance can only be experienced when one ignores the church order which has the responsibility of instilling a sense of embodiment of this Confession. Smit argues that with the amalgamation of the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the new church (URCSA) had a wonderful opportunity to draw up a new church order, based not simply on their existing church orders which reflected the false ecclesiological visions of the past, but on their own theological vision of the kind of church they believed they was called to be in South Africa at that point in time.¹⁴¹

It has been said that the confessors of Belhar deliberately opted not to use overt political language in drafting this Confession. It has also been pointed out that this decision was underpinned by the fact that the meeting found a more potent weapon in combating theologised politics in the form of Holy Scripture, instead of also resorting to politics. This Confession deserves credit for not creating a reactionary theologised politics in its challenge of the dominant theologised politics of apartheid.

It must also be remembered that liberation theology was understood to be only a more nuanced form of a deconstruction of “true theology” (and “true theology” was considered to be a type of theology that was exempt from politics). It is because of this negative perception of liberation theology as well as the conviction of this church that the gospel was at stake, that many adherents of the Belhar Confession thought it necessary to explain the real and true intention of this Confession. However, it must be kept in mind that it was never the

¹⁴¹ Cf. D J Smit, ‘Protestantism and ecumenism in a time of global transformations: a Reformed perspective’ in: *Reformed World*. Vol. 52, No. 3 (September 2002), 107-117.

intention of this Confession to suggest an alternative means of government. Being faithful to Holy Scripture, the Belhar Confession could only draw from this source.

Although many are quick to argue that the Belhar Confession should not be regarded as some kind of political statement, it nonetheless has everything to do with politics. But it concerns not only politics, but ethics as well. Since the formation of the URCSA, and ten years after the Belhar Confession, this church and the general church in South Africa are confronted with the question of how it ought to react to the challenges our democracy presents us with. In addition, because the church in question was compelled to assume some of the blame for not responding immediately to the evil of apartheid, the guilt with which it authored the Belhar Confession makes it none too comfortable with South Africa's democracy.

With regard to reconciliation and justice, suffice it to say that these subjects should not only be deliberated politically, but as the Confession indicates, are to be tackled theologically as well. The church order is of particular importance in this regard. It is imperative for the confessing church¹⁴² to realise that the context in which it finds itself today, is a context that takes the rebirth of Africa very seriously.

The African context is the context in which the church is plagued by issues relating to HIV/Aids, the relevance of the African Renaissance, the scourge of unemployment, a young and fragile democracy, as well as the challenges of modernity and post-modernity. More narrowly, the Belhar Confession challenges us to ponder the subject of reconciliation and justice within the confessing church. An attempt was made to point out the view that the system of apartheid which was the main catalyst for the Confession had brought with it much devastation and division. However, if justice is to be done to this Confession, it will have to be noted that it envelops issues such as the Word of

¹⁴² By 'confessing church', we here refer to the URCSA which gave birth to the Belhar Confession.

God, it is a subject that addresses itself primarily to the church, it is contextual in dealing with politics, it witnesses to Christ in public, and takes ethics very seriously.

Reconciliation and justice remain of paramount importance both for the URCSA as well as for the Belhar Confession. While more still needs to be done to address the inculcated racial prejudices and stereotypes between black and white people, more also needs to be done to deal seriously with the racial prejudices and stereotypes that exist among black and coloured people in this church. The questions of unity, reconciliation and justice which are equally important to the Confession will obviously become useless if they are not tested within the confines of this relatively new church.

Embodiment of that which is confessed in this Confession is of cardinal importance for the church today.¹⁴³ However, the Belhar Confession cannot be used to implement these issues, hence the church order, which was designed essentially to deal with questions relating to relationships among Christians. The Belhar Confession is usually interpreted without taking the new church order into account. This interpretation creates the impression that the issues which are discussed in the Confession are abstract issues.

