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„To stand where God stands“¹ – Theological Decisions in the Belhar Confession

Keynote Address at the Belhar Conference in Detmold (January, 25th 2019)

It is a quite challenging task, dear sisters and brothers, to talk about the main theological decisions in the Belhar Confession within the very limited time frame of 30 minutes. I will therefore only be able to point out and briefly discuss ten major theological decision of the confession, and it is my hope that we will get, despite all necessary briefness, to the heart of the Confession, its proclamation and challenge for us.

(1) The First Decision The Community of Hearing and Receiving (Karl Barth)

Let me begin my considerations with a few remarks on *how* I will read and analyze the major theological decisions in the Belhar Confession – and let me call upon Karl Barth in doing so. With these first preliminary remarks, though, we already get to one of the theological centers of the Belhar Confession and to major theological decisions of it. But first listen to Barth's observation in how to deal with the confession of other churches:

“The Church is constituted as the Church by **a common hearing and receiving of the Word of God.** [...] I have not primarily to criticise the confession of the Church as it confronts me as the confession of those who were before me in the Church and are with me in the Church. There will always be time and occasion for criticism. My **first duty is to love and respect it** as the witness of my fathers and brethren. And it is in the superiority posited by this fact that I shall hear it. And as I do so, as I recognise the superiority of the Church before and beside me, it is to me an authority.”²

When we look at the Belhar Confession today, whether we are from German, South African, Belgian or US-American churches, we do so in a community of hearing and receiving the Word of God together. We are not neutral observers and bystanders, dissecting the confession like scientists may dissect a new species in order to learn about its structure and composition. We listen to the Belhar Confession, ready and willing to receive the Word of God together with those who have written and those who have accepted it, in order to meet Jesus Christ in these words, in order to learn with Belhar who God is and who we are. As a Christian Confession, Belhar already has a claim upon us; Belhar does already belong to the whole Church, as Piet Naudé rightly observes.³ This does not mean, of course, that *criticism* of the confession, of its affirmations and rejections, would not be possible. Just the opposite! In the Reformed tradition, we maintain that every Christian

¹ Art. 4 of the Belhar Confession: “We believe ... that the Church as the possession of God must stand where God stands.”

² Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics I/2 § 20 Authority under the Word, 588.

³ Piet J. Naudé, Neither Calendar nor Clock, 169.

confession invites us also to critically assess its claims in light of the gospel,⁴ but this can only be – as Barth emphatically stresses – the *second* step; our *first* duty is to love and respect it as the witness of our fathers and mother, brothers and sisters.

And this observation leads us to the first of the major theological decisions of the Belhar Confession itself, which has been decisive not only for the content of its theological teaching, but also for the authority it claims: The Belhar Confession puts itself firmly into this community of hearing and receiving the Word of God in grounding its understanding of God and the church in the confessional tradition of the Church, especially in the Reformed tradition. This community of hearing and receiving was, from the beginning, a communion rooted in the international Reformed community. There are obvious, deliberate references to and noticeable influences upon the confession not only from historic texts, such as the Barmen Theological Declaration (1934), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and also (often overlooked within the German context) the *Confessio Belgica* or Belgic Confession (1566)⁵. At the same time, the Confession was also the product of a long and intense process of hearing and receiving the word of God within the *contemporary global* Reformed family, in particular within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). Already in 1964, the General Council of the WARC in Frankfurt had stated that “the exclusion of any person on grounds of race, colour or nationality, from any congregation and part of the life of the church contradicts the very nature of the church.”⁶ At the General Council of the WARC in Nairobi in 1970, this view was not only reaffirmed,⁷ but the apartheid doctrine and practice of two Dutch Reformed member churches in South Africa were identified as “a betrayal of the gospel”.⁸ Decades of intense discussions, consultations and theological studies lead to the 1982 decision of the WARC in Ottawa, to declare the *status confessionis*,⁹ and to suspend the membership privileges of two Dutch Reformed churches until their actions and word had given evidence of a “change of heart”. This decision of Ottawa, in itself the “culmination of a process that had gone on for sixty years”¹⁰, was the result of the community’s hearing and receiving the Word of God in a particular context, *and* in the catholicity of the international Reformed community. The

⁴ Already in 1532, Bernese authorities concluded their introduction to the Bern Consensus of 1532 with the following words: “If anything were presented to us by our pastors or others which might lead us closer to Christ and in the power of God’s Word be more supportive of common friendship and Christian love than the views presented here, we will gladly accept it and not block the course of the Holy Spirit.” Cf. Karl Barth. The Theology of the Reformed Confessions, 24.

