



World Communion of Reformed Churches Impulse to the Belhar Conference, January 25-26, 2019 Hanns Lessing

The engagement with the apartheid system in South Africa changed the global Reformed movement in a very profound way. Over decades of its existence the World Alliance of Reformed Churches had refrained from expressing its rejection of apartheid in confessing language. The strong presence of the white Reformed churches in South Africa prevented a categorical condemnation of racial segregation and the rejection of its theological justification. The World Council of Churches had already turned against the apartheid system in the declaration of Cottesloe in 1960 and had launched the Programme to Combat Racism at its Uppsala assembly in 1968. The Lutheran World Federation had declared a *status confessionis* on apartheid at its assembly in Dares Salam in 1977.

For the Reformed Alliance the rejection of apartheid was more costly than for other ecumenical organizations. The system of apartheid had been built on Reformed convictions, it had been decisively shaped by Reformed theologians and it was instituted by a government that identified itself as a protector of Reformed identity. When the 1982 General Council in Ottawa declared apartheid to be a sin and its theological justification a heresy, this was much more than a statement on an ethical or a political issue, but an expression of a much more profound theological and ecclesiological transformation. With the Ottawa decision, the World Alliance adopted a confessing identity, which led to a radical change in perspective: In a world marked by exploitation and oppression, the World Alliance realized that God is, as the Belhar Confession puts it, “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this.”

This change in perspective paved the way, which led to the Accra Confession of 2004 and the self-understanding of the World Communion of Reformed Churches as a confessing communion. The current strategic plan describes the mission of the WCRC with the following words: “Hearing the cries of wounded communities and engaging with them the theological work of the WCRC shall lead the whole Communion in theologically-rooted processes of confessing the faith, drawing on the Reformed tradition and contextual theologies to address the present reality.”

Based on this understanding, the WCRC encourages and fosters processes of confessing in its member churches and particularly encourages them to engage with the Barmen Declaration and confessions of Belhar and Accra. In our Reformed understanding, confessions are not only vaults of truths that provide us with well-tested language to express and guide our faith, but they are seen as resources of faith that prove their truthfulness when they are lived out in the challenges of Christian life. If the Church of Lippe will include the Belhar Confession in its list of confessions, it will therefore hopefully not only accept a text, but will be strengthened in its living witness for unity, reconciliation and justice in the church and in the world.

The WCRC understands itself as a confessing communion, where churches support, comfort and sometimes challenge each other with acts of confessing. The current strategic plan describes the WCRC as a *koinonia* that is marked by *discerning*, *confessing*, *witnessing* and *being reformed* together. Each of these four verbs are significant for the process of receiving a confession drafted by another church.

Receiving Confessions in a Confessing Koinonia

All Christian confessions have been formulated in a particular place at a particular time and respond to particular challenges. But their response to these particularities is expressed in the form of a universal truth claim, which surpasses human capabilities of judgement. Churches that formulate a confession therefore undertake an enormous risk. The accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession is a testimony how much the authors struggled with this huge responsibility. The Belhar Confession in all its particularity is therefore addressed to the global Christian church and calls upon all Christians for the examination of its universal claim to truth.

Engaging with a confession written by another church is therefore an act of Christian solidarity, in which we live out our calling to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The church in all its diversity becomes universal by receiving and repeating confessions, testing their truth claims and joining in the witness they call for.

Receiving Confessions in a *Koinonia* Being Reformed by God

If a church receives a confession it transcends its particular identity. The impressive presence of partners at this conference here in Detmold proves this point very well. The Church in Lippe discusses the adoption of the Belhar Confession after more than 40 year of intense partnership with the URCSA and one can say that this relationship changed the way the Church in Lippe understood itself as church. Particularly in the time of the struggle of resistance against apartheid, the relationship between the two churches was very close. In many encounters people from both churches discussed what it meant to declare that apartheid was sin and its theological justification a heresy. In this process both churches among several others realized that this confession joined them together in a very profound way. In a *koinonia* being reformed by God, particularly identities are being transformed by a common calling that joins us together in a way that overcomes the differences that separate us in other areas of life.

Receiving Confessions in a Discerning *Koinonia*

Receiving a confession has also a hermeneutical dimension. In receiving a confession, a church attempts to see the world in the particular perspective of believers from another context. The accompanying letter describes how hard it was in the South African situation to realize that separation, exclusion and oppression that had been justified with the Gospel were not right before God. Receiving the Belhar Confession therefore calls for a similar act of the discernment also in the Lippe context. We are called to discern: Where are we blind to atrocities and suffering? Where do we accept human hardship because we feel powerless and weak? Where do we condone injustice because we claim that there is no alternative?

Receiving Confessions in a Witnessing *Koinonia*

Such an exercise in discernment already leads into the direction of a witnessing *koinonia*. The Belhar Confession convinced the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church to take a radical stand against apartheid. Many of its members joined the resistance. Some of them became prominent leaders and testified with their faith and with their lives for the convictions they had formulated in the Belhar Confession. These forms of witness were very much shaped by the situation in which the South African Christians found themselves. Other times and other circumstances call for other forms of witness. The search for an adequate testimony from the Lippe Church will be an important part of the process of receiving the Belhar Confession.

As the WCRC we commend the Church in Lippe for the courage and the determination with which they have started the journey. God's blessing be with you on this way!

26 January 2019