From a structural point of view, unity has been achieved, but it remains to be seen whether unity and reconciliation will become tangible on a grassroots level. Not enough is being made of the church order of the URCSA.¹⁴⁴ Moreover,

¹⁴³ Because of that which is confessed in Belhar, it is not by chance that the church order provides guidelines to how the theology confessed in Belhar should be translated into praxis. The Confession maintains that faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for being a member of the Church of Christ, therefore articles 4-7 of the new church order deal with the crux of church orderly arrangements insisting on this as the ideal condition. Cf. *The Church order of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa*, Belhar: LUS, 1994.

¹⁴⁴ Not enough is being done to ensure the embodiment of that which Belhar confesses. Although Belhar undoubtedly contains all the characteristics of confessional theology, it is sometimes difficult to see them. In a recent annual conference on 'Barmen and Belhar' one sees impressive presentations of their relevance in the current contexts, yet not much is said with regard to the Church Order of Belhar which provides the platform for dealing with '*verbande*' or relations between the different members of this church. Cf. The Barmen-Belhar Conference. At the University of Stellenbosch. 19 October 2004.

the socio-political situation in South Africa begs of us to clearly discern what is meant by unity today. It goes without saying that there is a biblical imperative which envisages the unity of the church since it is in essence the body of Christ that is not divided but united. The tangibility of these issues at grassroots level can only be achieved when the new church order is taken seriously. It is the church order which asks the questions of how the issues in question will be achieved.

When the church order is put to task, it becomes easy to deal with issues such as the difference between unity and conformity, etc. Are talks about unity within not only the URCSA but also within the DRC family of churches necessarily about conformity? This is a question that has serious implications not only for the church in general, but for the church particularly in (South) Africa. When Barth maintained that Christianity existed in Germany and Switzerland and Africa, but that there was no such a thing as a German, Swiss or African Christianity ...¹⁴⁵, he certainly did not think that the unity of the church was at stake, for the fundamentals upon which Christianity is founded will always remain intact.

4.10 Conclusion

In this chapter attempts were made to look at the historical issues which precipitated a *status confessionis* in South Africa in (1982). By acknowledging the great impact that the theology of Barth had on the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church and later the Uniting Reformed Churches of South Africa in the formation of the Belhar Confession, this study deliberately set out to raise a presumptuous question of the need to deal with Barth in an age where many have called on Africa to rid itself of its colonial masters. While appreciating the need for theology in Africa to note the necessary and relevant appeal to take its

¹⁴⁵ Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IV/1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956b: 703.

existential context seriously, it is nevertheless argued that in doing so, Africa is not encouraged to distance itself from the rest of the world.

The South African history to which we have alluded necessitated a number of reactionary theologies which fell into the very same trap as the theology against which it was reacting. In applauding black theology for its bold challenge of politicised Afrikaner theology, it was discovered that its insistence on the socio-economic and political situation of black people as its theological point of departure impelled us to look instead to the possibility of confessional theology as a better alternative.

An argument was made that the Belhar Confession with its leanings on the Barmen Theological Declaration also contains the characteristics of confessional theology; however, it was argued that the proponents of the Belhar Confession had failed to emphasise the political nature of this confession for the reasons indicated.

Furthermore this chapter argued that, with regard to the recent commentaries on the Barmen Theological Declaration which exposed its inefficiencies in terms of identifying itself with those on the margins, the Belhar Confession with its lack of practical alternatives deserves a similar criticism. This criticism would however be unfair because it was not the intention of the Belhar Confession to spell out what these practical alternatives should be. The new church order dealt more with the question of how issues such as unity, reconciliation and justice could be harnessed. A point was made that when the church sees the Belhar Confession as merely a confession, without taking seriously issues such as the Word of God, the church, public witness to Jesus Christ, and its context of this confession, it fails to see the Belhar Confession at all.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Talks concerning confession have always accompanied Barth throughout his theological journey. It is not by chance that he spent the last hours of his life contemplating this subject. Confession for Barth had nothing to do with abstraction. For a number of years many who opted for an abstract reading of Barth's Church Dogmatics – that is, the attempt to read his Church Dogmatics as something which is removed from its socio-economic, cultural and political context – were content with his emphasis on God's wholly otherness. This was arrived at because many had failed to see Barth's Christology in its basic Chalcedonian character. What this suggests is that for Barth the divinity of Christ, which is complete in itself, does not discount the humanity of God, which is also complete in itself. These two characters are always at play in Barth's theological reflections. Furthermore, the failure to see the reciprocity between these aspects has resulted in an unfair amount of criticism, because Barth is seen as someone who was not doing enough in the ethical dimension.