⁵ Both are, together with the Canons of Dort, part of the so-called “Three Forms of Unity”, which are of particular confessional importance for churches of the Dutch Reformed family.

⁶ Jane Dempsey Douglas, Opening Address, in: Páraic Réamonn (ed.), Farewell to Apartheid? Church Relations in South Africa, Studies form the WARC 25, Geneva 1994, (7–16), 8f [my emphases]. The context of this quote reads: “The unity in Christ of members, not only of different confessions and denominations, but of different nations and races, points to the fullness of the unity of all in God’s coming kingdom. Therefore the exclusion of any person on grounds of race, colour or nationality, from any congregation and part of the life of the church contradicts the very nature of the church. In such case, the gospel is actually obscured from the world and the witness of the churches made ineffective. [...] Members of the Church are also called to witness in society to justice and equality by identifying with, and accepting responsibility alongside, those who suffer.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Ottawa decision reads, in part: “The general council declares that this situation constitutes a *status confessionis* for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed churches. We declare, with black Reformed Christians of South Africa, that *apartheid* (‘separate development’) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the word of God, a theological heresy”. Cf. Dempsey Douglas, Opening Address, 10.

¹⁰ Allan Boesak, Black and Reformed. Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition, Maryknoll 1984, 128.

Belhar Confession is thus the child not only of historic Reformed theologies and confessions, but also of the WARC's ongoing intense struggle with this matter from a confessional perspective.

In this sense, the Belhar confession does not want to confess a “new faith”, but it aims to confess the Christian faith in a new way – as a response to the internal and external challenges the Christian faith experiences in a particular context.¹¹ This understanding of the community of hearing and receiving leads us to the second, even more fundamental theological decision to which we now turn.

(2) The Second Decision

The Only Grounds of the Confession: The Holy Scriptures as the Word of God¹²

Even before the first line of the confession was written, before the first ideas of a new confessional statement were shared, a major theological decision was taken by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, a theological decision that sounds rather trivial and unspectacular, but a decision which is nevertheless crucial and vital for understanding (and confessing with) the Belhar Confession. Those gathered in Belhar confessed not their theological thoughts about their context, not their assessment of politics or economics or church life, but they confessed who God in Jesus Christ is – as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture.¹³ They expected the Bible to guide them in understanding church and world and God’s will for church and world. They trusted the Holy Spirit to speak a fresh word through and in those ancient texts, for those with ears to hear and to obey. They trusted that this fresh word from the Spirit had immediate relevance for them, that this fresh word enabled them to find words for their “cry from the heart”¹⁴, that it indeed obliged them to speak out “for the *sake of the gospel* in view of the times in which we stand.”¹⁵ What Belhar confesses about who God is (and we will get to this soon), even the highly controversial affirmation that God is “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged”¹⁶, was not understood to be the result of theological discourse and learning only, but first, and most importantly, of reading the Bible together in context. We will look now at one of the most influential and consequential *biblical* confessions and its relevance for confessing in Belhar and in general.

(3) The Third Decision

“Jesus is Lord”: Christological Ending and Beginning

Central to the Belhar Confession is the biblical claim, that “Jesus is Lord”, which seems to have been the earliest, distinctively Christian confession.¹⁷ With this confession from the

¹¹ Cf. Margit Ernst-Habib, *Reformierte Identität weltweit*, 134–172.

¹² From the Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession, paragraph 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.”

¹³ Cf. the First Thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for 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.”

¹⁴ From the Accompanying Letter to Belhar Confession, paragraph 1: “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.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Art. 4 of the Belhar Confession. Cf. Dirkie Smit, “In a Special Way the God of Destitute, the Poor, and the Wronged”.

¹⁷ Cf. Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Phillipians 2:11.