Barth only dealt with the question of those who wanted to see a God directly related with humanity in a little booklet that he titled *The Humanity of God* (1960). As far as he was concerned, the God of whom he endeavoured to speak was always a God that was related to humanity through his covenant with humanity. The interpretation of Barth's theology as a theology removed from humanity was soon countered by research that revealed Karl Barth as a theologian that consistently stressed the reality of politics.

This second wave of reading Barth's theology as a theology that identified with those on the fringes of society, has been considerate. Yet, as this study has attempted to illustrate, it had not done enough justice to the fact that Barth never thought less of the importance of issues such as the church, the context, the public witness of the church, and ethics. It has especially been pointed out that some of the

recent expositions of Barth's theology have failed to adequately display the ethical dimension which remains inherent in Barth's work.¹

Nonetheless, those who were exposed to a Barth that had taken equal notice of the issues alluded to could not deny the assertion that anyone that came into contact with this Barth, was affected by him, sometimes with chaotic results. A serious reading of Barth does tend to seduce one into his endeavours of swimming against the stream. Concerning this, a question was asked by one of the post-graduate students at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch. Making reference particularly to Hans Küng who was greatly influenced by the theology of Barth and taking cognizance of the difficulty that Küng had landed himself in with Roman Catholicism. This student asked whether it is common that all those that cross paths with Barth tends to follow the tide of swimming against the stream.

Being aware of such interpretations, this study has however attempted to argue that such an easy conclusion can be misleading. It can be misleading because, although Karl Barth stayed suspicious of human hegemonies – both theological and political – Barth could never fathom a theology that was unaffected by those hegemonies. He arrived at this understanding because he had come to appreciate the reality of ideologies, and yet had come to know the essence of being wary not to become possessed by the very ideology that one claimed to possess.

This study has attempted to investigate Barth's confessional theology and its contribution to the Belhar Confession in South Africa. It has discovered that the relationship between theology and politics is unavoidable, yet there are ways to ensure that politics does not dictate the programme of theology. In guarding against the possible assimilation of theology into political programmes, it was indicated that confessional theology would be aware of uncritical acculturation to prevailing assumptions, social doctrines as well as political realities. It was discovered that this awareness enables theology to always enquire about its own distinctive identity, insights and contributions to politics. Being aware of the complexities concerning the way theology and politics ought to engage each other, this study has come to realise

¹ We are thinking here especially of the study by Bruce McCormack. Cf. B. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: its genesis and development 1909-1936*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1997.

that confessional theology is the only helpful approach in which a church which also remains part of this world ought to engage politics.

This study has shown that many have criticised Barth either for being inconsistent in that he would criticise the “German Christians” and Hitler’s regime, and yet remain quiet when it came to the East-West issue. The conclusion of this study is that this critique was made without considering the point that Barth thought of these issues in a confessional way. By looking at politics in the given confessional manner, he quickly realised that Christianity was used to instil feelings of loathing towards Communism. Because of this, Barth could proclaim that God is not anti-anyone, but for everyone. By simply refusing to incarcerate God into an ideology, Barth saw no need to succumb to these criticisms.

It is the conclusion of this dissertation that the theology of Karl Barth remained interwoven with politics till the end. Furthermore, this study holds the view that the stigma traditionally attached to a theology that is well aware of its shortcomings and of politics in its praxis, has never been challenged head-on. On the other hand, it is maintained that politics is still viewed with great suspicion by theology. This is understandable, since politics can always coerce one into choosing a particular ideology, and force one to defend that ideology at all costs because it provides some kind of benefit to the one defending it. Although Barth was aware of the unavoidability of politics, he had also come to conclude that party politics was dirty to its roots.

Politics is not simply construed as the active involvement of one in a particular political issue. The refusal or option of not getting directly involved in politics can also be construed as political. Each chapter of this study had the idea of confessional theology in action as an indicator that this theology is a theology that sees itself in action. In this sense, apathy and indifference can also be construed as action. Therefore, those who deliberately remain apathetic cannot hide behind an excuse of not being active. In his book entitled *Disruptive Grace*, Hunsinger talks about the executioners and their accomplices during the Nazi regime. He starts off by making reference to an article that appeared in the New York Review of Books (31.

no. 9, May 31, 1984. pp. 37-42) which was penned by Istvan Deak.² The title of the article read: “How guilty were the Germans?”. Although the question remains vague initially, Hunsinger believes that it has contemporary significance. For Deak, large-scales acts of brutality are still sanctioned by ideology, and because the belief is still widespread that to correct perceived wrongs, any and every means are legitimate.

As an example, Deak cites cases from Iran, North Korea, Zaire, Romania and Northern Ireland. He concentrates on two questions: whether ordinary Germans upheld the Nazi proposition that the Jews should be murdered, and whether they possessed significant knowledge of Hitler’s final solution. The first question is answered in the negative. Deak asserts that recent research had uncovered the extraordinary fact that most Germans (including Nazi Party members) had no desire to see Jews brutalised or killed. Widespread disapproval of brutality and killings seems to have been the main reason why persecutions of the Jews were conducted in secret.

A question is thus asked to Deak, that if the Germans did not actively hate the Jews as he seems to be suggesting, were they then absolved from the crimes against the Jews? In answer to this question, Deak seems to think that the Germans were not absolved. In fact, what condemns the German population in his view is not that they volunteered to kill, for generally they did not, but that they had remained indifferent.

It is this last part which is of paramount importance to the conclusion of this study. Deak concludes with the words: “The German people in 1933 did not unanimously choose Hitler, nor did they, as a whole, obey him gladly and voluntarily, instead most of them gave up the values of scepticism and the freedom for the sake of immediate benefits, revenge for Versailles, and national greatness. Even worse, they became or were casual, indifferent, and callous towards persecution”.³ By holding this, Deak leaves us with a picture in which most Germans were guilty of unspeakable crimes not because they were the executioners, but because directly or indirectly they were the executioners’ accomplices.

Hunsinger in turn, looks at the United States of America as well as its relations to third-world countries, and finds a suitable subject of comparing the ills of being a-

² Istvan Deak cited in: G. Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the theology of Karl Barth*. Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000. 61ff.

³ Cf. G. Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*. 64.

political. He makes ample reference to the work of George Orwell. According to Hunsinger, Orwell wrote that the “nationalist does not only disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them”. Ignorance becomes the classic plea for accomplices. He goes on to mention numerous atrocities which were perpetrated on the part of the USA government and which are still continuing today. Hunsinger quotes Orwell as saying: “there is no crime that cannot be condoned when our side commits it; loyalty is involved, and so pity ceases to function”. In Hunsinger’s view, this loyalty is idolatrous, which is the will to believe patriotic truths, the lack of scepticism, and the fatal indifference of which Deak and for that matter Barth also warned. It becomes clear that in these cases one sees how political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.

How does this impact on the South African context? It is to be anticipated that there are numerous atrocities that South Africans have experienced, indeed something similar to the German situation. Although the current government is not the same as the one under which most of the barbaric atrocities took place, we will be safe if we continually look at the past and see how evil deeds initially began under an innocuous persona. We have to note that as long as theology remains an activity in the hands of fallible human beings, it will always be susceptible to mistakes. Confessional theology here provides us with helpful indicators of how to engage politics. This invokes the statement made popular by Barth, which unfortunately has also been widely misunderstood: “doing theology as if nothing had happened”. The phrase in question refers to a theology that begins always at the beginning, with the Word of God.

It has become clear that theological responses which took the human predicament as a centre for theological reflection had not merely galvanised those on the periphery into action, but had also created difficulties for itself in that it could not transcend the very ideologies which informed those theologies. Such had been the case with the Afrikaner *volk* theology, as well as the numerous theological responses to that theology. It has been argued elsewhere and in this research in particular that the *volk* theology of the Afrikaner people was a reaction against the domination of the British.