New Testament, the Belhar Confession concludes and summarizes everything it wants to confess about who God is *and* who we are called to be. Right before the doxological ending of the confession, this one sentence stands alone, drawing our attention to itself. Jesus is Lord,¹⁸ this is *in nuce* the confession Belhar feels compelled and urged to cry out in the face of all Lordless powers^{19,20} This cry is as much a cry of defiant hope (“Jesus is indeed Lord, and the Lordless powers are not!”), as it is a cry of prayer (“Maranatha, come Lord Jesus!”)²¹ and, finally, it is also a cry of allegiance (“To this Lord we cling, and this Lord we follow!”). That Belhar closes with this central Christian confession, that all it wants to affirm and reject is taken up in these three words, is theologically and liturgically an appropriate decision. Yet – the position of this sentence within the Belhar Confession should not divert our attention from seeing that this one-sentence-confession is not only the ending, but actually the beginning, the root, the impulse of all that Belhar is confessing. One could argue with the late Russell Botman, that this one-sentence-confession is indeed the key for understanding not only the content of the confession, but also its aim: Belhar is first and foremost not about proclaiming orthodox doctrines, but about becoming disciples and following Christ our Lord.²² The whole text of the confession can and should be read from this perspective, can and should be understood as an interpretation and specification of the confession that Jesus is Lord. With this strong Christological focus, Belhar reflects the focal point it shares with the Barmen Theological Declaration, and also the Heidelberg Catechism.²³ Just like the Heidelberg Catechism and Barmen, the Belhar Confession does do not separate faith and life, dogmatics and ethics, believing and obeying. Following Christ does not only include to confess (with your mouth) the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, but to live your live according to this confession, to confess with your deeds that Jesus is Lord. With other words: the Belhar Confession itself challenges the Church not to “have a confession” only, but to “become the confession”. This central Christological decision puts Jesus Christ at the end and at the beginning of the text, and it guides us through the whole text. But, of course, the Belhar Confession understands and confesses the Lord Jesus Christ not apart from the triune God, on the opposite: the very first sentence of the confession does not only directly quote the Hei-

¹⁸ Every Christological name, every theological term and concept remains ambiguous in the hands of human beings; the term “Lord” has been criticized, for good reasons, with regard to its problematic (mis)use throughout church history, where it has been used to dominate, control, and marginalize certain groups within the church. It is with this valid critique in mind that I use this term cautiously; cf. Margit Ernst-Habib, *A Conversation with Twentieth-Century Confessions*, 77–78.

¹⁹ For Karl Barth’s concept of “Lordless Powers” see *Christian Life*, 216.

²⁰ On the influence of Barth’s theology on the Belhar Confession see Rothney Tshaka, *Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar confession*.

²¹ Cf. 1. Corinthians 16:22; Rev. 22:20.

²² Cf. Russel Botman, quoted in Johan G. Botha, *Wie steek die Kerse aan?*, 50 „Die sleutel vir die verstaan van dié Belydenis lê daarin dat ons Jesus, ons enigste Here, gehoorsam navolg.” (The key for the understanding of the confession lies in that we obediently follow Jesus, our only Lord.)

²³ First Thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for 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. [...] As 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.” First Question and Answer of the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? – That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. [...] Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him

delberg Catechism²⁴, but it also introduces the triune God as the one who gathers, protects and cares for the church.

(4) The Fourth Decision: Joy to the World (and Church): The Triune God (Art. 1 and 5)

As important as the Christological decision for understanding and interpreting the Belhar Confession is, as important is the Confession's Trinitarian framework presented in the first and fifth article of the confession. It is here, that God's relatedness, God's essential "being in relation" is introduced:²⁵ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist together, not alone, but in relationship with each other. And this relational, triune God creates and sustains the world, and the church in and for this world. God is God in relation in the trinity and in relation to God's own creation. God is not the watchmaker of Deism, creating world and church, and then basically leaving both to care for themselves. On the opposite: God's work in creation, reconciliation and sustenance/sanctification is an ongoing work to the benefit for all of creation, but in particular for the *creatura verbi divini*, the creature of the divine Word, the church. This is good news, this the reason for our joy. Here are the foundations of the lordship of Jesus Christ, and in confessing these foundations, the church first of all gives joyful praise to God.²⁶ This praise is taken up again at the end of the Belhar Confession ("To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever."), and this doxological conclusion of the confession binds together all that has been said before – and gives thanks for it. When Allan Boesak, quite surprisingly, writes, that "joy is the most visible, sustained and enduring trait of the Confession"²⁷, this joy is rooted in who the triune God is and in what the triune God does, and this is what Article 1 and Article 5 of the confession bring to the fore. But, of course, this joy needs explanation, specification, interpretation in order for us to really understand, embody and celebrate it.²⁸ This joy Allan Boesak writes about is indeed a concrete, specific joy and we will look for it by going through the main body of the confession.