Similarly, black theology was a reaction to the oppressive politicised theology of the Afrikaners. Black theology has not merely been an intellectual tool. Goba is therefore correct in maintaining that the black Christian community on the whole played a very significant role in supporting and promoting the broad democratic movement in South Africa, especially through a number of key leaders both from the laity and the clergy.⁴ We have observed over the past few years (especially since the early 1960s – early 1990s) an active participation of black clergy in organised protests in different communities. It was these very protests which galvanised them into the authorship of the *Kairos* document which was rendered as a fundamental theological justification for the continuation of engaging the struggle for the liberation of black people.

The subject of indifference remains a topic for discussion in South Africa at present. It is known that many white Christians in South Africa found solace in the fact that they did not participate directly in the mayhem perpetrated against the majority of black people in this country during the apartheid regime. Yet, merely remaining indifferent and callous towards the situation, means that they were just as guilty as those who in fact committed the crimes.

The question of indifference and callousness remains a critical subject in South Africa. Many have taken democracy to mean the ultimate human form of governance that all humanity has to strive for. Appeals made by some prominent theologians for the church to return to being a church after the realisation of democracy have confused rather than enlightened Christians. Commenting on the Kempton Park negotiations, Goba has bemoaned the number of black Christian leaders who had already provided theological justification to a political arrangement that promised to deliver the oppressed.⁵

To argue that the church should retreat to its ecclesiastical duties (or more importantly, to simply retreat to its confessional statements) has also left many with the impression that the function of the church is merely to administer the sacraments and to preach the word of God, leaving all the socio-economic and political matters in the hands of the state. Above all, it has to be understood that advocacy for a

⁴ B. Goba, 'The state of Black theology in South Africa: a theological perspective' in: *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*. 8: 1 (May) 1994: 1-11.

⁵ B. Goba, 'The state of Black theology in South Africa: a theological perspective' in: *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*. 8: 1 (May) 1994: 1-11.

confessional theology in South Africa admits that ideologies remain inevitable, but that this theology is to be the vanguard against the usurpation of theology into human ideologies. The strength of a theology which is espoused by those who have come to acknowledge the significance of its context lies in the ability to be able to test the relevance of that theology when faced with the possibility of a changed context.

More than ever, it needs to be stressed that the theological struggle today ought to be one which aspires to transcend racism, ethnic chauvinism, tribalism and sexism. This is however not sufficient. It shall have to become clear that in transcending these issues, the church and the Uniting Reformed Churches of South Africa (URCSA) in particular should continue to align themselves with the voiceless, to position themselves on the side of those who continue to suffer in this current democratic epoch. Inevitably, the struggle is no longer against the socio-political racial order precipitated by apartheid; instead, the current struggle is a more complex one, aimed at a political hegemony based on political and economic interests of certain political movements from the centre who seek to entrench their positions. The church shall do well in conceding to this.

Testing the confession of confessing theology suggests that the church cannot avoid the reality of issues such as HIV/Aids which are compounded by poverty. It suggests that the church cannot continue to ignore the socio-economic and political aspects which continually threaten to divide humanity. Inescapably, a person's proximity to the subjects in question determines the urgency with which one has to address these matters. The complexities mentioned above pose a real challenge to the church in that it erodes the moral fibre of society. It is therefore not only a civil problem, but an ecclesiastical one as well.

The basic necessities of human beings impel them to find ways of feeding themselves. A number of examples can be cited to sustain this point, i.e. children who are preyed on by adults and are forced into exchanging sex for food or money because they do not have the means to sustain themselves.⁶ By advocating for a confessional theology it is appreciated that the church is forced with its back against

⁶ A number of examples can be cited to illustrate this point. One good example that is appropriate is to look at how young girls and boys are prostituted by elderly people, by exchanging sex for some money or something to eat. This in turn has an impact on one's household for while this was sometimes considered as the institution which instilled morals, these young boys and girls now become the providers of these households. The simple result is that parents (in most cases single female parents) have to ignore how bread came to be on the table.

the wall on a number of occasions where it has to test its own beliefs in the light of the changing needs of humanity. Although the church holds its confession in high esteem as it has become part of its moral fibre, confessional theology calls on those who espouse it to read the signs of the times and to consider whether the time has not come to stop reciting its confessions and get physically involved in what plagues society.