(5) The Fifth Decision: Assurance and Claim – Gift and Task

The Theological Declaration of Barmen claims, taking up a strong Reformed tradition, that "As 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." We encounter here what Calvin has called *duplex gratia*, the double or twofold grace.²⁹ God's gift of grace includes being reconciled to God *and* being sanctified by the Spirit in order to lead a faithful life of discipleship. Jesus Christ is assurance *and* claim upon our whole life; we encounter in God's grace gift *and* task.³⁰ This understanding is central for

²⁴ Question and Answer 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church? I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member."

²⁵ Cf. Matthias Freudenberg, Das Bekenntnis von Belhar, 63.

²⁶ Cf. Margit Ernst-Habib, Zum Lobe Gottes, 73f.

²⁷ Allan Boesak, To Stand Where God Stands, 146.

²⁸ Cf. Margit Ernst-Habib, Gott und die Freude, 127–146.

²⁹ John Calvin, Institutes 3.11.1.

³⁰ Cf. Margit Ernst-Habib, A Conversation with Twentieth-Century Confessions, 77f

the Belhar Confession as well: the three major topics of the confession unity – reconciliation – justice are all part of the description of who God is and what God has already done. They are not terms important for the struggle against apartheid or for a more just world, they are central images used in the biblical stories of the First and Second Testament in describing God and God's caring, liberating, and sustaining actions for the sake of God's people. Unity – reconciliation – justice are *given* by God: we are already united, we are already reconciled to God and one another, and God is already revealed to us as the One who wishes to bring about justice. Everything the church is called to do, confess and be is based on this already given gifts. Belhar's challenging claim is that the church has turned away from God's reality of unity, reconciliation, and justice, that the church, in fact, has not only ignored, betrayed and denied this reality, but that the church has actively engaged in bringing about, maintaining and defending disunity, irreconcilability, and injustice. The church has denied and betrayed the gift of grace. The task of the church, then, is not to establish unity, reconciliation, and justice, because that has already been done by God, but to recognize and acknowledge all the ways, she is working against God's reality, and subsequently to change her ways. Discipleship follows from the grace of God as gift and task, assurance and claim.³¹

(6) The Sixth Decision: “Called from the Entire Human Family” – The Gift and Task of Unity (Art. 2)

Article 2 of the Belhar confession stresses that the Christian church is called from the *entire* human family,³² that all believers have already been reconciled not only to God, but also to one another. Not only apartheid, but all disunity in the church based one human categories, concepts and borders, therefore, is not an insignificant deficiency in the church, but active disobedience, is an active turning away from the reality God has created. “Through the working of God’s Spirit” this unity of all believers in the church is already a binding force, but one that has to become visible in the life of the church – so that the world may believe. Belhar is very clear at this point: separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is not an unfortunate and lamentable minor problem in church life, but it is: a sin. A sin, that Christ has already conquered, but a sin that nevertheless gains hold in church life everywhere, not only in South Africa, not only in the past. Paragraph 4 demonstrates in an impressive way, where we experience and recognize the God-given reality of unity in the church: we have *one* faith, *one* God and Father, are filled with *one* Spirit, are baptized with *one* baptism, [...] are obedient to *one* Lord, [...] share *one* hope. It is exactly here that we recognize the unity of the church as the work of the Holy Spirit, in this list of one-ness.³³ The consequence of this one-ness in the work of the Holy Spirit is that we experience it *together*, that we are bound to *one another*³⁴ in it. The one-ness of our one faith, one God, one baptism, etc. is reflected in the community of saints only as we are together and oriented to one another. Every aspect of our lives that differentiates us from one another (spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, language, culture) does not create borders between believers, but – having already been reconciled with one another in Christ – is understood in the Belhar confession as opportunities for mutual service. The gift of reconciliation is lived out in the task of reconciled, vis-

³¹ Cf. Dirk Smit, Oor die teologiese inhoud van die belydenis van Belhar, 188.