If we appreciate the fact that Barth saw not an enemy in the protagonists of atheism but rather a challenge, we are then challenged to interpret Barth in a context which insists on the need for a theology that does not deny its uniqueness. As pointed out before, Barth saw the context in which his theology took place very seriously. It would be most unfair to Barth if we insisted on applying his theology to contexts such as the one in which we find ourselves today. Although Barth never thought that his theology had to be transported uncritically to different contexts, it would be fair to concede where his theology can help us to solve our current issues. To insist that Barth's theology has to be read as a confession helps us to appreciate the fact that his theology was never timeless and never attempted to be contextual in all cases.

This study makes a contribution to the field of theology in that it suggests a way in which one can manoeuvre through the complex maze of politics. It sheds new light on the popular criticism levelled against Barth's Christocentric approach to theology by explaining why Barth never thought it really necessary to respond to the criticisms that this approach was removing God from humanity. Confessional theology here also rids theology from being ideological theology. While insisting on the supremacy of God in theology, it nonetheless does not ignore the importance of the church, its public witness, its contextual reality, as well as the ethics which defines the moral character of the church.

In this dissertation much has been said about reconciliation and unity in particular. It was discovered that the issue of race still occupies a pivotal role in South African society. Of course racism differs from urban to rural settings, but nonetheless this issue poses a great challenge to the church's task of enforcing reconciliation among peoples and addressing the issue of unity. More importantly, this study has discovered that the very issues of reconciliation and unity need to be

addressed also within the confines of the URCSA. The past created a fallacy that black people are a homogeneous group, yet stereotypes continue to exist among the different black groups. In speaking about unity, this study bemoans the assumption that unity means conformity. Because the URCSA is constituted by people of different social backgrounds and cultures, it is inevitable that the Reformed spirituality differs from congregation to congregation.

Confessional theology it was illustrated remains constantly aware that theology cannot only be confined to the realm of the church. It seeks to be actively involved in the affair of the polis as well. For this reason confessional theology bemoans any suggestion that the church has to refrain from actively participating in affairs that concern the wellbeing of the community. It nonetheless does not suggest blueprints of how theology ought to involve itself in the affairs of the polis simply because it takes cognizance of the different contexts which might warrant different context. This deliberate intention not to provide blueprints for participation is due to the flexibility which is conspicuous in confessional theology. It is also for this reason that church orders are seen as means of committing the church and its theology to that which it confesses.

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Appendix I. **The Belhar confession.**

1. We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

2. We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of the saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another [Eph 2:11-22];

that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain [Eph 4:1-16];

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe; that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted [John 17:20, 23];

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity [Phil 2:1-5; I Cor 12:4-31; John 13:1-17; I Cor 1:10-13; Eph 4:1-6; Eph 3:14-20; I Cor 10:16-17; I Cor 11:17-34; Gal 6:2; II Cor 1:3-4];

that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in

Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God [Rom 12:3-8; I Cor 12:1-11; Eph 4:7-13; Gal 3:27-28; Jas 2:1-13];

that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this Church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine which absolutises either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutisation hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;

which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;

which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;

which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the Church.

3. We believe that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the Church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world; that the Church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the Church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells [II Cor 5:17-21; Mt 5:13-16; Mt 5:9; II Pet 3:13; Rev 21-22].

that God by his lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity; that God, by His lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable His people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world [Eph 4:17-6:23, Rom 6; Col 1:9-14; Col 2:13-19; Col 3:1-4:6];

that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;

that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation, sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4. We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that He calls his Church to follow Him in this; that He brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that He frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that He supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for Him pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that He wishes to teach His people to do what is good and to seek the right [Deut 32:4; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Eph 2:14; Isa 1:16-17; Jas 1:27; Jas 5:1-6; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 6:20-26; Luke 7:22; Luke 16:19-31; Ps 146; Luke 4:16-19; Rom 6:13-18; Amos 5];

that the Church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the Church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

that the Church as the possession of God must stand where He stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5. We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence [Eph 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; I Pet 2:18-25; I Pet 3:15-18].