³² Question and Answer 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism; see footnote 18.

³³ The designation “een” (one) is used twelve times in this paragraph

³⁴ The word „saam“ (together) is used seven times in this paragraph; the word “mekaar” (one another) is used ten times.

ible, true unity among those who have been reconciled to God and one another. From this affirmation of the reconciliation in Christ follows the rejection of all that hinders true and visible unity in the church, of all that maintains that something else than “true faith” (as a gift of God) could be claimed as a condition for membership in the church. This, indeed, is Good News and reason for joy: we are one in Christ.

(7) The Seventh Decision:

The Message of Reconciliation and the Reconciling Power of the Gospel (Art. 3)

The powers of sin and death have already been conquered, and with them “irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity” – that is the message of reconciliation in and through Christ which is entrusted to the church. How can the church live unreconciled with one another when Christ has already reconciled us to God *and* one another? The church is not only an institution with a message, but she is herself the message to the world, the message of reconciliation. If the church does not visibly live the reconciliation, if she does not “venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation”, then she does not fulfill her commission and actively denies the reconciling power of the Gospel. Then the church herself “weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ”, and becomes a stumbling block. For the Belhar Confession, this is a central theological decision: if the church herself does not *live* as the message of reconciliation in word and deed, then the church does not follow the Lord Jesus Christ, but an “ideology and false doctrine”. In every context, this is one of the major challenges and gifts of the Belhar Confession to other Christian churches and believers: to proclaim the Good News and joy of reconciliation in and through Christ and to call all churches everywhere to live according to these Good News and joy, to become the message of the reconciling power of God.

(8) The Eight Decision:

Justice – Who God is and who we are called to be (Art. 4)

Even though the confessors at Belhar were convinced that their understanding of who God is was taken from the Bible, their description of God as the one who is “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” raised fierce and acrimonious resistance, and does most certainly still provoke opposition. God is, says Belhar, Father and Good Lord of all, but *in a special way* God is there for and with those who are oppressed, marginalized and exploited. According to Belhar, God revealed Godself as the “One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth”; God is not confessed here as a theological concept in metaphysical categories, but as the loving and just God who “brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; who frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind, who supports the downtrodden, and protects the strangers, who helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly.” What a claim! Or let me reformulate: what a biblical claim! And one that has been taken up by many even before the Belhar Confession was written,³⁵ most notably so by Karl Barth, who wrote in 1946 (and it sounds like a paraphrase of the Belhar Confession!):

“For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of His people, God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on

³⁵ The already quoted statement from the WARC General Council in Frankfurt in 1964 stated, for example: “Members of the Church are also called to witness in society to justice and equality by identifying with, and accepting responsibility alongside, those who suffer.” (See footnote 6).

this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.[...] As a matter of fact, from the belief in God's righteousness there follows logically a very definite political problem and task. [...] It becomes so when we appreciate the fact that God's righteousness, the faithfulness in which He is true to Himself, is disclosed as help and salvation, as a saving divine intervention for man directed only to the poor, the wretched and the helpless as such, while with the rich and the full and the secure as such, according to His very nature He can have nothing to do. God's righteousness triumphs when man has no means of triumphing. [...] According to the Gospel of Luke and the Epistle of James, as also according to the message of the prophets, there follows from this character of faith a political attitude, decisively determined by the fact that man is made responsible to all those who are poor and wretched in his eyes, that he is summoned on his part to espouse the cause of those who suffer wrong.”³⁶

Like Barth, Belhar also takes this knowledge of God a step further: who God is, tells us who we are called and gifted to be. Or with the words of Belhar: since we belong to God, since the church is the possession of this Lord, since the church is called to live obediently and to follow Christ, the church “should stand where God stands”: by people in any form of suffering and need, against injustice and with the wronged. Again: what a biblical claim! And it is here that Belhar leaves its own context of origination, and becomes a call to metanoia and repentance for all churches everywhere. Every church will have to answer the question of who God is and who we are called to be, and Belhar is challenging us to be concrete and specific and, most important of all, biblical about it. That is not an easy and comfortable position to be in, but it is part of being “wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for God”, as the Heidelberg Catechism confesses. There is one challenging question, though, that has to be asked: How is it Good News and joy for us, who more often than not profit from oppression, marginalization, and exploitation of other, that God is in a special way the God of the oppressed, marginalized and exploited?