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

Appendix II. Accompanying Letter

1. We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgment, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed church family calls for such a decision. Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand. Along with many, we confess our guilt, in that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin and confessed to be sin have grown in time to seem self-evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to the Scriptures. As a result many have been given the impression that the gospel was not really at stake. We make this confession because we are convinced that all sorts of theological arguments have contributed to so disproportionate an emphasis on some aspects of the truth that it has in effect become a lie.

2. 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. Being fully aware of the risk involved in taking this step, we are nevertheless convinced that we have no alternative. Furthermore, we are aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, would give us the right to confess in this way. An act of confession may only be made by the Church for the sake of its purity and credibility and that of its message. As solemnly as we are able, we hereby declare before men that our only motive lies in our fear that the truth and power of the gospel itself is threatened in this situation. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies, or achieve any ulterior purposes. Yet, having said this, we know that our deepest intentions may only be judged at their true value by Him before whom all is revealed. We do not make this confession from his throne and from on high, but before his throne and before men. We plead, therefore, that this confession would not be misused by anyone with ulterior motives and also that it should not be resisted to serve such motives. Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way, but to point to the true stumbling block, Jesus Christ the rock.

3. This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion which threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no one will identify himself with this objectionable

doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it. We are deeply aware of the deceiving nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have to a greater or lesser extent learnt to take a half-truth for the whole. For this reason we do not doubt the Christian faith of many such people, their sincerity, honour, integrity, and good intentions and their in many ways estimable practice and conduct. However, it is precisely because we know the power of deception that we know we are not liberated by the seriousness, sincerity, or intensity of our certainties, but only by the truth in the Son. Our church and our land have an intense need of such liberation. Therefore it is that we speak pleadingly rather than accusingly. We plead for reconciliation, that true reconciliation which follows on conversion and change of attitudes and structures. And while we do so we are aware that an act of confession is a two-edged sword, that none of us can throw the first stone, and none is without a beam in his own eye. We know that the attitudes and conduct which work against the gospel are present in all of us and will continue to be so. Therefore this confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.

4. Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse, and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life. It places us on a road whose end we can neither foresee nor manipulate to our own desire. on this road we shall unavoidably suffer intense growing pains while we struggle to conquer alienation, bitterness, irreconciliation, and fear. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways. We are only too well aware that this confession calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society which have developed over many years. However, we confess that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice. We pray that our brothers and sisters throughout the Dutch Reformed church family, but also outside it, will want to make this new beginning with us, so that we can be free together and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice. Accordingly, our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation. We believe that this is possible in the power of our Lord and by his Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation, and true peace to our country.

Appendix III. The Barmen Theological Declaration

IN VIEW OF THE ERRORS of the "German Christians" and of the present Reich Church Administration, which are ravaging the Church and at the same time also shattering the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:

1. "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me." *John 14:6*

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved." *John 10:1,9*

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation.

2. "Jesus Christ has been made wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption for us by God." *1 Cor. 1:30*

As Jesus Christ is God's comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, with equal seriousness, he is also God's vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life. Through him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

3. "Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grow into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together." *Eph. 4:15-16*

The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over 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.

4. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to have authority over you must be your servant." *Matt. 20:25-26*

The various offices in the Church do not provide a basis for some to exercise authority over others but for the ministry [lit., "service"] with which the whole community has been entrusted and charged to be carried out.

We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the Church could, and could have permission to, give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders [*Führer*] vested with ruling authority.

5. "Fear God. Honor the Emperor." *1 Pet. 2:17*

Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's Dominion [*Reich*], God's commandment and justice, and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfil the vocation of the Church as well.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State.

6. "See, I am with you always, to the end of the age." *Matt. 28:20* "God's Word is not fettered." *2 Tim. 2:9*

The Church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.

We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self- chosen desires, purposes and plans.

The Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a confederation of Confessing Churches. It calls upon all who can stand in solidarity with its Declaration to be mindful of these theological findings in all their decisions concerning Church and State. It appeals to all concerned to return to unity in faith, hope and love.