(9) The Ninth Decision: To Confess and to Do All these Things: Obedience to Jesus Christ

Typically, the three major theological terms of the confession of Belhar are understood to be unity, reconciliation, and justice, and we have followed this understanding so far. But the last article of the confession reminds us of a theme that has been present throughout the whole confession: the theme of obedience, which is, of course, the reflection of the theme of Christ’s Lordship. It is out of obedience to the Good News of the Gospel that Belhar confesses and urges the church to do all these things; it is out of obedience that Belhar calls the church to become the message of reconciliation; it is out of obedience that Belhar rejects all ideologies and false doctrines that deny or diminish the unity, reconciliation and justice that God has already brought in Jesus Christ. Belhar takes up a theme here that has been prominent not only in the Heidelberg Catechism, but in particu-

³⁶ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1, § 30 The Perfections of Divine Loving, 2. The Mercy and Righteousness of God, 386f.

lar so in Barmen.³⁷ It is also through this obedience that the church does not confess “from on high”, “but before God’s throne and before other human beings”,³⁸ that the church also confesses her guilt and responsibility for the sin of disunity, irreconciliaton and injustice. A confession is not aimed at proving others wrong and sinful, but at providing an opportunity for repentance and metanoia within the own church. Being obedient does not only mean to follow Christ, then, but also to repent of the wrong ways the church has taken. As strange as it may sound to our ears: based on everything we have heard so far, this obedience is even understood as joyful obedience, and here we move to the tenth and last decision.

(10) The Tenth Decision

The Joy of the Gospel: Standing where God stands

Before I conclude my contemplations of major theological decisions of the Belhar Confession with a few sentences of Allan Boesak, allow me to refer once more to Karl Barth, whose theology undoubtedly provided one of the major sources for the Belhar Confession.³⁹ Piet Naudé rightly reminds us, that “standing where God stands” from Article 4 of the Belhar Confession actually had been influenced by Barth’s discussion of the nature of confessions. Barth writes: “Confession carries its great reward, which consists in our being allowed to stand on the right side, on God’s side. [...] If in confession a man stand on God’s side, this has the sober and liberating implication [...] that God stands on his side.”⁴⁰ This is, according to Barth, reason for joy and fearlessness, and here Allan Boesak concurs with Barth. When Boesak summarizes the main thrust of the Belhar Confession with a brief quote from it (“To stand where God stands”), he also dares to understand *this* as the joy of the Gospel and he dares us to recognize that the decision to stand where God stands is, indeed, prompted by the Good News and is in itself Good News:

“Joy is the most visible, sustained and enduring trait of the confession. That joy reverberates throughout the Confession of Belhar. [...] Joyfully it claims with all the saints the affirmation of the unity of God’s people as gift and obligation, the message of reconciliation God has entrusted to the church and the truth that through Jesus Christ we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, called to be peacemakers. It celebrates the good news that God is a God who brings true justice amongst humankind and that the church as the possession of God must stand where God stands, against all injustice and with the wronged and the powerless against the powerful. It sings joyfully that we are called to confess all these things not through earthly power, arrogance or recklessness, but in obedience to Christ, even though doing so may provoke the wrath of earthly authorities and human laws, because above all we

³⁷ The Third Thesis reads: “As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance.”

³⁸ From the Accompanying Letter to Belhar Confession, paragraphs 1 and 2.

³⁹ Cf. Rothney Tshaka, Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar confession, and Piet Naudé, Neither Calendar nor Clock, 77–103.

⁴⁰ Piet Naudé, Neither Calendar nor Clock, 90, quotes these sentences of Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, § 53 Freedom before God, 85f.

know: Jesus is Lord. Belhar, then as now, proclaims the victory of Christ, and through him ours, over the power of sin and death, fear and powerlessness. We shall no longer be afraid.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Allan Boesak, *To Stand Where God Stands*, 146.

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